

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

Submissions from representative / campaigning groups

Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform



Labour campaign for electoral reform

Administrative co ordinator

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Chair

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5 January, 1998

Lord Jenkins of Hillhead,
House of Lords,
London, SW1A 0PW

Dear Roy Jenkins,

I hope you will enjoy the task ahead of you this year as Chair of the Commission on the voting system and congratulate you on your appointment.

LCER has held a large public meeting alongside its AGM for the last eight years. We were hoping that Robin Cook would be able to attend but, with his commitment during the British Presidency, he can only say he will come if he can. In any case we thought it would be a good opportunity this year to invite you and the rest of the Commission to attend. We have booked the Grand Committee Room between 6.30 and 8.30 pm on Thursday, 26 February.

We would, of course, make the meeting open to other reformers in other parties. That has been our tradition in any case. Depending of how many of the Commission could attend, we would like an introduction from the platform and then responses to various short questions and statements from the floor. We would expect MPs and journalists, as they have in the past, to attend but not to dominate the proceedings.

It would be useful to know, as soon as possible, whether you would feel this is something you would like to do as Chair with other members of the Commission or if you would prefer other members of the Commission to be on the platform.

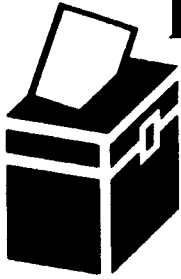
LCER is not aligned to any one system but is committed to Labour's policy of the Commission and Referendum. I am enclosing LCER's latest mailing and our news release which I hope you will find helpful. I also enclose a copy of our handbook, *Labour's Road to Electoral Reform* which Martin Linton and I are currently rewriting, with an introduction by Robin Cook.

I nearly met you in Oxford when Mary Robinson accompanied her husband who was speaking about Edmund Burke. But I feel I know you through the late John Lyttle who was at university with my husband and who attended our wedding. I know he approved of my work on electoral reform and indeed on Cyprus where we first discussed politics.

I look forward to meeting you during the course of the Commission. Do contact me if you want any other background material.

Yours sincerely,

Mary Southcott



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22 December, 1997

(embargoed until midnight 26 December, 1997)

NEWS RELEASE

RING OUT THE OLD, RING IN THE NEW?

Labour's electoral reformers speak out on the prospects for change in 1998.

Professor Raymond Plant (member of the House of Lords, Master of St Katherine's College, Oxford, Chair of Labour's internal working party on electoral systems 1990-1993 and LCER President) says: "What an opportunity this Commission provides for regalanising the debate about the future of British democracy. When John Smith proposed the referendum on the voting system for the House of Commons, he stressed that this was a matter for ordinary citizens not just for Members of Parliament. The new Commission will, if it consults widely and deliberates in public, engage the interest of people in all parts of the United Kingdom. I hope it will seize the opportunity to take this debate to the people and not treat it as an academic or theoretical exercise so that its recommendation receives the widest degree of enthusiasm from reformers."

Richard Burden (MP for Birmingham Northfield and LCER Chair) says: "It is a real pleasure, but a slight irony, that we owe the great steps in democracy since 1 May to a Labour landslide elected on a system which has lost legitimacy for many people outside the corridors of power. The new year will bring the London referendum, and legislation and developments to elect the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly using forms of PR. But for electoral reformers, 1998 will be the year of the Commission on the voting system for the House of Commons. Reformers from all parties and none, inside and outside Westminster, need to involve themselves in this process."

Judith Church (MP for Dagenham and member of the Plant Commission 1992-3) says: "We welcome the appointment of the voting reform Commission whose members are highly experienced and well respected in this field. Combined with other constitutional reforms, the human rights bill and the freedom of information white paper, this Commission will be a landmark in the creation of a modern democracy. I am confident that they will recommend a new voting system which will be accepted by the majority of the British people in the referendum."

Martin Linton (MP for Battersea) says: "The most important thing is that we end up giving people a vote that makes a difference and gives them a say in both their representative and their government. We want a voting system that puts everyone's hands on the levers of power, not just people lucky enough to live in marginal seats or in seats where their party stands a chance."

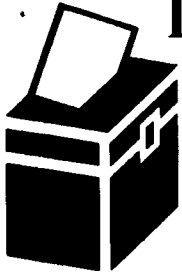
Stephen Twigg (MP for Enfield Southgate) says: "The 1997 general election heralded a new political era with a new generation in parliament. The young people who voted Labour in record numbers did so in support of democratic reform and a new politics."

Ends

Enclosed the Winter 1997/8 LCER Newsletter and the article *A Sustainable Democracy*

For information contact: Richard Burden MP on 0121 475 9295 (constituency) 0121 454 2631 (home)

Mary Southcott on 0117 924 5139, 01902 714 679 or pager 04325 167 037



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28 February, 1998

Independent Commission on the Voting System,
6th Floor, Clive House,
Petty France, London, SW1H 9HD
e-mail votingcom@holis.demon.co.uk

Dear Commission,

I am enclosing the Statement passed by the Annual General Meeting of the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform on Thursday, 27 February, 1998. Although it does not mention a specific system, it indicates where the consensus may lie within Labour reformers.

You will, I imagine, be receiving individual submissions from our members, some of whom will be attending your hearings around the country.

I also enclose our New Release which contains the views of some of our key members.

Yours faithfully,

LCER EXECUTIVE STATEMENT TO AGM

LCER SUBMISSION to the INDEPENDENT VOTING COMMISSION

LCER welcomes the establishment of the Independent Commission on the Voting System* promised in Labour's 1997 manifesto. We hope the process of the Commission and the subsequent referendum will involve the British people in the assessment of the present system, the decision about an acceptable proportional alternative and whether we change the way we vote. LCER has always supported electoral reform in principle. We fully intend to campaign for any new system which upholds the following principles which our campaign has promoted:

♦ All votes count

Party representation should broadly reflect the votes each party receives throughout the country. The current system cannot prevent parties with minority support claiming monopoly power. General elections are increasingly fought by parties targeting voters in marginal seats with less concern for the involvement of those elsewhere. Preferential voting in single member seats would encourage electors to vote positively for candidates rather than tactically. It could therefore be considered as an element of an additional or mixed member system. Only systems with an element of proportionality can ensure all votes count.

♦ MP - constituency link

The representational role of the MP is a valued part of our current system. There are proportional systems which retain this link and we believe that in general elections all voters should continue to have a chance to vote for the candidate of their choice. Doubts about whether large multi-member constituencies encourage the relationship between representative and represented as far as the Commons is concerned do not apply to local government.

♦ Consistency

Although voting systems for different tiers of government do not have to be identical, they need to be complementary. Arrangements for the Scottish Parliament, which is a legislative as well as a deliberative assembly, and the Welsh Assembly should be taken into account.

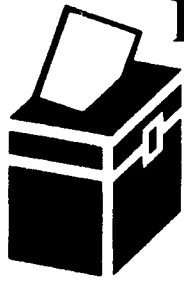
♦ Clear and understandable

Public education will be an important part of both the voting referendum and the introduction of any new electoral systems. Material explaining the systems will need to be available. The system recommended by the Commission should build on current practice and voters must not need a politics degree to understand it!

♦ A new political culture

A winner-takes-all system encourages adversarial rather than problem solving politics. Parties cannot credit another party with a good idea or promote honest open discussion among its own members because the media reports these as weaknesses or splits. A new voting system can help to connect people and politicians and build stable government as part of a wider constitutional agenda designed to ensure that citizens are fully involved in decisions which affect our lives.

We send the Commission best wishes for their important work.



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24 February, 1998

Immediate release

News Release

Is the Best the enemy of the Good?

This **Thursday, 26 February**, the Annual General Meeting of the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform, will be a chance for people to have a say on a new voting system to elect MPs in the next century. Beginning at **6.30 pm in the Grand Committee Room, House of Commons**, there will be an opportunity to discuss the principles underlying this choice with invited former members of Labour's Plant Commission, Jeff Rooker MP, Judith Church MP and Richard Rosser (Labour National Executive Committee) in the presence of members of the new Independent Commission on the Voting System, chaired by Lord Jenkins of Hillhead.

We need to discuss systems which fit the criteria laid down in the remit of the Commission: broad proportionality, stable government, voter choice and the MP/constituency link but also the manifest failings of the present system which need to be addressed and how we want politics to change and the way we are governed. Democracy is the big picture.

Richard Burden (MP for Birmingham Northfield and LCER Chair) says:

"The Labour Government has already made a flying start on the most radical program of constitutional reform Britain has seen in living memory. Electoral reform will be a vital part of creating a new and more open style of politics. While the Jenkins Commission is identifying a proportional system for Britain, LCER will be working hard to persuade Labour Party members, not already persuaded, of the need for change and will be in the forefront of the campaign for a "YES" vote in the referendum when it comes."

Jeff Rooker (MP for Birmingham Perry Barr, former LCER Chair and Plant Commission Member) says:

"The Plant Commission produced the most in-depth study so far of electoral systems and found most of the pitfalls. Our reports provide the foundation upon which the Jenkins Commission will now build. Their decision involves all parties which is how it should be. Tribal politics cannot be allowed to choose our new voting system."

Judith Church (MP for Dagenham, LCER Vice Chair and former Plant Commission Member) says:

"If we are to connect people and politics, we need to change the political culture from winner-takes-all to a modern inclusive, responsible and representative politics. On their own, with no element of proportionality, majoritarian systems, such as Alternative Vote and the Supplementary Vote which Plant recommended, do not produce a result where the votes cast nationally bare a relationship with the final make up of parliament. Under AV or SV, in 1983, Labour would have suffered a worse defeat and in 1997 Labour's majority would have been increased from 179 to 213 on less than 44 per cent of the vote. The British people are entitled to a real choice in the referendum between the status quo, a majoritarian system, and a proportional alternative."

For more information contact:

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Mary Southcott 219 2136, 0117 924 5139 (answerphone) pager 04325 167 037

Ends

Mary Southcott
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28 February, 1998

Independent Commission on the Voting System,
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Dear Commission,

I am submitting my report, *The Best is the enemy of the Good?*, which was presented to the Annual General Meeting of the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform, as my personal statement on a good system for Britain.

As you may know Martin Linton and I are updating our booklet "Labour's Road to Electoral Reform: what's wrong with first past the post?". As soon as "Making Votes Count" is available in proof I will send the Commissioners a copy.

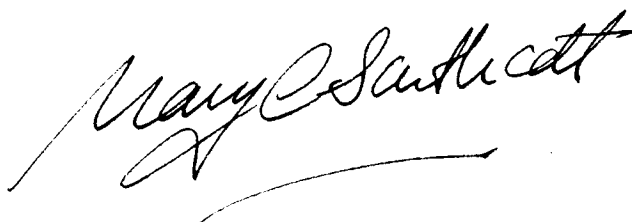
From my work on updating this book, from working with members of the Plant Commission from 1990 - 1993, from doing meetings and conferences up and down the country in Labour and cross Party groups and from briefing politicians and journalists on this subject, I decided that we needed to look at systems from current practice rather than future aspirations.

We need to tackle the characteristics of the present system which can lead to:

demoralisation, dichotomy, disillusion, distortion, domination, polarisation and tacticalisation which can be divided into tactical voting by the electorate and tactical resourcing by the parties which is now enhanced by target technology. Systems also make it more or less easy to expose, challenge and change the unrepresentativeness of the House of Commons.

If I can be of any further assistance to the Commission or the staff, please let me know.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Mary Southcott'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

The Best is the enemy of the Good?

Mary Southcott's Parliamentary and Political Report - February 1998

The Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform has been part of nurturing the process of the Commission on the Voting System and the Voting Referendum. It has been about finding consensus with people in our own party who did not share our views about the current voting system. We have got used to thinking not what we think best and having it immediately or taking our ball home but how can we affect the future, what is best for the Party - to find consensus, put it into the manifesto, campaign together and win the general election. It was always an irony that we were called defeatists. Our optimism was that Labour could win and begin the process of changing our voting system.

The consensus was first on having the Plant Commission, then the Referendum, and when we realised how disruptive it would be to have electoral reformers fighting for different systems, we suggested the commission. Now we have the great responsibility of seeking with other reformers the one system which will be put to the British people. This is not a time for peddling our favourite systems. Of course, parties which have policy can do that and so can each individual member of the campaign - and possibly will - but what the campaign needs to judge is where that consensus is. What would be a good system for this country for the next century and how that can be implemented.

This means starting where we are as much as knowing where we want to be, the ethics of responsibility as much as those of conviction. The voting system is not an end in itself. It is part of the wider examination of how we are governed, what people want out of a 21st century democracy and changes in the wider constitution to decentralise power and empower people. One of the fundamental challenges for the new Labour government is tackling the disillusion and involving people in decision-making rather than alienating them still further from the political process. One of the key solutions may be education. "Why did no one ever tell me about this?" is the cry of many young people.

The Freedom of Information White Paper and the Advisory Group on Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in schools are as important as changing the voting system but they are not unconnected. The don't knows and don't cares could win most political debates. The Abstainers were one of the largest parties at the 1997 general election. Certainly we need to know something about what is happening in other countries where they do not use first past the post. We could learn from the way newly emerging democracies rejected our system and find out why. We need to get some of the facts about Italy and New Zealand. We need an authorised video which makes different ways of voting accessible but which is agreed with supporters of the different systems including our current one. And the Government needs a strategy of voter education on systems to be used or decided upon.

But the solution to the alternative proportional voting system may not come from swapping our best system solutions but, in the context of a changing world and cynicism about politics, from addressing the biases in the system we have and seeing how they can be corrected. Even many status quo supporters concede that where you live and even which constituency will determine whether your vote counts. The dreadful fear is that the new Hague Conservative Party learns to target as successfully as Labour and the Liberal Democrats. The marginal constituency and the marginal voter can then have the general elections to themselves. Most people subscribe to the rhetoric one person, one vote, one value.

Another fear is that boundary commissions have already influenced the result of the general election before any vote is cast. That links in with the growing awareness that you can win elections by distributing your vote more evenly provided the party gets a third of the vote but by concentrating it in geographical areas if you are a smaller party. Tactical voting has become endemic. We do not even know what people's first preferences are but we do know voters do not like voting negatively and often do not have the information to make the right choice. The straitjacket imposed on people in constituencies where their party is a poor third will be removed for the European elections.

Elective dictatorship, domination, one party rule is something which many democrats find offensive whether their party is in power or not. The main positive of the present system to some is that it magnifies majorities, but if that is causing the problem it needs to be addressed. There is a tendency to oppositionalism, rather than a more holistic way of making policy which encourages discussion, commissions, pilot schemes, trusting people with information - the new politics of inclusion, involvement and responsibility.

Making votes count is a symbol and a short hand for ensuring that people count and that their voices are heard. What is not acceptable in a grown up politics is a separation of conversations. What the political elite are talking about, and the media are covering, needs to be what people outside are interested in or wanting to be addressed. So we must look at the dichotomy which was noted in the Plant reports between deliberative and legislative assemblies. Most people want the assembly that legislates to have consulted widely first. It does this best if there are people on the inside in touch with and articulating views on the outside but also providing the places of contact for consultation and listening.

We need to examine what we mean by government stability. We do not want anti-consensus government. The local representative geographical link is important but we must look at this from the perspective of the loser as well as the winner voters. Voter choice is not simply about candidates and parties, it is about governments and policies. And proportionality is not a mere matter of arithmetic, it is about connecting the voter and the government. We need to ensure that when the Commission suggests an appropriate system or combination of systems and that is put to a referendum, if it succeeds, that the whole proposals will become part of Labour's commitment in the general election, if there has been no chance to legislate and implement them in time for that general election.

LCER has members everywhere, throughout the country geographically, across the political spectrum and in every tier and grouping within the party. Individual members are in favour of almost every system. Some of them have invented new ones! When we consulted in winter 1992/93 62 per cent supported mixed member systems, 16 per cent the single transferable vote and nearly 14 per cent preference majoritarian systems. We could have become an AMS Labour campaign but we decided to move by consensus. This may be a parable of the new politics. We could all sign up for change and we did. First past the post supporters saw our divisions on systems as weakness but ironically now they are a strength. We can stay together. Once the Jenkins Commission has reported, the challenge will be to deliver all our members, our sponsors and our energy to winning the vote for change in the referendum. We hope the Commission will make our life easy by recommending a good system which reflects the best in the current one and corrects its anomalies.

PR for Europe has already alerted people outside the political process to the internal democracy of parties. While Labour is doing all it can for education, education, education, we need to link that in to education for what? Democracy is the big picture. Democracy - democracy - democracy.

Mary C. Smith
26. ii. 98.