

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

Submissions from political parties / fora

Liberal Party

A new voting system; The voters' choice or the politicians' choice?

*The Independent Commission on the Voting System
has asked for views on alternatives to the current
"First-past-the-post" system of elections to the
House of Commons.*

This is the Liberal Party's contribution.

*"A great many people think they are thinking when they are
merely re-arranging their prejudices."*

William James



The challenge: re-awakening interest in elections.

To begin with, The Liberal Party notes that the work of this Commission is just one of a number of exercises being undertaken by various institutions, examining a variety of aspects of constitutional reform, from funding of political parties to the future of party political broadcasting.

We believe that all these issues are inter-related and we would suggest some sort of liaison with the other bodies if this is not already taking place.

We think it particularly important that a system of government and elections to government is coherent and easily understood by voters. It is important, for example, that the system of voting is the same for all levels of government, that the elections to a reformed House of Lords, The House of Commons, Regional Government and Local Government take place in strict rotation, with one set of elections per year per tier of administration, held on a specially designated day each year, so that the political profession, the media and the voters can become accustomed to a natural and ordered rhythm of government, debate and elections.

We believe that a whole series of reforms which replace the existing amateurish anarchy with a fixed electoral cycle of more professional and less adversarial elections will go a long way to restoring voters' faith in our democratic process and to achieving the higher level of participation that this government is looking for.

A great deal will depend on the work of the Commission which has a unique and challenging opportunity to introduce a new voting system which will invigorate the electoral process and re-awaken interest in elections.

Have we any interest to declare?

We are the Liberal Party, not to be confused with Paddy Ashdown's Liberal Democrats, a somewhat larger organisation. In the 55 seats we fought at the last general election, we averaged a poll share of 1.5%.

Short of the Commission's advocating the introduction of an Israeli-style national list system, which we would not in any case support, any recommendations the Commission may make are unlikely to directly benefit this Party's Parliamentary performance in the foreseeable future.

Accordingly this paper represents, we hope, a sober and disinterested assessment of what needs to be done, based on nothing other than the Party's belief in the freedom of the individual and in a healthy democracy.

The Commission's requirements examined; the quest for stable government

We are not sure how the Commission is expected to identify a voting system which can deliver "stable government"

What is stable government? The Commission needs to define what this is.

Opponents of reform tend to refer to stable government as an administration of one party with an outright majority, but our post-war

history is littered with de-stabilising crises presided over by such so-called stable governments. By the same token, multi-party administrations have worked in times of crisis in Westminster and now operate as a matter of routine in local government. Council officers are reported as actually preferring them to single party administrations; because proposals do not go through on the nod and are subject to scrutiny by more people with different ideas, the quality of decision-making tends to improve.

Of course, one of the reasons why political groups on local councils habitually work with each other is because they have no alternative; if a group loses control, they cannot call a snap election as a Westminster government can. Perhaps the Commission should flag up the need for fixed term Parliaments, to enforce cross-party co-operation in Westminster in the event of one party's losing control.

We believe that the pre-occupation with stable government is a concern limited to those who have simply become accustomed to the post-war political scene in Westminster.

In any case, there is nothing in a First-past-the-post rule book which guarantees a single party administration with a working majority, witness the number of hung councils nationwide. Moreover, as demographic changes eat into the traditional strongholds of the main political parties, and a less loyal and more discerning electorate is offered a choice between more philosophically footloose candidates, first past the post is perhaps about to deliver a series of hung Parliaments and multi-party governments, just as it did in between the wars.

We believe that voting systems can no more be expected to deliver stable governments than stop inflation, guarantee good weather or cure back ache.

The Commission's requirements examined; the quest for broad proportionality.

The Commission needs to clarify what it means by "the requirement for broad proportionality." Proportionality of what? Does this requirement indicate a pre-occupation with proportional representation of political parties because if it does, we would wish to register our protest in the strongest possible terms.

Up until now, political parties have been the servant of the electoral process, rather than its master. It seems some established politicians wish to change this. We have been concerned that there have been concerted moves since last May to institutionalise parties and make them part and parcel of the electoral process. Having made them indispensable, internal administrative structures would then be created to centralise control. Power would be vested in the hands of the few - a thoroughly unhealthy and illiberal development.

It is not true to say, as some do, that political parties are already indispensable; as bad as our existing voting system is, it is neutral inasmuch as it can operate whether the election is a party political contest or not. This is particularly important in a country like the UK which has a tradition of individualism, free elections and independence of thought and of politics. The election of the Independent MP for Tatton in 1997 may have been achieved under particular circumstances, but maybe this is the

shape of things to come in Westminster. Independent politicians already command a great deal of influence in local government, especially in Wales and Scotland.

While the Liberal Party is a political party and we believe we have a future, we are not blind to the possibility that parties as we know them may be no more than a passing phase in our political development - museum pieces from the steam age of politics when simplistic packages of philosophy were required for a badly educated adult population which had just been given the right to vote.

Are political parties on their last legs?

There are several pointers which should give those seeking to institutionalise political parties pause for thought:-

a. The quality and quantity of the membership of political parties is in decline. Taking the quoted totals of 330,000 for the Conservative Party, 100,000 for the Liberal Democrats, and 405,000 for the Labour Party, the total membership for the major parties represents a mere 1.9% of the national electorate. Moreover, turnover of membership is reported as being as high as 25% a year - hardly evidence of a burgeoning, committed party workforce. Come election time, the absence of voters sporting rosettes, the declining number of voluntary poster sites, the absence of tellers at polling stations, and a general lack of participation by voters at all levels contribute to an overall impression that political parties as we know them may be on their last legs.

b. Philosophies are the engines of political parties. Without them the difference between parties becomes blurred. In the 1980's the political parties had distinct philosophies which drove distinct policy programmes. In the 1990's, these distinctions have all but disappeared; Thatcherism won, Socialism is dead and, despite the efforts of parties to highlight their differences, there is a convergence of views on many issues, underpinned by virtually identical economic policies.

c. With philosophy and policy virtually identical, the electorate change government with as much thought and enthusiasm as they would change their underwear (and probably for much the same reason!) Even if John Major's administration had not made such a hash of things, the Conservatives might still have lost to Tony Blair for no other reason than people felt the need for a change.

Concentrate on the pure mechanics of voting!

The decline of political parties may be temporary; they may yet be invigorated by the reforms the Commission is considering. Even so, it would surely be the height of folly to introduce a voting system that required the continued existence on these monoliths just when a more educated and politically sophisticated electorate was hoping to consign them to history.

Accordingly, the Commission's task is best served by forgetting about political parties altogether and concentrating instead on the pure mechanics of an election, whereby on a given day, a community gets together and decides who among its number shall represent them, whether this be in Westminster, Edinburgh, or the local town hall.

Voters' requirements of a voting system

At the end of the day, all that can be asked of a voting system is that it should be neutral, that all votes should have an equal value, that the result reflects the wishes of the electorate, whether this is expressed in a party political context or not, and that at the end of the day, as many of the electorate as possible are able to identify with a successful candidate whom they helped to elect and whom they consider to be their elected representative.

To what extent does the existing system deliver these requirements?

Our existing first-past-the-post system; it works but it's inefficient.

The way we vote today has justifiably been described as an out-dated Victorian machine. It works of a fashion but it wastes half the raw material fed into it (votes!), producing a rough and distorted result with the remainder.

This is best illustrated using a simple model of an election in an imaginary city we shall call Albion. There are 3 seats in Albion, with 50,000 voters in each seat and just two parties, the *Reds* and the *Blues*, contesting all three seats.

There is a general election and the results in all 3 of the Albion seats are as follows:-

	REDS	BLUES	
Albion North	24,000	26,000	Blues win
Albion Central	45,000	5,000	Reds win
Albion South	23,000	27,000	Blues win
Seats won	1	2	

The *Blues* appear to enjoy the support of a majority of Albion voters with their 2 out of 3 seats until you tot up the votes for Albion as a whole:-

Votes won	92,000	58,000
-----------	--------	--------

The *Reds* should have taken 2 out of the 3 seats and there is clearly something very wrong with a voting system which allows the party with the smallest number of votes to take the largest number of seats, especially when there is no third party to cloud the issue. While electoral reform is often portrayed as a third party charity, it is just as important in a two party system. Even so, the presence of other parties magnifies the problems.

But what precisely is wrong? It is simply this; a candidate achieves election whether his majority is one or 10,001; as impressive as the result was for the *Reds* in Albion Central, 39,999 *Red* votes were surplus to requirements and were therefore wasted. By the same token the 52,000 votes that were cast for losing candidates throughout Albion were also wasted. Thanks to

the crude simplicity of the system, there is no way to utilize these wasted votes, trapped in their hermetically sealed single member constituencies. Such waste would not be tolerated in a company balance sheet or industrial process. It must not be tolerated at the ballot box.

So, how do we recycle these wasted votes? Two separate reforms will transform the efficiency of our Victorian Apparatus:

Reform No. 1: The many are always better represented by the few...

To begin with, we need to put the clock back by re-introducing multi-member constituencies for Parliamentary representation. Far from being the alien concept those MPs who wish to retain the autocracy of single member constituencies would have you believe, multi-member constituencies are as British as roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. Multi-member representation is in widespread use in local government and was part and parcel of the very first Parliaments.

Multi-member constituencies were not phased out completely until 1948. We need to phase them back in again because a 21st century constituency containing educated people of different sexes, ages and cultures with different attitudes, beliefs and aspirations is far better represented by 3 or 4 people than by one person.

There is nothing quite so ridiculous as the pious claim of an MP in sole charge of a single member constituency that he represents all his constituents whatever their political persuasion. Tony Blair no more represents the 8,300 people in Sedgefield who voted Conservative in his pursuit of Labour's objectives than William Hague represents the Labour 13,200 voters in Richmond when he opposes those objectives. The abolition of the single member constituency is crucial to the reform of the voting system.

To take the Albion example, then, three single member constituencies are replaced with one constituency for the whole city returning 3 members. Since there are three seats up for grabs, the "Reds" and "Blues" will put up 3 candidates apiece. Voters will therefore find six names on the ballot paper and this brings us to the second reform required to ensure that "Albion" is democratically represented.

Reform No. 2: Doing away with the mark of illiteracy

When the right to vote was progressively extended to the adult population, an "X" was all a lot of people could put on their ballot paper. A better educated and politically sophisticated electorate of today ought to be given greater freedom of expression than is currently allowed by the mark of illiteracy. Numbering candidates in order of preference allows voters that freedom of expression and gives the Returning Officer the additional information he needs to recycle "unspent" voting power. The voter will have complete freedom of choice to number all 6 in order of preference, to restrict his preferences to his chosen party or even to plump for just one candidate. But how are these votes counted? Let us return to Albion where 6 candidates are chasing 3 places.

Counting the votes

Imagine a long trestle table with 6 piles of votes on it, one pile per candidate, sorted according to voters' first preferences. Unpopular candidates are eliminated from the contest and their small piles are sorted according to the further preferences of the voters, while the surplus of popular candidates are also recycled to ensure that all votes on the table are utilized as fully as possible. In this way, the six piles of votes of varying quantities are whittled down until 3 large piles of votes stand testimony to the end of the count and the 3 victors.

There is, of course, a lot more to it than this and the count involves a more sophisticated procedure than is currently used, but the instructions are concise and the accuracy of the count can be checked for all to see at the end of each stage of the process.

Proportionality of community interests, not just political parties.

Since all the votes are utilized as fully as possible and are accorded equal status, the nature of the two reforms described above ensures that the victors will reflect the community's corporate political will. In other words, if 2 out of 3 voters in a community elect to have representatives of a certain party, or a certain sex, or a certain ethnic background, their votes will cascade from one candidate's pile to another, according to declared preferences until this corporate decision emerges as 2 out of 3 piles of votes cast for winning candidates of those voters' persuasion. This system treats all candidates as equals.

In the case of "Albion", 2 MPs representing the *Reds* and 1 MP for the *Blues* would be elected. Moreover, the voters will have decided which 2 of the 3 *Red* candidates and which one of the 3 *Blue* will be their representatives in the way they express their preferences.

The Super Vote

To this extent, "party proportionality" is achieved but it is one of many facets of our two reforms, a mere by-product rather than a pre-occupation. Simply to describe this reform package as "proportional representation" does not do it justice. Even its technical name - the "Single Transferable Vote in Multi-member Constituencies" - represents an unmarketable mouthful, which may explain why the Electoral Reform Society has been around for over 100 years campaigning for it!

Some commentators have, justifiably, dubbed our preferred system as "the Super Vote" and the Commission might be minded to adopt this description in the event of their choosing this system.

Our preferred system is no theoretical exercise. It is in widespread use, particularly in Ireland - on both sides of the border.

It is notable that the requirements detailed in the Commission's Guardian advertisement - proportionality, stability, improved voter choice, and retention of a close link between the electors and the elected- were the very considerations which prompted the authorities to introduce STV in

Northern Ireland for local and European elections when the current round of troubles started.

STV; a benefit to third party supporters, not necessarily third parties...

In the Albion example, we demonstrated the importance of reform in a two party context by stripping out all reference to third parties. So, how would the Green Party the SNP and the Liberal Democrats fare under such a system?

Nobody knows for sure, since one in four electors don't bother voting, and there is undoubtedly latent support for parties which does not manifest itself under the existing arrangements. For example, in the past, Liberals in rural areas have been able to supplement their vote by calling on Labour voters to back them to "kick the Tory out". In North East Cambridgeshire, Clement Freud got this down to a fine art; in the 1983 election, Labour's vote was down to 4,600, a mere 8% of the total, although it was quite clear from local election campaigns which returned Labour councillors that Labour's true level of support was far greater.

If the electoral system is reformed, there will be no need to use the Liberals "as a bucket to spit in", as Labour's Austin Mitchell once described it; Labour voters will be able to vote for Labour in the knowledge that, even in deepest Wisbech, a Labour MP can be elected.

Moreover, if STV in multi-member constituencies is used, a candidate needs a hefty amount of support to achieve election. On the Continent, party lists systems of proportional representation are contrived to enable support for minority parties to accumulate at a regional or a national level so as to ensure representation for the smallest faction.

In contrast, STV concerns itself merely with the casting of votes within a multi-member constituency at a community level; no voters are exported to bolster support for a party outside that community. It might be supposed that one third of the vote will be required to achieve election in a three member constituency. In fact, a finer formula is used and the figure is closer to 25%, but this still represents a formidable obstacle to third parties shorn of tactical support from protest voters.

STV benefits the supporters of a minority party, rather than the party itself, whose candidates may well be eliminated from the count due to lack of adequate support, but whose supporters are able to have their votes recycled and counted for further preferences.

It is the recycling element of STV that is often overlooked by both advocates and opponents of reform who see the debate simply in terms of seats shared out in proportion to votes totted up for parties at a national or regional level. Invariably, the debate turns to Continental practice and it is here that we Liberals must temper our traditional enthusiasm for all things European, since many Continental voting systems have been devised primarily to achieve party proportionality, but have features that make them totally unsuitable for use in this country.

Party Lists; putting words into the mouths of voters

As crude an apparatus as the existing first-past-the-post system is, the British voter does at least retain total control of his vote; when he casts it, he knows exactly who he is supporting and that his support will not be registered elsewhere.

Reforming first-past-the-post with STV would increase the efficiency and power of the British vote and yet the voter would still retain total control over his vote which would be counted according to his expressed preferences, and for nobody else.

Everything changes with the introduction of any party list system; be it a hybrid, or however open, the voter loses control. He would be asked to cast his vote for a list which is tantamount to having a row of buckets at the polling station, one for each party, and asking him to throw his vote into one of them. He would then be asked to leave political party officials to decide which of the party's candidates should represent him. Even if the list system chosen allows the voter to express a preference for one of the candidates in the party bucket, it is assumed that the voter will be happy for any candidate in the party bucket he has chosen to be elected; words are put into his mouth; the politician increases his power at the expense of the voter.

We can imagine that the British voter will look askance at any proposal to introduce a party list. The Government's proposal to do precisely this for the 1999 round of Euro elections with the minimum of public information explaining the change could well be extremely unpopular and queer the reform pitch. We Liberals are not supposed to be cynical but some colleagues are suggesting that the use of the worst form of PR imaginable in 1999 is a deliberate ploy by New Labour to put the public off the idea of reform altogether.

Additional Mess for Scotland and Wales

One particular list system gives us cause for concern. The Additional Member System is a hybrid device used in Germany, which this government proposes to import for use in the election of the devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales. It is said to offer the benefits of party proportionality while preserving the autocracy of single member constituencies. Several variations of this system are being canvassed, but basically about half of an assembly elected by this method is filled by MPs representing much larger single member constituencies. The remaining seats would be used to "top up" the assembly so that party strengths in the assembly would reflect votes cast for the parties in the election. These "additional members" are drawn from regional party lists and the pecking order on these lists can either be decided by party or according to the performance of the "best losers" in the single member constituency contests.

Liberals believe that the use of this hybrid would be a disaster; the undemocratic single member constituency is retained; a voter is assumed as being happy to support all candidates on the list of his chosen party; there would be two types of MPs, one type directly elected trying to cope with a constituency doubled in size and another, either a party nominee or

"best loser", with no direct constituency responsibility, free to swan around the legislature in question furthering his own political career.

The system described above also suffers from the drawback of many of its Continental counterparts; political parties must be an integral part of the system to enable it to function, in contrast with the existing British and the Single Transferable Vote system described earlier, which can operate within or outside a party political framework.

Discrimination of the worst possible kind

The introduction of a party oriented system of proportional representation for the Scottish and Welsh Assemblies is particularly inappropriate for communities where there is a strong tradition of dissent and political independence. While independent candidates would be able to stand for the "constituency" ballot, they would be unable to participate in the "top up" ballot, which would be restricted to registered political parties only. While party apparatchiks would have two bites of the power cherry, independents would have only one.

The Voters' Choice

The Single Transferable Voting system in multi-member constituencies represents a reform of the existing voting system which empowers educated and increasingly sophisticated voters who are capable of thinking beyond single dimensional party politics.

The Politicians' Choice

The introduction of any list system would be seen to be nothing more than a device which empowers the political establishment and seeks to extinguish original thought, dissent and independence of spirit. It's introduction would represent discrimination of the worst possible kind.

A change for the worse is worse than no change at all

As inefficient as the existing British voting system is, it is vital that any change is seen to be a change for the better by the people who use it- the voters. A change for the worse would be worse than no change at all.

David Green
Communications Director,
Liberal Party.

26th February 1998

Published by The Liberal Party, 1a Pine Grove, Southport, Lancs PR9 9AQ.
Telephone: 01704 500115. Fax: 01704 539315.
Email: com@libparty.demon.co.uk