

Report of the Independent Commission on the Voting System: Volume 2

Submissions and correspondence from Members of Parliament

Martin Salter and Jonathan Shaw MP

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MARTIN SALTER, Labour MP for Reading West

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

The Chairman
The Independent Commission on The Voting System
Clive House
Petty France
London

26th February 1998

Dear Lord Jenkins of Hillhead,

Please find enclosed a submission from Jonathan Shaw MP and myself for the consideration of the Commission.

If you feel it necessary I would be more than happy to give evidence in person.

Yours sincerely,

MARTIN SALTER MP



SUBMISSION TO THE INDEPENDENT COMMISSION ON THE VOTING SYSTEM

FROM MARTIN SALTER MP & JONATHAN SHAW MP
ORGANISERS OF "KEEP THE LINK" – A GROUPING OF LABOUR MPs
COMMITTED TO SYSTEMS OF ELECTORAL REFORM WHICH RETAIN THE
CONSTITUENCY LINK

THE CASE FOR THE ALTERNATIVE VOTE

We welcome the establishment of the Independent Commission on the Voting System as promised by Labour in 1997. Furthermore, we look forward to the Commission facilitating an inclusive debate that promotes understanding and knowledge of the issues involved. There are two essential elements to a genuinely democratic voting system, fairness and most importantly accountability. We strongly recommend the Commission to embrace this latter element and to promote it to become the essence of our political culture. We will fully support a new voting system, which enhances the present direct accountability of representative to electorate. The Alternative Vote system, or its close relation the Supplementary Vote, fully guarantees the accountability of a Member of Parliament to the electorate.

PROBLEMS WITH OTHER VOTING SYSTEMS

- **The Single Transferable Vote System**, as used in the Republic of Ireland, would create mega-constituencies with multi-members. This would blur the relationship between MP and constituent. For instance, which MP would a constituent approach with their concern, which MP would feel obliged to deal with that concern? The Single Transferable Vote would create an unworkable and confused constituency organisation, the electorate would become distanced from their representative, thus producing MPs who are free to pursue personal agendas without the day to day concern of addressing constituents' problems. Furthermore, the Single Transferable Vote is only contingently proportional and would not guarantee proportionality at every election. The Single Transferable Vote would destroy the link between MPs and geographical constituencies.

Under the list system that partners this proposal electors vote for a party rather than an individual. MPs are then selected from central and regional party lists of candidates in numbers proportional to their party's total vote. Therefore, it is the party machines which have the final say as to the name of the MP. This clearly hinders voter choice by ignoring the fact that a voter doesn't solely consider a Parliamentary Candidate on the grounds of their party membership but also on their assessment of the candidates' ability to serve the interests of the constituency.

- **The Additional Member System**, as used in Germany, would produce two classes of MP, the first would be accountable to the electorate whilst the second would not be bound by constituency duties. Once again this system severs the contract of accountability between a single representative and a specific electorate. In a similar vein to the Single Transferable Vote system power to decide the identity of a Member of Parliament would be handed from voters to party machines. In common with the Single Transferable Vote system the link between each MP and a geographical constituency would be diluted.

THE ALTERNATIVE VOTE

- **The Alternative Vote System**, as used in Australia, preserves the local accountability of one MP to a specific geographical constituency. Indeed the Alternative Vote would build on the tradition and understanding of our democracy. Only through this system can the basic tenet of democracy, accountability, be genuinely maintained. The Alternative Vote system would allow the electorate the opportunity to continue voting for individual candidates, but in order of preference, thus permitting a true reflection of the diversity and pluralism of the society we live in. By allowing the electorate the chance to vote in order of preference each vote cast would have more equal value and MPs would not have a majority of people who voted to keep them out of Parliament. An increasing feature of British electoral behaviour, tactical voting, would become simpler under the Alternative Vote. Indeed the Alternative Vote system would allow the electorate to vote tactically, knowing their true intentions are being reflected without having to second-guess other voters' intentions.

Voter choice would therefore be increased and every vote would be made to count. The Alternative Vote would also reward political parties that work together and endorse each other therefore edging politics away from its present adversarial nature.

- The Alternative Vote System would not require another lengthy Boundary Commission to sit and report, as the present constituencies would remain intact. Therefore it is the only alternative voting system that can be in place before the next general election.
- The Alternative Vote System would maintain the present design of the Ballot Paper, with minimal alterations. Therefore reducing the possibility of voter confusion and/or the potential for decreased turn out.
- The Alternative Vote System would increase the mandate of Members of Parliament. Since they would be acting with an increased legitimacy of a guaranteed absolute minimum of 50 % of the votes cast in their constituency.
- The Alternative Vote system guarantees proportionality within an individual constituency. A candidate must attain a clear majority of the votes to win his or her seat.

CONCLUSION

In recommending an alternative to the present First Past The Post System the assumption should not be made that pure proportionality is necessarily in the best interests of democracy in all elections. Whilst forms of Proportional Representation are suitable for other elections, such as to the European Parliament, the unique accountability of one Member of Parliament to one constituency should remain intact. Indeed the Commission is tasked to, "Observe the requirement for broad proportionality, the need for stable government, an extension of voter choice and the maintenance of a link between honourable Members and geographical constituencies."

The Alternative Vote system would ensure an increase in voter choice whilst keeping the link between MP and constituency. Preferential voting would guarantee a more accurate reflection of voter intention whilst promoting fairness and accountability. The 1976 Hansard Commission was caught between a "fundamental and unanimous" desire for electoral reform, however it acknowledged that all proposed Proportional Representation options would have significant democratic defects in Britain.

However, the Alternative Vote System encompasses proportionality yet would enhance democracy.