

# Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform AGM

## 15 July 2008

### “Let’s play by Aussie rules”

**Summary – by Lorna Russell, Make Votes Count in Labour campaigner**

**Kevin Maguire**, news columnist for the *Mirror*, opened up the meeting by putting forward the case for the Alternative Vote (AV) electoral system. He stated that the current UK electoral system is “grossly unfair” and therefore he believes that it should be reformed; AV being his preferred choice of new electoral system. The primary advantages of AV that he cites are that he believes that it is the simplest and easiest form of electoral reform and it maintains the link between an MP and a constituency, which he states “is a cornerstone of our democracy”.

In terms of the Labour Party’s stance on electoral reform, Kevin Maguire stated that it is “unfinished business”. He pointed out that a good proportion of Labour MPs support AV, but he also acknowledges that it will be harder for Labour to change the electoral system now that they are not as strong as they were ten years ago. Therefore he feels that the Party should wait until their next manifesto before attempting to reform the system.

Maguire then went on to discuss the benefits that AV could bring to the Labour Party. However he also recognised that there are dangers for Labour with the AV system because in context of the current political climate, the Liberal voters’ second preferences could very easily go to the Conservative Party.

**Paul Smith**, President of the Australian Labor Party Abroad (and Islington Councillor), was the next speaker. He talked about about three aspects of the Australian electoral system that he believed could be applied to the UK. The first of these was the AV system. The main benefit that he sees of this system is that “it makes every vote count and you actually have to get 50% plus one to be the person elected”. He also recommended that the UK should consider electing their upper house too, although he did advise that the systems should be as simple and as proportional as possible.

Interestingly, he then argued a case for compulsory voting. In Australia the law is such that voting is a legal obligation and people who do not turn out to the polls are fined for not voting. He pointed out that in the last Australian General Election 94.76% of adults voted and compared this figure to the UK’s last General Election, where the turnout was a much lower 61%. He then emphasised that increasing the ways in which citizens are able to vote has helped to bolster Australia’s large turnouts. For example they employ postal voting, prison voting and mobile voting, where jeeps and helicopters, armed with ballot boxes, search the rural areas looking for people who have not yet voted. Maguire stated that maximising turnout has a potential additional benefit for the Labour Party. This is because if you change the

system so everybody votes then a far larger percentage of people who are low income earners (i.e. traditionally potential Labour supporters) would vote.

The last piece of advice he offered about reforming the electoral system was to “keep it simple”. From his experience with Australian councils he found that many of his voters were less educated than more right-wing voters, and thus found the voting system harder to use. Indeed he made reference to Labour’s loss of a state election in Australia in 1991 because of a change in what counted as a valid vote as a further example of why the system needs to be clear and easy for voters to use. He also brought up the concept of ‘How to Vote’ cards which could be distributed to citizens to ensure total clarity with the electoral system. His advice ended with the words “So keeping it simple stupid, making sure that you maximise participation gives Labour the best chance. But it’s only going to work if you accept a clear statement about Labour values that will resonate with ordinary people”.

**Peter Hain MP** was the last speaker of the evening. He began by supporting Paul’s call for compulsory voting, downplaying claims that it would be an attack on individual liberty by stating that it is “a civic obligation and a duty as far as I’m concerned and I think it would transform our politics in a very positive way”.

Like Maguire, Hain sees that AV is the only realistic chance of electoral reform in the UK. This is due to the fact that it is not a radical change from the current system and states that “people like Jack Straw who are First Past the Post-ers to the end can now live with the Alternative Vote and indeed are increasingly attracted to it”. Furthermore he points out that the House of Commons has only ever voted once for electoral reform of this kind and that was in 1931, when the only system that it got through was the Alternative Vote. Thus he recommends that this is the system that should be introduced in the UK, and even suggests that it may be possible to include provisions for AV in amendments to the Constitutional Reform Bill.

The key reasons that he supports AV are that the system requires each MP to get a majority of their constituents’ votes (at the present time less than a third do), it keeps the single member constituency and that its nature is simple and gives the voter a great degree of choice. A further case for reforming the current system, he asserts, is that we “don’t actually have an electoral system that’s fit for purpose” since in 1951 the two major parties polled 97% of the vote, yet in the last election they only received 67% of the vote.

Peter then explored whether or not the AV system would benefit the Labour Party. He refrained from making an explicit prediction about the consequences of AV for Labour, stating that “you can’t actually tell what people’s voting behaviour is going to be under an entirely different system”. He also noted that Labour committed to a referendum to bring in Proportional Representation under its 1997 Labour Party Manifesto commitments, however he does not feel that the Party would win the referendum if it called one. Since AV is more of an adjustment than a radical reformation of the existing system he does not believe that a referendum would be necessary for this change.