

Compass Conference June 2008

Summary of MVC-ERS-LCER break-out session

by Lorna Russell and Rob Rankin

“Whose Votes Count?”

Professor Robin Blackburn

Yasmin Qureshi PPC for Bolton South East

Emily Georghiou Equality and Human Rights Commission

Chuka Umunna PPC for Streatham

Jennette Arnold AM Chair of London Assembly

Robin Blackburn

Robin began by pointing out that First Past The Post is one of the most undemocratic features of our political system, because it “sets up a sort of filter against genuine representation of the variety of modern Britain and I think it’s not allowing new forces and new ideas to amount and it’s giving a false representation of opinion in the country”. A further disadvantage of the present system that he cited is the large extent of wasted votes that are produced in both safe seats and in non-marginal seats. Indeed, “most people’s votes don’t actually count... and people are aware of that”. Blackburn’s final criticism of the current electoral system is that he believes it encourages state arrogance, using Thatcher’s premiership as evidence to support this.

Having discussed why the current system needs reforming, Blackburn then laid out his reasons for wanting a Proportional Representation system as opposed to majoritarian or mixed system, emphasising that “it is part of democratic renovation and renewal and advance in Britain and that it will also unlock progressive forces”. Furthermore, his reasons for favouring PR systems over others include the fact that it gives a fairer representation on a more broadly equal basis with one-person-one-vote, yet at the same time it does mean that minorities don’t get given huge power. It has proven to have given a voice to Green ideas in Europe, where there’s a lot of PR, whereas there is very little Green presence in Britain and in the United States, where the systems are majoritarian. Blackburn then acknowledged that PR could under certain circumstance lead to a greater representation of racist parties, but argued that these racist ideas are not a product of electoral reform. Moreover he contends that if racist parties did make headway under PR this would “oblige us to pay more attention to racism... and act an alert to all the democratic forces and the decent forces in society to rally and oppose them”.

Robin ended by suggesting that last year presented the Labour Party with the perfect opportunity to do a deal with the Liberal Democrats on PR, though that moment may temporarily have passed. He does however remain convinced that in the next year or two we will see all sorts of changes in our society, including further democratic renewal and possibly some form of electoral reform too.

Yasmin Qureshi

Yasmin was next to speak and started by voicing her concerns that PR systems have in the past led to extreme parties gaining some form of power. However she also recognised the benefits that a proportional system could bring, including representing more opinions and wasting less votes. So she concluded that she would support PR as long as the system minimised the chance of extreme parties coming in, such as through raising the threshold [percentage of votes] needed to win seats.

Yasmin moved on to discuss the need for parliament to be more representative in the sense that it reflects everyone, in terms of colour, gender, age, and socioeconomic backgrounds. She emphasised how hard it is for a candidate from a working class background to be elected compared to a candidate from a middle class background because of the costs of conducting an electoral campaign. Therefore she suggested that "parties themselves need to have a system where they support candidates who are not financially sound", and that in order to get quality and get a better representation, parties need to change the people that they select or provide mechanism support systems so you get a much more diverse group of people coming through. Labour for example has introduced women only short lists in numerous constituencies and has the policy that one third of the councillors for any ward must be women as well. This is important, says Yasmin, "because voting alone is not a way to change society".

Furthermore she believes that "one of the greatest vehicles for change is actually participation in politics". For her political movements are very important, and she concluded that "political parties need to get their house in order to encourage people to come onboard... because if you get a much more diverse group of people coming into the political system then with a system of PR you've got a far more accurate representation society".

Emily Georghiou

Emily highlighted the need for fairness and respect for diversity within society and linked this with electoral reform, through identifying a power gap between those who are well represented and those who are not. She stated that it is "important that the society we live in has a politics which both represents society's diversity and has elected assemblies which reflect the society that we live in and we've moved on from thinking about equality of sameness to equality as diversity".

Emily went on to discuss the inequality inherent in the first past the post system, using an example of her experience in campaigning in Bristol West in 2005, where she said that areas in the inner city constituency were largely left alone. Highlighting the fact that your vote only really matters in a marginal constituency she argued that "to have a voice in our democracy you need to have an effective vote and be encouraged to use it wherever you live and that vote is not a system of democracy but a human right to be heard". She stated that it was important for electoral reformers to frame the case for voting change in terms of equality and human rights.

Emily suggested that the recent BNP gains may not be attributed to BNP voters being racist but instead "voting for the people who live on their estate, knock on their doors, listen to them and help them out". She predicted that "parties may be boxed into a corner by dwindling membership and volunteers for door knocking" in an "electoral system which rewards targeting increasingly smaller numbers of people while neglecting the core vote in the hope that a historical link will maintain their support for their party".

Chuka Umunna

Chuka began by acknowledging that the voting system is at the heart of what is wrong with political culture today. He set out the context for his discussion by describing the cynical way in which political parties target particular groups of people. He referred to ERS research on the 8,000 voters who determine the results in marginal constituencies to highlight the extent of the problem.

He then went on to counter the argument that PR systems result in coalitions by arguing that political parties are coalitions anyway because of the diversity of perspectives within them. However, under the current system, this diversity is closed because no one is willing express divergent viewpoints for fear of individual reprisal from the media or the party. Therefore, Chuka argued that it would be beneficial to have a more open coalition "so a plethora of views are represented and given air and people identify with them". He acknowledged that collective responsibility sometimes prevents politicians from expressing different views. However, he argued that there are "a lot of other things that you could talk about with collective responsibility to one side, which if you perhaps had a different system wouldn't necessarily mean electoral suicide".

Finally, Chuka addressed the practical problem of electoral reform not being particularly high up on the public's agenda and therefore not being a particularly good vote winner, as opposed to economic proposals or NHS reform. One of the key questions he raised was how do we popularise electoral reform? Using the example of his Streatham constituency he again highlighted the problem of safe seats not being targeted for campaigning and therefore the national message not being constructed with them in mind,

He ended on a positive note by saying that younger people and younger politicians seem to be quite interested in the electoral reform issue and that this offers hope for the future.

Jennette Arnold

As chair, Jennette made a number of contributions during proceedings, drawing on her experience with the London elections as well as picking up on and adding too the speakers points. She mentioned in particular that when she was out canvassing for the London elections one of the messages she was trying to get to people was that their vote did count. "When people said to me on the doorstep, 'why should I vote?' I said, 'because your vote matters.' And I was able to work them through a number of systems that absolutely made clear to them that their vote mattered. People really appreciated having the opportunity to discuss their vote and the issues surrounding it."

Also, drawing upon her experience in the London Assembly, she brought together the points raised about PR giving power to the far right and the issue of coalitions. Firstly arguing that one of the reasons the BNP crossed the 5% threshold was because Labour didn't get enough of its voters out. Secondly she highlighted the benefits of letting a broader range of parties in and of coalitions by noting the success of the Green Party's work with the Labour Group in the GLA.