

PR: WHY SHOULD WE CARE? LIB DEM FRINGE, 14<sup>TH</sup> SEPT

**MAKE VOTES COUNT / ELECTORAL REFORM SOCIETY / UNLOCK DEMOCRACY**

**“PR: why should we care?” Making the Case for Voting Reform**

**Fringe @ Lib Dem Conference, Bournemouth, 14<sup>th</sup> September 2008**

**CHRIS HUHNE MP (CHAIR, MVC):**

Since last year we've had the Government's Review of Electoral Systems. And there are some things in that which certainly we've welcomed from the point of view of the campaign. The tone of the document was much more that of a civil service document than a political one, but that meant that it was even-handed on some issues. There have been times in the Labour Party when it really did look as if we were weeks away from senior people breaking ranks and actually suggesting that there might be some movement, and then they all went back into their boxes. I think part because of the exceptional weakness of the Labour Party in the polls currently, after the great missed opportunity of not this summer but last summer with Gordon Brown coming to power and failing in his first few weeks as Prime Minister to reopen this whole debate about electoral reform and the Constitution, when he would have been in a very strong position to do so because of Labour's lead in the polls. Subsequently, of course, the Labour Party has been lagging so badly that suggesting electoral reform would be greeted immediately by people saying, 'well, you would say that, wouldn't you?' A rather weak moral position from which to re-open the argument.

And I'm afraid there is really no progress to report on the Conservative side at all, except that I still retain a residual hope, which is based on nothing else than the fact the Conservative Party, as we all know, is the last Napoleonic party in Europe. It doesn't have any formal policy making procedures at all. What the Leader says goes and if the Leader decides that he wants to do something then that is what Conservative policy is. Which certainly would make it tremendously flexible and an easy partner to deal with in any negotiation, should there in fact be a balanced parliament after the next election. And I also merely draw attention to the fact that some years ago when David Cameron first took over as Leader, he went to the Power Commission conference in the QE2 Centre in London and was interviewed about his views on electoral reform and came up with a rather interesting view at that time, that he did not think that the Alternative Vote was a good idea because it wouldn't solve the problem, which I think is the sort of response that we would normally expect one of us, as proper electoral reformers to give to the option of the Alternative Vote. But it certainly shows that he knows his stuff, as you would expect from someone who has been extremely well educated by none other than Vernon Bogdanor, whose commitment to electoral reform and constitutional reform is second to none.

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**Brian Eno:**

*(Brian sent his apologies for not being able to attend in person, but send the following statement which was read out).*

Democracy is a daring concept - a hope that we'll be best governed if all of us participate in the act of government. It is meant to be a conversation, a place where the intelligence and local knowledge of the electorate sums together to arrive at actions that reflect the participation of the largest possible number of people. The first way in which we express our participation is by voting - by making our choices between various programmes and styles of government on offer. If that very first step is flawed - that's to say, if it fails to produce credible results - then everything that follows will be flawed.

First-past-the-post electoral systems, when coupled with scientific polling and focus-grouping, are destined to end up as battles between competing propaganda machines for the minds of a small number of swing voters. The PR agencies, the manipulators and the simplifiers, the Karl Rove's and the Alistair Campbell's – are the winners. Good government is always the loser. We all sense that there is something intrinsically wrong when a party which only managed to secure a small proportion of the vote ends up with exclusive power. Our sense of injustice translates into disillusionment and apathy, which in turn us away from active political participation. To young people, the next generation of voters, the game is transparently corrupt. If the distribution of power is so capricious, and so immune from any influence which they as individuals might be able to exert, there is little encouragement to take part at all. This apathy leaves a vacuum which becomes filled by professional persuaders - paid propagandists. They crowd out accuracy, rationality and altruism. When governments rely increasingly on sophisticated public relations agencies, public debate disappears and is replaced by competing propaganda campaigns, with all the accompanying deceptions. Advertising isn't about truth or fairness or rationality, but about mobilising deeper and more primitive layers of the human mind. The emotions stirred up - such as envy and self-interest - don't fit well with the mission of democracy. Do we want to be governed by those layers of ourselves? Wasn't the hope of democracy that we would move beyond that?

The more our voting choices are directed at an all-or-nothing first-past-the-post result, the more this sequence becomes instantiated. As people lose their confidence in the system, they become less willing to participate. The vacuum in participation will be filled by money. The more politics comes to reflect the influence of money, the more it reverts to that process which democracy was supposed to replace - might is right. If sheer financial power becomes the primary factor in the electoral process, then we are back to the law of the jungle, to 'might is right'. The electoral process is the foundation of good and fair government. If that isn't right and solid, everything else is skewed.

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**AMY RODGER (PPC for East Lothian / ERS Scotland):**

I got into this electoral reform game not because I was one of those Liberal Democrats who joined the Liberal Democrats because they supported electoral reform. I joined our Party for all sorts of other reasons, about equality and things like this. But I always supported it; it just wasn't my main focus. But that was why I ended up working in electoral reform and ended up working for Fair Share, the cross party campaign for local government in Scotland, because it was about answering the question posed in the title of this Fringe meeting, it was about answering that question about Why Should We Care? And because I wasn't coming to the question as somebody who did care, who already cared I could understand maybe, a wee bit more about trying to make other people care about it and about trying to link it to the things that people did actually worry about and their day to day concerns. I understood that most people didn't actually care.

It's about linking it in the same way – we've all, as Liberal Democrats, had emails through from the Campaigns Department telling us what to put in our Focus leaflets, because these are the things that people care about; it's that health, education, crime mantra and we know really in our heads, even if not in our hearts, that that's actually what we need to be going out there and talking about. It's about talking to people about the things they care about. It's where the Lib Dems do best. It's where we talk to ordinary voters about what they care about, whether that's holes in the road or whether that's graffiti down the road or whether that's something bigger about the Iraq war in 2005. And so the challenge for us, as people who do care about PR, is to link it to those issues that people do actually care about.

Now my experience from Scotland is about linking it to those issues that councils work on, because that's where we succeeded in the campaign in Scotland for getting STV for Scottish local government. It was about telling people, community groups, ordinary people, about the way that those decisions were made, that those decisions about who closed their schools, about who closed their hospitals or downgraded their hospitals, about where resources were directed in the fight against crime in their community. Pointing out to people that they needed those decisions to be made by people who represented their views, and that under the current system, under First Past the Post, those decisions were being made by bodies, by administrations in councils that were a distortion of their views, and that didn't represent the views of their whole community, only the views in most cases of the largest minority in their community.

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Where I lived at the time in Glasgow it was the Labour Party. There is a Labour Party hegemony across the west of Scotland that did not represent the views of a huge amount of people, the SNP in particular, not the Liberal Democrats unfortunately were getting a substantial amount of the vote and no representation in council chambers across the central belt of Scotland. It was so distorted in Scotland, so distorted that the need for change was more obvious and I think that's one reason why we succeeded in achieving change. So that's the next thing, is about pointing out to people the need for change and pointing out to people what the unfairness is. So you need people to see why they need to care, why the voting system effects the things they do actually care about.

Don't go out, as far as I'm concerned, and tell people changing the voting system for the sake of changing the voting system. If you're trying to engage people who aren't activists, who won't come voluntarily to a meeting about electoral reform, then you need to go out there and you need to link it into the things that they are bothered about. But you also need to tell them why electoral reform, STV is the solution.

I'm going to propose a somewhat heretical view now. We in Scotland, we got STV through a deal between the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party after the 2003 Scottish Parliament elections. It was our party's price for coalition. Even though I had spent the previous two years working for this reform and working for this change, when it came to that negotiation in 2003 I was actually a wee bit queasy that we were going to allow the Labour Party to impose some really quite draconian measures in some policy areas. But what I've seen happen in Scotland since we've had STV is why it is important. I have seen councils and councillors become more responsive to what people want so that the Labour Party cannot just impose draconian curfew measures. The SNP cannot just – they're having to roll back on – this ridiculous proposal to raise the drinking age to twenty-one in Scotland. But because councils are representative and are made up – and the administrations do actually reflect and have to reflect and know that they have to reflect a broader spectrum of views, they are not able to just impose measures left right and centre I could almost say, that they just want to. They actually have to be more responsive, they have to consult.

In my own constituency I'm the PPC for East Lothian, there's a number of consultations going out at the moment: either about measures that the previous Labour administration was half way through implementing that the SNP Lib Dem coalition administration wants to see whether people still wanted them to carry on; or what they would prefer things of specific measures that were either in the Lib Dem or SNP Manifestos that rather than just have the battle in the apocryphal smoke filled room,

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they're putting it out to consultation amongst the public in East Lothian. And they are doing this because they know that they need to be responsive.

STV in Scotland did shift tectonic plates of Scottish politics. The change in the electoral system in local government that has had a far more profound effect on Scottish politics than that knife edge win that the SNP saw in the Scottish Parliament on the same day. From a LibDem point of view now if you were to drive or sail actually from Durham, up the east coast to Wick you would stay in Liberal Democratic administrative territory for your whole journey. There is not one council between Northumberland and the Highlands of Scotland that does not have Liberal Democrats in administration. That happened because of STV and that happened because we're a party that understands the consequences of Proportional Representation and the Single Transferable Vote and therefore firstly we campaigned properly about it. I would suggest that we were one of the – it was patchy but we were pretty successful in our campaigns under STV in our council campaigns and our election campaigns. Plus we knew, and we had the Manifestos ready, because we knew that STV would mean talking to other parties. We knew that it would mean coalition control and we stepped up to the plate in the borders, in East Lothian, in Edinburgh, in Fife, in Aberdeenshire and in the Highlands. So as party activists, as Liberal Democrat Party activists, there's your motivation for campaigning for STV.

The delivering of Electoral Reform really isn't just about us as a Party. It is about giving citizens meaningful choice at the ballot box and a responsive, representative council of administration depending on the level you're going for after the election. I would suggest that the activism needs to be focused. And I'm going to suggest there's two main strands that we found useful in Scotland. One is the broader public education strand. We've just started a community engagement programme and in the lead up to the election we did a lot of education about how to vote and about why to vote under STV and that was very helpful. Since the election, it's been more focused on how you as individuals and community groups can use the opportunities that STV provides. And I'd say that obviously we're in a different context when if you're not in Scotland you don't actually have STV, but I would still suggest that it's about creating a sympathy for STV and an acceptance of reform and of the need for reform and of the benefits of reform.

There's also the lobbying bit. To effect change you've got to change the decision makers minds. To make change happen it's the decision makers minds who need to be changed. Malcolm was referring to responding to the government consultations. I'd say doing that, writing to your MPs when there's no consultation on, writing to your AM's, your NSPs if you're in Scotland or Wales, letters to the

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press, all the usual stuff but getting it done and using the resources that organisations like Make Vote Count and Unlock Democracy and the Electoral Reform Society provide to help you do that. One of the things that in your very helpful campaign pack that we've given you the new ERS publication about PR mix, we've got whole loads of stuff that can give you other arguments, that can help you frame those letters, those responses. Go for the decision makers and tell them that you're there and that you're bothered and that you're concerned and that you want to change it.

But to just go back to what I said at the beginning, make it real, make it about real issues. It's not about how the votes are counted on election night. That's one tiny part of it. It's about making responsive representative councils, government for every voter in the UK. Thanks very much.

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**PETER FACEY (Unlock Democracy):**

Let me start with an opinion poll. In the last year who here has written or delivered a *Focus* leaflet or campaign material which had something about electoral reform in it? Anything at all. There was a hand there from somebody in the Labour Party. In my time in politics I've heard Chris tell me and I've done it as an agent and as a candidate, concentrate on the core issues, concentrate on the things which matter to people. You don't put constitutional reform stuff in however important it is because it's not what people vote for. Now today, at the moment, what matters to people, people like my own family, the heating bills are going up. My son's turned three and is going to start school next September and I'm worrying about child care. I'm worrying about housing. In my case how much money my house is dropping and whether I can buy a new house in the future. Younger friends are worrying about getting on the housing market or they're already in negative equity. I'm worrying about the environment, I'm worrying about recycling. I'm worrying about day to day things, about how I get to work and transport. But the thing which we haven't done as a Party and as a movement, is connect that to the electoral system.

Ultimately the electoral system is about power. That's what it is. It transfers the power from us, the electorate, to the people who we elect, our representatives to parliament and ultimately the government. And because that power transition system isn't working, we have a situation where you have a party which got a third of the votes at the last election, or just over, has absolute majority in parliament. You have the fact that over half the electorate at the last election voted but elected nobody. Locally where I live you have a fact that just before last May's local elections the Conservatives actually won control of the council before any votes were actually cast because there weren't enough contested seats. They took twelve of the council seats without a single person voting because there weren't enough Liberal Democrat or Labour or Independent candidates standing against them, they were basically elected. You have the fact that because of the electoral system you have a focus on marginal seats. And all the energy here among the Liberal Democrats goes on marginal wars, we're in a safe seat or goes on marginal seats across the country and the whole country becomes about a General Election, what's going to happen to Worcester Woman or to Milton Keynes Man or whoever else? Well the fact is I don't live in Worcester, I'm not a woman either but okay, I don't live in Milton Keynes either and I've never lived in one of those places. So nobody really cares about what happens to Fowlmere man or Croydon woman, or Stoke on Trent teenager, you know, because that isn't interesting. Because they're not going to make a difference. That affects the whole way we do politics, it affects the whole style of it. And unless we change the electoral system we aren't going to be able to deal with some of the other issues.

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I take my hat off to our friends in Scotland, in terms of what they've delivered, but they delivered it through good old fashioned hard politics and taking their opportunities when they were there. Those of us in England we've got a harder fight now to do. We have to actually get to the situation where we can cut those deals, and the reason I asked you in the beginning about the leaflet, is my pledge in terms of a democracy campaign, we have to start making democracy about those issues. We ran a campaign a few years ago which delivered a Private Members Bill, called The Sustainable Communities Act which was all about giving local authorities more power, those of you who are councillors in October the government's going to have the first invitation and is going to ask local authorities to participate, please do. If you don't know about it and you're a local councillor come and talk to me or one of my colleagues and we'll tell you about it. But that coalition was a coalition of ninety organisations. It wasn't built on the fact that it's about democracy and local empowerment, though it is. It was built because it was about saving post offices, dealing with recreation areas, saving the local pub. It was about a whole myriad of local issues brought together as a coalition of thousands of people who pestered their MPs, who bullied them, we humiliated them in public because they wouldn't turn up to public meetings, they had meetings of five hundred people, and it did happen to be about democracy and we had to turn electoral reform into that.

Now I've come to lots of these meetings and we all sit and we talk about how good electoral reform is and we all go away. I've done it myself. I sat out there, I listened, I went away and I delivered my leaflets about wheelie bins and I delivered my leaflets about recycling and everything else. I want you to take a pledge, this is rather like a 19<sup>th</sup> century revivalist meeting. I hereby take the pledge. I want you to do something. We have made an offer, a very foolish offer my treasurer keeps telling me, but we will basically fund a postcard, but if you want to deliver a postcard through every door with a Focus leaflet or campaign leaflet, we will provide you with one. It's scaring me and my treasurer, but we will provide you with one. We already have a million pledges from people to deliver a million postcards, including Chris. He's personally going to deliver 40 thousand. I believe he may raise a few friends to come and help as well. The fact that there are 90 thousand postcards pledged to be delivered in Newcastle. Now we're not just doing this to the LibDems, we are doing it to other parties, we're talking to the Greens and the Greens have already pledged to deliver 200 thousand postcards. We're talking to trades unions and others. I would like you to sign up to that but if you don't want to do that, just put an article in a Focus. One article in a year, it can be on local government, it can be on national, it doesn't matter. If you can't write it yourself or you don't think you can make it sexy enough come and talk to us and we will in good Chris Rennard style, well taught, produce you a punchy short article, whatever size you want, on why Electoral Reform matters. It may be about local government,

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it may be about why national government isn't doing something because the electoral system is wrong. But we will help you do that.

Next time our local meeting of the Party somebody says, 'subjects to have somebody speak on,' why not have one on why Electoral Reform is important? If you can't find a local speaker talk to Make Votes Count, they have a speakers list. If you think you can do a good job, volunteer to be a speaker. If you're unlucky you may have me coming to speak to you, but you may be lucky and you may get one of these wonderful other people. That's something simple you can do. You can also do all the consultations and everything else. You can take the campaign pack away, but just do something.

I started in politics in the Liberal Party and I heard David Penhaligon speak. Now those of you who are youngsters may not know who he was or is but for me it was hearing somebody say if you get angry stick it on a piece of paper and stick it through somebody's door. That works on wheelie bins. It also works on electoral reform, on Bill of Rights, on Human Rights, on local democracy. If you're angry about it stick it through somebody's door, go and tell them about it. There is no point being angry if you do nothing. All it produces is heart attacks and cancer and ulcers. So I want you with me collectively here to take the pledge that I will do one thing. One small thing this year, when I come back to a meeting like this and somebody like me stands here and says what have you done last year, you can sit there and say 'well I delivered a postcard', 'I held a local meeting', 'I wrote to the government, 'I did this', 'I did that'. That's how we build a movement. We will not change the electoral system which is about fundamentally taking power out of the hands of the people who have it and giving it to the people who matter, the people, unless we build a movement. As long as it is us sitting in rooms like this all we will do is make ourselves feel good, so it has to be about the action you take, so the same drive which makes you go out on a wet Thursday night, dodge the dog and actually talk to somebody about local politics because you care about the community, I need to take the same drive for that and put it into electoral reform. Thank you very much.

**CHRIS HUHNE:**

Let me open things up to the floor. Before I do, let me add this. Peter's remarks rather reminded me, it was Margaret Meade who said that a small group of motivated people can change the world and added, it's the only thing that ever has. And I think that that's something that's worth bearing in mind when we come to this campaign and I think that what Amy said about Scotland was very much to the point, because we have seen a further serious advance in the cause of electoral reform north of the border. Perhaps we sometimes underestimate how much of an advance we've made elsewhere. If you look back to 1997 we had electoral reform for Scotland, for Wales, for the GLA, for the European Parliament, now for local government in Scotland. All of these things are new just in the last eleven years. So I really do think we have to build that campaign and Peter's absolutely right and try and push the bolder finally over the big hill that's marked the House of Commons.