

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

Submissions and correspondence from Members of Parliament

Richard Burden MP, including submission by the
All Party Parliamentary Group on Electoral Reform

Richard Burden MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA
Constituency Office: (0121) 475 9295

Lord Jenkins of Hillhead,
The Independent Commission on the Voting System,
6th Floor,
Clive House,
Petty France,
London SW1H 9HD

1 April 1998

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PLEASE QUOTE IN ALL CORRESPONDENCE:

OUR REF : l/rb/dg/IND01-04.VOT

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Peter Roy'.

As you know, the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform recently submitted to you the principles agreed at its AGM for a reformed electoral system for the House of Commons. These were as follows:-

- * All votes should count with party representation broadly reflecting the votes that each party receives around the Country.
- * Retention of the MP - constituency link.
- * Consistency - voting systems for different tiers of government should be complementary.
- * Any voting system chosen should be clear and understandable to the public.
- * Any voting system should foster a new political culture to promote problem solving politics and involve citizens more fully in the decisions affecting their lives.

In recent weeks, the Parliamentary All Party Group on Electoral Reform has also been discussing the question being addressed by the Commission and we should also be letting you have a submission before too much longer.

In the meantime, I thought I should let you have some personal thoughts. First of all, I would like to say that I fully endorse the principles outlined in the LCER submission and

Labour Member of Parliament for Birmingham Northfield



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hope they assist the Commission in its deliberations.

Single Member or Multi-Member Seats

One area in which there are, of course, differences of view amongst electoral reformers in all parties concerns the question of single member versus multi-member seats. I do not have a problem with multi-member seats in principle. In local government, the principle of multi-member wards is well established and I look forward to the day when we combine that tradition with a proportional voting system such as STV. In the case of the European Parliament as well, although there are legitimate concerns about the form of the list system under discussion in Britain, I nevertheless believe that the overall framework of multi-member regional seats is a sound one.

When it comes to the House of Commons, however, I believe that there is considerable public attachment to the retention of an *individual* MP's link with a geographical constituency of manageable size. Clearly, the Commission's work needs to be seen in the context of broader constitutional change and no voting system should be set in stone. The Westminster MP's role will no doubt change as Parliaments and Assemblies are established for Scotland and Wales, and as the European and regional constitutional agendas unfold. Over time, therefore, it may well be that a different view may develop about whether MPs should represent single member seats or be part of larger multi-member ones. As things stand at the present time, however, I do not believe that a proposal to establish multi-member seats would command sufficient support either in the House of Commons or the country at large to commend itself as the best kind of proportional system to put forward into a referendum.

If the principle of single member seats is to be retained, with broad proportionality also being achieved, then some variant of the additional member or mixed member system would appear to be appropriate.

Forms of AMS/MMS

During his period as a member of the Plant Commission, Jeff Rooker MP put forward his own proposal for a mixed member system using one vote with two values. A copy of his submission is attached. I think the simplicity of this system has much to commend it. The relatively small number of "top-up seats" involved, moreover, would help keep the single member seats a manageable size whilst retaining a key element of proportionality. I therefore hope that the Commission will seriously consider this proposal in its deliberations.

There are, of course, other variants of the additional member or mixed member system which also deserve consideration. Although the Rooker proposal obviously has the merit of simplicity, for instance, there may also be a value in giving a voter two votes so that they can register positive support for an individual candidate from a party they do not normally support, while still registering more general support for their overall party allegiance. Whilst

the "highest loser" approach to allocating top-up seats also clearly has merits, there may also be some appeal in more structured approaches to the top-up - perhaps to help ensure a greater gender balance amongst MPs. In short, the different variations of AMS/MMS each have their own strengths and there is no perfect system. I do hope, however, that the Commission will be able to arrive at a consensus for the kind of AMS/MMS system which would provide the "best fit" for the British experience.

AV in Constituencies

The last issue I would like to touch on here concerns the Alternative Vote. There may well be good arguments for introducing preferential voting within individual constituencies. For example, ensuring that each MP secures a majority of the votes cast in his or her constituency could well add an extra legitimacy to the electoral process. On its own, however, the Alternative Vote would not meet the test of proportionality. Indeed, on the basis of the last election, the reverse could even be the case. Under the Commission's terms of reference, therefore, I believe that the Alternative Vote could only really be considered as the constituency component of some kind of AMS or MMS system.

If the Commission does decide to opt for a constituency component of an AMS/MMS system, the question arises about whether - following a successful referendum - the change could be introduced in two stages. Clearly, as the introduction of AV would not of itself require boundary changes, there could well be the opportunity to introduce it in time for the next election. That would certainly have some appeal as it may be confusing for the electorate if, following a successful referendum result, voters then ended up going to the polls a year or so later in exactly the same way as they had done before. If AV is introduced before the next election, moreover, there would be the time to re-draw boundaries and introduce the top-up for the next election but one.

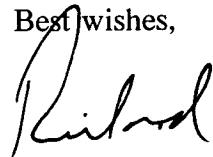
If the Commission does decide to recommend a two stage approach to reform, however, I think it is absolutely vital that the referendum which takes place should be on the basis of the "finished product" rather than on AV with the promise of some kind of review process following the next election. The latter approach could obviously leave the country stuck with the interim AV system indefinitely without ever having had the opportunity to vote for a proportional system in the referendum. Again, I do not think that approach would be in line with the Commission's terms of reference to recommend a broadly proportional alternative to First Past The Post.

I very much hope these thoughts are useful to the Commission in its work. They are, as I said at the start of this letter, entirely personal and should be seen in the context of my overall

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support of the LCER paper which you have already received.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Richard', written in a cursive style.

RICHARD BURDEN MP
Birmingham Northfield

Richard Burden MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

**ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON
ELECTORAL REFORM**

Lord Jenkins of Hillhead
The Independent Commission on the Voting System
6th Floor, Clive House
Petty France
London
SW1H 9HD

30 April 1998

Our ref:\hw\jen30-04.er

Dear Ray

**ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON ELECTORAL REFORM:
SUBMISSION TO THE COMMISSION**

It is my pleasure to enclose the Submission to the Commission on the Voting System by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Electoral Reform.

As you will see, the Submission is essentially in 'bullet point' form, but I am also enclosing a copy of the minutes of our meeting of 25 March which should be taken as part of our Submission. I hope that these will prove valuable in the Commission's work in devising a new electoral system for the Commons.

May I wish the Commission well in its deliberations.

Best wishes
Richard

Richard Burden MP

Chair, All Party Group on Electoral Reform



ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON ELECTORAL REFORM

SUBMISSION TO THE COMMISSION ON THE VOTING SYSTEM

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Electoral Reform recommends:

■ **The system should be broadly proportional.**

The Group recognises the Commission's terms of reference require it to produce a system that is broadly proportional. The Group believes this is important and that criteria should be established by the Commission on what constitutes broad proportionality. We believe that all the evidence suggests that the First Past The Post, the Alternative Vote and the Supplementary Vote systems alone could do not come under a reasonable definition of proportionality.

The Group commends to the Commission the research conducted by Dr Helen Margetts and Democratic Audit, and John Curtice when it comes to study the issue of deviation from proportionality.

The Group understands that no system can be fully proportional and that thresholds may be appropriate to safeguard against extremist parties gaining a foothold in the democratic process on a small percentage share of the vote.

■ **A strong constituency link should be maintained.**

There are differing views as to whether this link should be of a single or multi member kind, but the Group believes that this would rule out a pure list system.

■ **Legislation should be in place before the next general election.**

Although the Group recognises it will be impractical to introduce a broadly proportional system in time for the next general election, it is vital that, in the event of a successful referendum, at least the legislation to change the voting system is in place. The Group therefore recommends that the referendum should take place in 1999, possibly in the Autumn, with legislation to follow as soon as possible thereafter. The Group does not believe the referendum should be held on the same day as an election.

■ **The system should be practicable.**

The system should be capable of commanding widespread support from the British people in the referendum. The Group also recognises that any system needs to be capable of securing the backing of Parliamentarians.

■ **The system should be modern and fit for the new century.**

Any new system should address the disillusion many feel with politics. By making Parliament more representative, the new system should also make it more relevant and strengthen its role in British political life. This process will also help to engage the electorate more closely in the political process.

The Group believes that the experience of other countries could be used to inform the Commission's work, but that the new system should reflect the characteristics of this country's political culture.

The Group is aware that there are legitimate suspicions of systems that could be perceived as entending party political patronage. We hope, however, that the Commission will examine ways in which differing voting systems could encourage greater diversity amongst MPs and address issues such as the underrepresentation of women and ethnic minorities.

■ **The system should take account of the changing nature of the British constitution**

Any new system needs to be placed within the context of constitutional change in the United Kingdom and possible changes to the role of an MP following the development of regional and national assemblies.

The minutes of the Group meeting to discuss the submission on 25th March are attached as part of our submission and should be read as such.

*ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON ELECTORAL REFORM
C/O RICHARD BURDEN MP
HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON
SW1A 0AA*

Westminster, 30 April 1998

All Party Parliamentary Group on Electoral Reform

Minutes of meeting - 25 March 1998

Present: Richard Burden MP Linda Clarke MP
 Peter Temple-Morris MP Lawrie Quinn MP
 Stephen Twigg MP Dale Campbell-Savours MP
 Baroness Maddock Keith Hill MP
 Damien Green MP Earl Russell
 Hugh Bayley MP Fiona Mactaggart MP
 David Borrow MP

In attendance: Haydon Wallace (Office of Richard Burden MP)
 Peter Facey (Electoral Reform Society)
 Catriona Black (Office of Margaret Ewing MP)

Chair: Richard Burden MP

The minutes of the last meeting were approved and the Group went on to discuss a submission to the Commission on the Voting System.

DISCUSSION ON THE NEW SYSTEM

It was widely agreed that the Group would be unlikely to come to a consensus on a single system.

It was agreed that the Group should endorse the principle of proportionality and that purely list systems, and FPTP and AV/SV alone should be ruled out. AMS and STV would therefore remain within the scope of the Group's recommendations.

It was agreed that the level of deviation from proportionality was a key factor for the Group's submission and it was suggested that research from Dr Helen Margetts and Democratic Audit could prove useful in determining this.

A number of members noted that some of their constituents disliked having to raise policy issues with their local MP if he/she was of a different political persuasion. It was suggested that this could be avoided if there were regional top up MPs in an AMS system, or STV.

It was argued that the Irish experience suggested STV could produce an even more localised role for MPs, with competition for constituency casework even amongst MPs of the same party. There were differing views on whether this was a good idea or not.

It was noted that the new system should counter the arguments that PR must mean an extension of party political patronage or cutting the local MP/ constituency link. It was widely agreed that this link was important but that it could encompass a single member (AMS) or multi-member (STV) constituencies.

It was suggested the Group should concentrate on the practicalities of getting the system recommended by the Commission through the Parliamentary system and winning the referendum. It was noted by several members that proposals put forward by Jeff Rooker for the Plant Commission, as circulated at the meeting, could prove useful in this respect.

There was some support for amongst Group members that these ideas could form the core of the new system. It was proposed that any system should be based on the British values of pragmatism and fairness, that votes should count equally - one vote, one value - and that it should have a large element of continuity and minimum disruption.

It was also noted that the top-up could be local rather than regional and could use county boundaries - and that this would have some of STV's attributes.

A number of members expressed support for Jeff Rooker's so-called 'highest loser' option, whereby a candidate could form part of the top-up of MPs even if he or she was not elected in the constituency section but came a close second. It was suggested that this could deal with the 'turkeys don't vote for Christmas' argument of getting a new system through the Commons.

The Group noted the need for the new system to be saleable to the public. It was suggested that the arguments for the new system should be positive and vigorous, and the electorate needed to be offered the prospect of a visible improvement in the political life of the UK.

THE CONTEXT OF CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

It was stressed that the referendum should not be taken in isolation from the whole of the Government's constitutional programme and that the context of modernisation of the Commons could be used to win around doubting MPs in terms of increasing esteem and freeing up MPs for other roles.

The importance of the Scottish and Welsh experience and the timing in relation to the referendum was also raised. The real desire for change to the system felt in Scotland during their referendum was also emphasised.

It was suggested that, following the Scottish and Welsh examples, regional assemblies in England may be established and that this could change the role of MPs. It was noted that these new bodies may increasingly take on some of the work currently undertaken by MPs and this would have a knock on effect in terms of casework, policy making and scrutiny of legislation. It was agreed this could be flagged up in the submission. However, caution was urged on this point and some members suggested that such activities as casework helped to keep MPs' feet on the ground.

TIMING

Some members thought it unwise to have the referendum at the same time as another election/referendum. In particular, it was thought that the closed party list system in the 1999 Euro elections may turn off some voters from PR. Others thought the sooner the referendum was held, the better or that the end of the Parliament would ensure greater enthusiasm for change.

The Group agreed to an outline for a Group submission based on a number of principles:

- The system should be broadly proportional - studies by Helen Margetts and Democratic Audit, and John Curtice may help in deciding the acceptable level of deviation from proportionality.
- FPTP, AV and SV *alone* should be ruled out
- A pure list system should be ruled out
- A strong constituency link - whether of a single or multi member kind - should be retained
- The system should be practicable and take note of the need to get through the Commons
- The referendum should take place in 1999, preferably in the Autumn
- It was vital for legislation enacting the change (after winning the referendum) to be in place before the next general election
- The system should be capable of gaining maximum support in the referendum
- The new system should be placed within:
 - (i) the context of unfolding constitutional change
 - (ii) the changing nature of the MPs role following the development of regional / national assemblies
- The system should be modern and fit for the new century, and should link in with a mood for change
- The new system should be promoted as a British system reflecting the characteristics of British political culture

It was agreed that an officers meeting should take place on Monday 6 April on 5th floor conference room, 7 Millbank, to finalise the submission to the Commission.