

“ PR: WHY SHOULD WE CARE? ”

MAKING THE POPULAR CASE FOR VOTING REFORM

JEAN LAMBERT MEP:

We, as the Green Party, are actually signed up to Make Votes Count, which is an all-party, non-party body which has been working now for a considerable period of time on the issue of electoral reform. And we usually have a fringe at the Green Party conference to get an update about what's going on, what we think the possibilities might be and what the party itself might be doing to make the case as really, sort of, develop the idea in people's heads that this is a positive thing, it's a positive measure, it's part of a modern democracy. And so it gives me very great pleasure to be chairing today's session with Malcolm Clark, director of Make Votes Count and this is the start of the conference season. I think if we had him at the end of the conference season the poor guy would be sort of under the table instead of behind it. And also Peter Tatchell, who again you know very well, who is Green Party candidate, prospective candidate for Oxford East, as well. So what's happening? What's rising, what's falling, who's beginning to get more interested, who's beginning to with they'd been more interested and done more in the past?

MALCOLM CLARK (Director, Make Votes Count):

Where are we this year as opposed to last year? Last year we were talking, and I wouldn't say hyping up at all, but talking about the government's view of voting systems. This was the watered down promise that Labour had had going from '97, they had the manifesto commitment for a referendum on a more proportional voting system, and then it was watered down in 2001 to simply this review of where we are, what systems they've introduced in Scotland and Wales and the London elections, the European Parliament, and this was promised in 2001, it was promised again in 2005, and finally after much delay it was published at the beginning of this year. It was actually a good document. I mean, a good document from two points of view. One, it was quite even-handed. It wasn't a 'first past the post is brilliant', it actually gave the pluses and the minuses of all the systems that we could use. But it was only all the systems that have been introduced so far. It didn't talk about alternative vote, which I'll come on to; it didn't talk about the alternative vote plus and what happened on the Jenkins Commission; it didn't talk about anything to do with the Commons, because the Commons hasn't been reformed as yet. But it did have some useful stuff in it. It helped to bash some of the myths that were out there. It said that the PR systems had been introduced and people had found them no more or no less complicated than first past the post. They said internationally comparison had been that proportional systems have a higher turn out than first past the post. And there were various other good points that were raised.

But the government said we published this, 'this is the start of the opening up of debate, this is our contribution and a debate will follow,' and they never actually specified where that debate would be or how it would do. Quite incredible in a sense. When it came up in the Ministry of Justice annual review on the Governance of Britain initiative in July they said; "Steps done: completed the review. Steps still to do: a big, big blank." So where is this debate? And even from January that was what we were looking for. The review of voting systems was a desk-bound report, it was done by civil servants in Whitehall. The MVC supporters have seen the campaign materials we sent round earlier this year on democracy isn't desk-bound, simply making that point that voting is something that we all do and care about and has implications. It shouldn't be something that a few people just write about from an academic viewpoint. And so those are the two elements that we've been trying to push. One that says get it away from Westminster, and particularly those people who have vested interests in the status quo. And two, let's have this debate.

From a political point of view the last six months have been notable for really one thing only in terms of Labour, and that was this discussion on the alternative vote. That is the preferential vote system that's in place in Australia; voting one, two, three on the ballot paper; single member constituencies; and if someone doesn't get over 50 per cent of the vote you then start transferring till you get over 50 per cent. Not a proportional system at all. Only the first part of what the Jenkins Commission recommended in '98. But that's been gaining ground within Labour. It's always had its supporters in Labour in Peter Hain and a few others, but ever since the Guardian ran on Easter Monday with a big splash the government thinking about AV, there's been this sort of bubbling up within the Labour Party – not wider, I stress – but certainly within the Labour Party, this discussion on the alternative vote. Some for positive reasons that they realise something's wrong and they need to do something; some of 'oh dear, what are we to do with our status in the polls at the moment?' variety; and some on discussion of the issue but not in favour of proportional representation. Peter Hain himself will say he favours this form of electoral reform but not PR. So it's been a slightly squeezed debate as I say, but the positive aspect of it is it's got people within the Labour Party thinking about it and the think tanks and the Fabian Society and newspaper journalists like Kevin Maguire in the Mirror and other Labour figures. So whereas in the past few years the issue has been pretty dead or silent within the party, this issue has now come to prominence, but it's on AV, it's not on proportionality.

So that's where the debate is in Labour Party at the moment, and the interesting thing is, on one level can we push for it? Can we – and this is certainly what the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform has been saying – can we push for it, can we get Labour to introduce it before the next election? It's a ballot paper redesign, in effect, it's not changing constituency boundaries and it could be seen as a good first step, it breaks the fact that we haven't changed the first past the post for well over a hundred years. But that's the position within the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform. The position within the Labour party more widely has been to think that 'people will see it as done for partisan reasons. We're changing the voting system because Labour doesn't think it can win again under the current system.' And ironically I would say - that's the Conservatives have been pushing that line, and I say, ironically actually – of course you can't really tell unless you have a real life scenario, but looking at the number crunching of polls and predications, if you introduced AV it would actually tend to have worse effects for Labour and be better for Conservatives. But we all think back to 1997 when, you know, the predictions were that if you'd had AV then Labour would have got an even bigger majority.

But actually it has this kind of anti-incumbency kind of effect, help for tactical voting. So there's this strange dynamic going on.

What's happening in the Conservative Party shows a little note of optimism. I don't know if anyone is here from Wales, the Welsh Greens. I'd say Wales is actually a hotbed of electoral reform radicalism at the moment, believe it or not. The Welsh Assembly has certainly been discussing it, looking at the possibilities, of seeing if they can change the local government system in Wales to be under STV and proportionality. And the Conservatives in Wales, forget everywhere else, the Conservatives in Wales have taken that idea on. I mean, they very nearly got it as a manifesto commitment at the Welsh Conservative local manifesto the last elections, as PR for local government. Nick Bourne, the leader of the Conservatives in Wales, is a supporter of electoral reform. There are several others as well. Jonathan Evans, the Welsh MEP, is actually a very good speaker on electoral reform and very positive for it. So in Wales there's this little push going on.

In the Conservatives party as a whole, I'd say not a chance. And disappointingly, when you think of House of Lords reform not getting anywhere this side of the election, the Conservatives have said they see it as a third term issue. So if they're seeing House of Lords reform as a third term issue, goodness knows where they see Commons reform. But one argument that does work in the Conservatives is this idea, this message, on competition actually, and that they think the Labour MPs are getting lazy and have no competition in their safe seats and that's part of the problem. So there is a group of about a dozen or 18 Conservative MPs have formed this direct democracy movement and they are producing a pamphlet for the Conservative conference. And some of them actually say the words STV without spitting, and they're actually quite keen on it. But this is, I stress, the fringe within the Conservative Party. But if we're looking forward to future chances, under a possible Conservative government post 2010, then there are a few people that we can lobby, but it's very minimal.

Which is why, considering where we've got with the parties, the move has much been with Make Votes Count and the wider electoral reform movement to push for away from parliamentary lobbying and lobbying within the parties back down to kind of where we started from in '98-99, which is doing more grass roots activism, leading activity at local level and trying to build up again the campaign there and get the change from there. So that's where our attention is starting to be focused on.

That was the starting point for MVC's work during the London elections. Rather than just doing a general 'here we have the London elections for the third time under the additional member system and isn't it good' spiel I actually went out and started doing more of a voter education campaign, producing the literature, going on radio stations and actually trying to educate people about the proportional system that we have. And that was quite well received, as well as tapping into the big effort in London to try and limit the BNP vote as well. People are interested in knowing how they can best use their vote for that, best use their vote for a number of other things as well. I started working in various community groups on that, and so that's where we want to continue, in doing more of that localised activity.

Obviously for local elections and Commons elections we don't have the proportional system in place. It's very much going to have to be about the messages - what's going to work, what's going to get people's attention - and not on proportionality, on fairness to parties, on talking about systems. It's about bringing it down to how politics is played, how it affects people and why it is that we've got this system or situation at the moment that the parties aren't talking to everyone, or people don't feel like their voices are being heard. And it's true, they are not. Parties aren't talking to the large bulk of people because it's those swing voters and target seats that parties are putting their resources to. And this was one of the interesting things in America that partly I wanted to go and see from the Democrats' point of view, is they're trying, under a first past the post system admittedly, but to push what they're calling the 50-state strategy to try and target more resources and personnel in building up their party, the Democrat party, at a local level nationwide, not just in the swing seats. As we get closer and closer to their election in November, sure they're going to come back to the minimal amount of target seats, but actually they're having lot of success putting out the message: 'your vote matters, we're trying to compete for it' and they're actually putting the resources in something that our parties here don't do. But you won't succeed in that unless you have proportionality because otherwise it's just going to - as we're about to see - turn back to being just those few swing seats.

There are three campaign activities going on now from Make Votes Count. Firstly, an urgent campaign action. The government is consulting at the moment and up to the end of September on whether to move the day of voting to the weekend, to Saturday or Sunday. Well, we can have our opinions one way or another on it, but it doesn't matter whether you vote on a Thursday, Saturday or Sunday, it's actually whether that vote's going to count and all those issues that are really the key

things. The consultation's final question's a little bit more open: "are you aware of any other barriers which prevent individuals from voting?" Interpret it how you want. I'm just encouraging people to interpret it as a way of actually writing something about electoral reform of the voting system. And interestingly, in the whole of last year the Ministry of Justice received about 900 or so responses to all of their Governance of Britain consultations. That's not a huge amount, and these are all tallied, they get an official report, they get responses, they get summarised what people have said. And so the idea is to get people, as I say, hopefully supporters in their hundreds, to respond to this consultation and it will actually be seen to have an impact, be out there and have some wider circulation.

Looking ahead as well, one of the things we've got with Unlock Democracy is this postcard campaign which is actually four different messages about electoral reform. And the idea is that supporters will, fill in one to Gordon Brown, talking about electoral reform. You take one and then you give three to your friends or colleagues or something like that and the message is different on each one: on wasted votes, on how few constituencies are in play, on how you voted in 2005 and what you got, and on a reminder of Labour Party's manifesto commitment. So there are a lot of those being produced, and one of the aims that Unlock Democracy has is to get people to deliver them or use them when they're doing door to door campaigning as well, just generally.

And then the third thing coming up is the swing towards activism. In order for me to be effective in providing resources and working out what needs to be done, there's a short supporter survey here which asks what you would be interested in doing, what kind of activities, and also whether you want to be put on a speakers' list, which we're going to have training for; so people can have the training to go out and do small scale talks in their local community on this, because we do get groups coming in, both political and civil society groups, wanting talks. The idea would be to expand that. And again a more kind of fully-fledged activist network as well with Electoral Reform Society. As well as putting in resources, they're going to be doing regional meetings around the country probably in spring 2009, kind of more general democracy meetings but which will also be a focal point and hub for people wanting to campaign on the issue. And it'll be in partnership with local or regional media, and hopefully get a bit of attention then, but also be a base that we can build on, because the question is not just getting people to a meeting, as I'm sure you all know because you're activists, it's actually how do you get people to do things afterwards as well? So those resources are being developed. That's Make Votes Count and where we're going. And I'm very excited to be able to hear what Peter has to say on actually the message, on the reasons why all of this campaigning is important.

PETER TATCHELL:

When I was at school, which was a very, very long time ago, one of the things that really stuck in my mind was my British history lessons, where a teacher told us about the terrible, wicked corruption of the voting system in the 18th century, the rotten boroughs. We were taught how millions of people didn't have representation, how their votes didn't count because constituency boundaries were gerrymandered and votes were bought. Well, here we are 300 years later and we still have a massive gulf between the popular will and representation in parliament. It is absolutely shocking that we're in a so-called democracy where, not since before the Second World War, have we ever had a government in this country which has commanded the support of the majority of the British people. Every single government since the Second World War has been a minority government, got in on a minority of votes because of our flawed and failing political system. That is not democracy. And although there is no comparison with Zimbabwe and Uzbekistan and so on, it does grate when our government lectures these countries about their un-free, unfair elections when we in this country do not have truly free and fair elections where everyone's vote counts.

If we look at the last election, I think we all know that of all eligible voters only 21 per cent voted Labour. And of those who voted, only 36 per cent voted Labour. Yet Labour ended up with 55 per cent of the seats. More people didn't vote, 39 per cent, than voted Labour. In England, much as I loathe the Tories, the Tories won the majority of votes in England, but they ended up with 92 fewer seats. At that last election in 2005, it took an average of 27,000 votes to elect a Labour MP, 44,000 votes to elect a Tory MP, and 96,000 votes to elect a Liberal Democrat MP. And of course the hundreds of thousands of people who voted Green, or for that matter for the United Kingdom Independence Party, got no MPs at all. That is not democracy. And we all know it. We need to say it. We need to press our government to make sure that there are the changes that Malcolm has outlined.

When I think about how we can move forward, there are many, many different models. Malcolm's mentioned some of them. I think that we do have the practical, concrete example of the Scottish, Welsh and London Assembly elections. Those are models that exist and are working in this country. So the idea this is something foreign and alien, that it's a system that won't work, is rebutted by those three alternative systems we already have. And to be honest, although they're imperfect and could perhaps do with a bit of tweaking, I'd be quite happy with something like the Scottish, Welsh or

London Assembly system, because although it's not totally proportional, at least it would make sure that minority parties like the Greens were properly represented. It would make sure that that huge disparity between votes cast and MPs elected would be narrowed. And the important thing about that system, as opposed to STV and all the other systems, is that I personally think it's important to maintain a constituency link, that there are identifiable Members of Parliament who have responsibility for particular areas, which local people can go to. And rather than having these gigantic super-sized constituencies, I think we need to have something that's more manageable, that an individual Member of Parliament can more readily relate to the local community which he or she represents, the local community needs and interests. Tightening that constituency link is really, really important.

I think we also need to remind ourselves that if we'd had some form of PR we would have never had Margaret Thatcher. And that's a very powerful argument for most of us. We probably wouldn't have had the Iraq war. We possibly wouldn't have Trident and expanded nuclear power as well. It isn't just an airy-fairy idea about fairness, important though that is, it's got practical implication in terms of the government and policies that government pursues. If we had PR we undoubtedly would have a government that more closely reflects the liberal left, green, progressive majority that exists in this country. So it's in everybody's interests to argue for it. Even the Labour Party, because right now PR is one thing that can possibly save Labour and prevent a Tory landslide. Because just as Labour had landslides in the last three elections, so the Tories will on the current form if the current opinion polls are sustained. They will sweep the board, Labour will be decimated. If Labour had any sense, on a point of principle, but also on a point of practical survival, it would be supporting voting reform.

Now, I agree with everything that Malcolm and Make Votes Count is doing. I'm a strong supporter of their campaign. They are doing very good, slow, patient, essential groundwork to lay the basis for a popular support for electoral reform. But I don't think it's enough. My big fear is that Make Votes Count will eventually go the way of Charter 88. Remember Charter 88? It had a huge profile, a huge profile, but then over the years it's just slowly faded to almost below the radar. I think this means – from that lesson this means that we have got to try and do something to up the ante. And this is not to disparage or deny the important work that's being done, but we've got to try and do something to raise the profile, to really put this issue on the public agenda in the way that elections, democracy, fair votes were put on the election (sic) but the Chartists and the suffragettes. I'm not saying we should mimic

exactly their tactics, but I think their style of direct action undoubtedly forced the issue of votes for women and working class people onto the political agenda in a way that parliamentary lobbying did not.

So my question to you is do you think we really ought to move towards some kind of direct action campaign as the Green Party or in alliance with Make Votes Count? Because if we don't, I fear the major parties will ignore us, because it's in their interest, they're too self-interested, too concerned about themselves to put principle before the reach of power. I think we've got to do something, and the whole history of this country is that direct action has so often been the way in which held-down, suppressed issues have got a voice, got public attention, provoked debate. And I think that we perhaps need to say to our government, taking a leaf out of our American brothers and sisters a couple of hundred years ago, 'no taxation without representation'. Thank you.

AUDIENCE QUESTIONS:

Role of the LibDems in hung parliament or otherwise; weekend voting; postal voting fraud; dangers of electronic voting / counting; support for direct action; threat of the BNP and needing to actively campaign against them; audit of money going into marginal seats; local campaigning ideas; Labour MPs we can lobby.

PETER TATCHELL:

A lot of people say coalitions are bad, they create unstable governments. Well, that's true they can do; but they're also a reflection of the real tension and balance in society. And in many ways, you know, coalitions, their instability reflects the instability of the society for which the MPs represent. So I actually think that coalitions, just by all their flaws, actually make for more representative government. And we just have to live with it and work through it and try and get deals and agreements between the parties. On the question of vote fraud, I agree with you, that's a really big issue. Like most of you, I guess, I support the idea there should be individual registration, not household registration, and that when people go to a polling booth they should be required to produce photo ID and give their signature, so their signature can eventually be verified.

In terms of direct action, what kind of direct action? One is the Greenpeace style, which tends to be very visual, dramatic, imaginative. It makes people stop and look. It's quite inspirational. You know, a few little dinghies going in front of nuclear powered submarines. That kind of gets news coverage and it does attract public attention and interest. The other style of course is non-violent civil disobedience, like back to the civil rights movement in the United States in the '50s and '60s. I think both those tactics in the right way could be very, very effective to help raise the profile and put this issue on the agenda. I think if we don't go down those roads we are not going to get this issue on the agenda, because the politicians are the roadblock. They don't want it. From the main parties, they don't want it discussed. Unless we force it into the headlines, non-violently and peacefully, then we ain't going to

MALCOLM CLARK:

PCS passing that motion in support of electoral reform was one of the big successes of this year. And is a sign of progress within the trade union movement. Within the Labour Party, actually yes, there is again some hope. Although some of our supportive MPs will lose their seats, equally for the first time since '97, the PPCs who are coming in are more pro-reform than the last few intakes. And we've got the likes of Stephen Twigg coming back, who's standing in Liverpool West Derby. My own constituency in Streatham, the new Labour candidate is a guy called Chuka Umunna, who's again a huge supporter of electoral reform. And there's several others around the country. We have the chance for not just the intake in 2010, but 2015, 2020, whenever the subsequent elections are, for those Labour people coming in to be instinctively more pluralist, more supportive of electoral reform.

So that's the future. I know that's not going to have any effects now. How do we stop AV? The simple answer is we don't necessarily stop it. Make Votes Count doesn't back AV. It's about actually using all the tools we've got to speak to all the different people. It's a way of starting to get the issues through for some people. But it's not proportionality, and therefore that's why we need to keep on campaigning and pushing the PR argument.

In terms of London elections and fighting the BNP, I think one of the things is to actually engage the faith and ethnic minority communities and do the campaigning with them and talk, as I say, both arguments on electoral reform and fighting the BNP. One of the successes, I should have said about the London elections is simply that nine out of ten people who voted in the London elections now have an Assembly member that represents the party they voted for.

The Lib Dems, how do you keep pushing on them? That's a key question actually, and it's a shame. In a sense, the scope for a hung parliament has decreased a year ago, although there was lots of talk about at the beginning of this year. There's less scope now, but it still having that dialogue and that's where Make Votes Count does come in quite well. You know, people on the Make Votes Count management committee, including Chris Huhne, Ed Davies, senior Lib Dem parliamentarians, to keep pushing those issues and not be satisfied with where we've got, but keep on ensuring it's a high issue. If there is a hung parliament that they can help push for it. But it's a realisation, as I said, of the whole strategy that parliamentary-wise we may be less able to get it, therefore it's about going door to door and bringing our arguments to more people.