

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

Submissions and correspondence from Members of Parliament

Rhodri Morgan MP

B. J. ...

14. VII '97



C. J. ...

HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Please Quote
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10 July 1998

Lord Jenkins of Hillhead
House of Lords
London SW1

Dear Roy

Commission on Electoral Reform

I am writing to amplify some of the thoughts that I expressed in the consultative session that you had in the Grand Committee Room a week or so ago.

I appeared to shock all of my Conservative fellow-Parliamentarians and not a few of my Labour colleagues as well, by saying the unsayable and perhaps asking them to think the unthinkable as well by saying that I thought that the constituency link was over-rated. I want to say straight away that I rate the constituency link personally very highly, but I don't think that the members of the public rate it as highly as we MPs do in a multi-member constituency setting such as I have found myself in, representing a Cardiff seat since 1987.

During that period I have experienced almost every variety of political mixture in the Cardiff area, since Cardiff is very much a city where political change tends to take place and tends to act as a kind of bell-weather for the rest of Britain, much as say Birmingham and Bristol do as well, having a touch of the north and a touch of the south in them as cities, in terms of their political behaviour.

I have gone from being two Labour and two Conservatives in the City from three Labour and one Conservative, to the 1997 of four Labour and no Conservative. It was certainly my experience during the 1992-97 Parliament that being sandwiched between two Conservative MPs, namely the Conservative MP for Cardiff North and the Conservative MP for the Vale of Glamorgan to my west, I found myself being called upon to act as if I were the constituency MP for those two constituencies as well as for Cardiff West on at least a once a week basis. The reasons given for wanting me to act on their behalf, and not their local MPs, were usually political. 'I've been a Labour supporter all my life and I want you to act for me', was the commonest line.

Where boundary changes had occurred within recent living memory, further confusion could be caused even between myself and a Labour colleague such as Alun Michael. Although the Grangetown ward had been moved from Cardiff West into Cardiff South in the 1982 boundary re-organisation, queries from Grangetown asking me to act as their MP amongst those of the older generation, and sometimes not so old as well, were also frequent. Any burst of publicity on an issue by me in the local newspaper, or on the local television, would also result in a flood of requests for me to take up constituency cases, where their particular constituency cases, eg hospital waiting lists or other queries, was the subject of whatever it was that had appeared in the media over the previous few days. People clearly thought that if I had expressed an interest in a subject and had been quoted as such in the South Wales Echo or on BBC or HTV Wales, then I was obviously the right 'constituency' MP to take the case up, even if they came from Cardiff east or even sometimes the Valleys as well.

What I was wondering was whether you should actually ask MPs what their real experiences are about the constituency link. My own inclination is to say that based on my experiences over 11

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years, that to put it crudely 'if I had a fiver for every time I had been asked to act on behalf of somebody as their constituency MP from outside Cardiff West, I would be a rich man indeed by now'. It would be interesting to know how frequently MPs write the kind of letters that we all write, namely 'Dear Mr & Mrs I am writing in response to your letter of asking me to take up the question of your pension, or delayed operation, or whatever. We have a Parliamentary convention by which each of us MPs only takes up cases on behalf of our own constituents. You would otherwise get into a terrible confusion and I am therefore passing this correspondence on to your constituency MP Yours.'

Most MPs, especially in multi-member boroughs and cities such as Cardiff, are doing this every time and it considerably undercuts the link about the absolutely essential nature of the constituency link, although I wouldn't want to say that the constituency link is of no importance. I just believe it is over-rated compared to what the public think and how the public act.

The other issue that I raised, which I do believe is very important, is some study into the reasons for falling turnout. I certainly had the impression that many of the less well-off constituents in Cardiff West believed they had 'done the business' by turning out to vote for me in vast numbers in 1987 in order to win the seat for Labour, and that then having got a Labour MP back in, a fair proportion of them then believed that they didn't really have anything to bother about after that. As a result the turnout fell in 1992 and it fell again to well below 70% in 1997. I believe that it is only in seats where there is doubt about who is going to win and the real issue therefore that can be determined by maximising turnout that has held electoral turnout percentages reasonably high as we have gone through the 1992 and 1997 elections.

Of course Party effort is also disproportionately concentrated on 'target seats', both as regards the attacking Party and the defending Party. However, I also believe it has penetrated through to people that they somehow know on the bush telegraph whether the seat is likely to change hands or not, and if it isn't, they can't be bothered to turn out to vote. That isn't everybody, of course, it is just 2 or 3% less, or perhaps even 5% less at each election. However, that is a very corrosive influence, if it gets projected over the longer term and we all have this fear about our electoral turnouts dropping to the levels of US Presidential Elections and the magic or even nightmare figure of 50%.

I hope you find the above contribution helpful.

Yours

Rhodri

copy Rt Hon Jack Straw MP, Home Secretary
Rt Hon Nick Brown MP, Chief Whip