

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

Submissions from political parties / fora

Liberal Democrat Party



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The Rt. Hon. the Lord Jenkins of Hillhead, OM,  
Chairman,  
The Independent Commission on the  
Voting System,  
6th Floor,  
Clive House,  
Petty France,  
LONDON, SW1H 9HD

Dear Roy,

I have pleasure in submitting the written evidence of the Liberal Democrats for your Commission's consideration. I also write to express the willingness of the Party to give oral evidence if your Commission would find it useful.



**Robert MacLennan**  
**Liberal Democrat President**

# Liberal Democrat Evidence to the Independent Commission on the Voting System

'In a really equal democracy, every or any section would be represented, not disproportionately, but proportionately. A majority of the electors would always have a majority of the representatives; but a minority of the electors would always have a minority of the representatives. Man for man they would be as fully represented as the majority. Unless they are, there is not equal government, but a government of inequality or privilege ... contrary to all just government, but also above all, contrary to the principle of democracy, which professes equality as its very root and foundation.'

J.S. MILL, *Considerations on Representative Government*

1.1 Liberal Democrats warmly welcome the establishment of the Independent Commission on the Voting System. As is well known, we and our predecessor parties have been dedicated advocates of the introduction of proportional representation for all elections. It is our firm view that in any modern democracy the allocation of seats won should broadly match the votes cast in the ballot box.

1.2 Liberal Democrats believe, in particular, that electoral reform would strengthen the representative capability of the House of Commons and the legitimacy of parliamentary democracy in the United Kingdom. We deplore the existing, crude 'winner-takes-all' system in dislocated, single-member constituencies drawn on boundaries that are often highly contrived. Our aim is an electoral system which articulates the democratic choices of an increasingly sophisticated electorate, which allows every vote to count, and where MPs are elected to serve natural communities. Our purpose is to reinforce parliamentary scrutiny of

the government, to improve the quality of public policy and to secure stable government enjoying wide public support.

1.3 Our current system of election has failed to represent adequately the views of voters in Parliament, delivering overwhelming majorities to parties enjoying the support of less than a third of those entitled to vote. At the 1997 election, it denied representation to Conservative voters in Scotland and Wales despite that Party's substantial share of the vote.

1.4 Our commitment to proportional representation has its roots in the legacy of nineteenth century Liberalism. Belief in the overriding importance of proportionality was reflected in one of the very first policy statements produced by the Liberal/SDP Alliance, namely the Commission on Electoral Reform chaired by Sir Henry Fisher and including in its membership Roy Jenkins and Robert Maclennan. The Fisher Commission advocated the introduction of a system of Single Transferable Vote which it chose to call Community Proportional Representation.

### **Proportional representation**

2.1 We recognise that there is no one perfect electoral system. Moreover, different systems of election may be appropriate for different types of government. All proportional systems have strengths and weaknesses. Yet all proportional systems are better both in principle and in practice than first-past-the-post or the Alternative Vote.

2.2 A proportional system of election for the House of Commons needs to avoid the flaws of the present system without introducing undesirable side-effects. We agree with the four

criteria set out in the brief of the Commission: broad proportionality, the need for stable government, an extension of voter choice and the maintenance of a link between MPs and geographical constituencies. We believe that a proposal along these lines would command widespread support.

2.3 Liberal Democrats also consider that a proportional system would encourage citizens to vote. We believe that the present system, which forces many people to vote for the candidate they least dislike and where very many votes are discounted, induces widespread cynicism. A good proportional system will encourage participation by maximising voter choice and by allowing a range of individual preferences to effect the result.

2.4 We are anxious to secure an electoral system that ensures an end to the exaggerated regional polarisation of political parties. It is in our view damaging to national unity that after the 1997 general election the Conservatives have no MPs in either Scotland or Wales. The current system has not helped Labour to win seats in the south of England. Likewise, British European policy was for years impaired by the absence of Liberal Democrats from the European Parliament.

2.5 Liberal Democrats believe that the healthy democratic society of the twenty-first century will be one in which political self-expression is enhanced. The best electoral system will be one which fully reflects the pluralism of a modern society, the increasing autonomy of the citizen-elect and the rights of minorities to fair representation. Britain needs a political system that will reflect the views of individuals and not simply the status of political parties.

## **Criteria for assessing change**

3.1 Our over-riding concern is to replace the present system with one designed to secure:

- A high degree of proportionality between parties;
- The avoidance of wasted votes;
- The retention of a constituency system;
- Less geographical polarisation of party representation;
- The opportunity for voters to choose between candidates from within the same party and to spread their votes across parties.

3.2 Our conclusion is that, set in this context, the best system of proportional representation is the Single Transferable Vote (STV).

### **Single Transferable Vote**

4.1 Both proponents and opponents of STV tend to accentuate its special nature. But like some other forms of PR, STV is a list system involving multi-member geographical constituencies. As with the alternative vote (AV), STV involves preferential voting: electors prioritise candidates as their first, second and third choice and so on, until they have no further preference. In contrast to AV, it is the existence of multi-member seats under STV which produces proportionality. Candidates may be listed on the ballot paper in alphabetical order, in random order or in an order preordained by the party. The third option is more likely to meet the wish of parties to indicate to the electorate their preferred ranking order.

4.2 There is no one pure STV system. Use of STV may be combined with some elements of other proportional systems. For example, in Australia voters may use their discretion either to vote simply for the party list or to use STV to spread a number of preferences for candidates either within one or between different party lists. It would also be possible to combine the use of STV in regional constituencies with a top-up list system (AMS) to ensure full proportionality across the country as a whole.

4.3 Unlike other list systems which allocate seats by splitting the vote between parties, STV allocates seats to those candidates who reach a quota. Unlike other list systems, therefore, no minimum threshold is required. The quota depends on the number of votes cast and number of candidates to be elected, so that, for example, in a four member constituency a candidate must achieve more than a fifth of the first preferences to be elected. It is not possible for more than four candidates to achieve more than a fifth of the votes cast.

4.4 If no candidate reaches the quota the lowest placed candidate drops out and his or her votes are transferred to the next preferred candidate, until a candidate exceeds the required quota to be elected. When a candidate exceeds the quota and is elected, their surplus votes are also transferred to avoid wasting votes. The more seats per constituency, the more proportional the overall result is likely to be.

4.5 STV is the system used for elections in Ireland and Malta, for European Parliamentary elections in Northern Ireland and, on a discretionary basis, in Australia. It is also used within many professional bodies and associations in Britain, including the NUT, the Synod of the

Church of England and the Liberal Democrats. The Irish have confirmed their support for STV in two referenda.

4.6 With STV broad proportionality would be assured except where parties have a low vote widely dispersed. No party would be likely to secure a Commons majority without the support of nearly half the popular vote. Moreover, in every part of the country there would be likely to be a reasonable spread of party representation.

4.7 **Representation of votes cast.** STV would significantly increase the chances of constituents being represented by at least one MP from the party they supported, while also increasing the scope for MPs to act together across the party divide on issues affecting their areas.

4.8 **Preferential voting.** Voting by numbering candidates in order of preference should strengthen the identification of voters with their individual MPs. Whereas at present most voters vote for losing candidates, under STV most would vote for successful candidates. Moreover, STV allows voters to discriminate between candidates nominated by their preferred party, or to divide their support between parties if for some reason (like good constituency service or a salient issue that divides the parties, like Europe) they wish to do so. Of all proportional systems, STV maximises voter choice.

4.9 **Representation of the public.** Liberal Democrats would hope that under STV in the UK the comparative advantage given to public choice over party political tradition would assist women and ethnic minorities to get elected. STV would, at any rate, encourage the



parties to present a broader range of candidates, including those with specialised knowledge, than they do at present, making the House of Commons as a whole more representative of the public at large.

**4.10 Representation of natural communities.** STV can be structured in a way which would guarantee the coherent representation of natural communities at parliamentary level. Under STV the link between MP and constituency could be maintained and even enhanced, by using geographical counties, large cities and groups of boroughs as multi-member constituencies for the purposes of parliamentary representation. Such effective political entities would also be better prepared to sustain and enjoy the greater decentralisation of government within the United Kingdom particularly by the use, where possible, of local and regional government boundaries.

**4.11** Island constituencies and a few very large sparsely populated areas should remain, exceptionally, as single member constituencies but with preferential voting

**4.12** AV, which is effectively STV in single-member constituencies, should in our view also be used for parliamentary by-elections. By-elections are an important part of the British political tradition, as also that of the Irish, who hold their by-elections under AV.

## **Assessing Different Systems**

### *Alternative and Supplementary Vote*

5.1 The Alternative Vote (AV) does not provide for (or attempt to provide for) proportionality across the electorate. Indeed, research at the time of the 1997 UK general election suggests that AV would have produced an even less proportional result than first-past-the-post with the Conservatives losing further seats to both Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

5.2 A modification on AV is the Supplementary Vote (SV) system. SV is similar to AV except that it allows voters to express only first and second preferences, rather than rank all candidates in order of preference. Its proponents argue that lower and higher preferences should not be given equal status. However, SV is not proportional and is more likely to yield wasted votes than AV because voters who cast two votes for losing candidates have neither of their votes counted.

### *Closed List Systems*

5.3 Closed list systems (in which the voter votes for a party rather than a candidate) do not meet the term of reference of the Independent Commission on the Voting System regarding voter choice. Closed lists distance the voter from the election of a representative and may, as a result, reduce voter turnout and the accountability of members. In our view, they also place disproportionate control in the hands of the party managers.

### *Additional Member System*

5.4 The Additional Member System (AMS) uses regional or national top-up lists to produce a result that is broadly proportional. AMS does not, however, meet the requirement of maintaining a constituency link because significant numbers of MPs will have no constituency; there will be two classes of MP.

5.5 The possibility of combining AV with an additional member top-up has been canvassed. The criticisms of AV, namely that it is not by itself a proportional electoral system should be borne in mind if this combination is being considered. The combination of AV and AMS is likely to produce a larger Parliament with the need for a dramatic counterbalancing of the AV result to ensure proportionality.

### **Making the change**

6.1 Any change to a new electoral system fitting the criterion of 'broad proportionality' will require a review of constituency boundaries or a dramatic increase in the number of MPs.

6.2 The possibility of a phased approach to full proportional representation has been canvassed. However, we can find no sensible interim measure that could be introduced by 2001 or 2002 and that is designed both to ease the transition and be broadly proportional. To introduce AV as a first stage would not make the introduction of AMS at a later date any easier. It would risk obfuscating the purpose of changing the electoral system from the status quo. Furthermore, a phased approach is likely to prove more costly than a one-step reform. We conclude that if a proportional system is to be introduced, it should be introduced in all its essentials in the first general election to be held after the proposed referendum.

6.3 Liberal Democrats believe that to increase the size of the House of Commons would be a serious step in the wrong direction. Britain's legislature is already large both relative to its population and absolutely. To add a national top-up to ensure proportionality without reducing the number of MPs would be without precedent, costly and unpopular, would overstretch the services of the House, and would be ultimately unjustified by the scale of work or representative requirements.

6.4 The fact is that any proportional system means that constituency boundaries will have to be redrawn and the public will have to be thoroughly informed about the new system — and MPs will have to accept that some of them will lose their seats. The problem of MPs who lose their seats due to a change in the electoral system needs to be addressed by other means. The growing pluralisation of politics with decentralised government, devolution and a reformed House of Lords is likely, in any event, to open up new opportunities for representative public service.

6.5 To smooth the transition, however, it would be possible to create the initial STV parliamentary constituencies for 2001-02 by simply aggregating existing seats or by using existing local government areas based on the natural communities outlined in paragraph 4.10. This would avoid the need for a lengthy Boundary Commission review which would be bound to delay the introduction of PR.

6.6 This transitional approach to the boundary review was the strategy proposed by the Fisher Commission. It proposed the creation of 143 constituencies with the number of MPs varying from one per seat (the islands and sparsely populated areas) to eight. Although we

support the general thrust of the proposals of the Fisher Commission, we would not wish to be held to that ceiling. We would propose, in any case, that before the second general election to be held under proportional representation there is a fundamental review of the total size of the reformed House of Commons that reassesses the balance of seats between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and takes account of the current proposals for devolution as well as the reform of the House of Lords.

6.7 Such a phased approach to the question of boundaries would have two distinct benefits. First, it would enable the Boundary Commission to build on the experiences of an STV election to inform their recommendations for future elections. Second, it would make the transition easier for the political parties, with current MPs likely to stand in 2001-02 in their existing, albeit now multi-member, constituencies.

## **Conclusion**

7.1 The Liberal Democrats therefore submit that:

1. STV meets in full all the criteria of the Electoral Reform Commission.
2. STV is best suited to meet the needs of a modern parliamentary democracy.
3. STV could be introduced in time for the next general election, leaving to the next Parliament a full-scale review of constituency boundaries.
4. Casual vacancies should be filled by by-elections under a preferential voting system.