



Democracy isn't **DESK BOUND**

The Review

The long-awaited *Review of Voting Systems: the experience of new voting systems in the United Kingdom since 1997* was published in January 2008 by the Ministry of Justice. The review was a piece of desk-bound research, drawing on evidence from earlier research and commissions of inquiry, but not inviting or seeking any public contributions.

The review “contribute[s] to the knowledge base and debate on whether or not changes should be made to the voting system for the House of Commons. ... Sets objective information to contribute to this debate but [does] not make judgements or recommendations that are inherently political in nature. [The MoJ] welcomes contributions to a healthy debate.”

The Review's findings:

“We do not find a difference between PR systems and FPTP in terms of delivering stable and effective government although, with a greater number of parties involved under PR, the political landscape can be more dynamic. In the experience of the UK, coalition governments can be just as stable as single-party governments.” (para 6.168)

“One of the main benefits of PR is that voters have a greater degree of choice in elections and a greater chance of their vote counting in terms of who gets elected.” (para 6.169)

“We do not find, on balance, any evidence to suggest that voters find one voting system easier or more confusing than another voting system.” (para 6.170)

Proportional systems were found, on international comparison, to be associated with higher voter turnout than First Past the Post and other majoritarian systems. (para 7.97)



Where was the voters' perspective?

Virtually absent. Missing, presumed irrelevant. Only one survey of voters was included in the analysis; ignoring the many opinion polls, submissions to the Power Inquiry, and potential anecdotal evidence that is out there. No attempt was made to pro-actively find out voters' experiences or opinions.

The Government's initial response:

Heavy negative spin on the day of publication; no oral statement to the House; and no Government time offered to debate the findings in the Commons. No process outlined for eliciting feedback on the review or for continuing the debate, or opening it out to the public. Lords reform to take precedence, and no progress on the Commons expected until the system for electing the second chamber decided.

The Government's more considered response:

Lords reform is not the great barrier first envisaged. Discussions on the electoral system for the Lords will inevitably lead to discussions on the electoral system for the Commons. Commons reform, if implemented, would have to be seen as above party advantage. Arguments for reform hold more weight if they come from principle and from working out what people want from an election, and choose a system accordingly. Any change would need to be approved in a referendum.

Make Votes Count's response:

The review quashes many of the myths used by First-Past-the-Post advocates against reform. It could serve as useful basis for negotiations come a hung parliament. However, while the review may carry out the letter of Labour's 2001/05 manifesto commitment, it is certainly not in keeping with the spirit. There now needs to be some kind of process for open public debate and consultation, and that's what we are pushing for.

There is strong public pressure for taking control away from MPs of their expenses, pay rises and other aspects of their own employment conditions. So the next logical step is to start asking why MPs still retain control over the very system that gets them elected and gives many of them jobs for life. The Government wants to be judge and jury for deciding whether there is a case for changing the voting system. Those with vested interests should not have that power. It is time voters' perspective was heard and people had their fair say on elections.

What you can do:

Take action now by going to our campaign website www.makevotescount.org.uk and following the steps outlined there. Also request some campaign postcards from our office - to fill out yourself or hand out to others.