

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

Submissions and correspondence from Members of Parliament

Tom Levitt MP



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Our ref:

Dear Lord Jenkins

Thank you for your invitation to contribute to the consultative process on voting systems.

Unfortunately I shall not be in the House on 30th June when you invited us to make our contributions. However, I have recently had an article on the subject published in Tribune and I hope that you will accept my support of the Alternative Vote system as a contribution (enclosed).

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

TOM LEVITT MP

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Labour Member of Parliament for High Peak



included in the 10 per cent conviction rate cited.
In any event, if the CPS is the success it would like us to believe, may one enquire why it has spent £70,000 of public money on an advertising agency in an attempt to soften the blow it is known it will receive from the Glidewell

fraud offences not only face long periods of imprisonment but confiscation orders that lead to the stripping of their assets, in some cases even the loss of a matrimonial home. Those who claim an inability to pay, face lengthy consecutive sentences. The

Adding insult to injury

THE *Tribune* editorial (February 27) described the Millennium Dome as a "monstrous inheritance from Michael Heseltine. Sadly, the New Labour

more heightened, with good cause, by being asked to celebrate the Millennium with a global warming experience that undermines the Climate Treaty on which their future depends.
PETER MELCHETT
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BALANCING ACT

TOM LEVITT doubts that proportional representation is the cure to all that ails Britain's electoral system

WHY does everyone assume that the only alternative to first-past-the-post for the House Commons, is proportional representation? There are ways of improving our electoral system which avoid the complexities of proportional representation. It is not possible to defend a system which gives a party a generation of power on a minority vote. But do we want coalitions to be inevitable? Lists to be fixed by party managers? Large constituencies with no community of interest?

A voting system must be simple and rational. It must deliver a verdict with the authority of government as bequeathed by the electorate. FPTP has lost our confidence: but why replace a bad system with one which is no better?

I suggest three criteria for the House of Commons electoral system. First, all MPs' names should have appeared on a ballot paper. Second, all MPs should command the same status, with no first- and second-class members. Third, MPs should represent discreet geographical constituencies.

The first criterion rules out the list system where you pick one name from the top of up to 20 party columns (or lower down the list if you prefer).

The national or regional list is drawn up by party bureaucrats. If a party submits 20 names and wins 50 seats, most of its MPs' names will be unknown to the electorate.

Representing a constituency is

a privilege. It ties a member to an electorate and makes him or her accountable to local media, local party (whatever the imperfections of both) – and the local electorate. Having some members with that accountability and others not is divisive.

Under some added-members systems, those added are faceless party hacks: under others they are one-time losers. Added members fails the three tests. Regional lists or multi-member seats fail criterion number three and the usual single-transferable-vote model requires multi-members.

Such seats could be massive and unwieldy. MPs would either develop subject-specific casework (relying on cross-party co-operation) or divide geographically. How would the only Labour MP in a constituency the size of Gloucestershire cope?

In 1992, there were moves to vote tactically, often counteracting one another. In 1997, with a less marked tactical push, it appeared to work. How else to explain the Liberals' 20 gains on a million fewer votes?

However, tactical voting forces the elector to choose between voting with head or heart. It can be a difficult choice. This is why it is not possible to say party A would have had B seats under system C. The system determines how people vote.

An advantage of the alternative vote is that it allows both head and heart voting. There would be single-member constituencies, as now. The ballot paper would

look the same (allowing parties to exercise quotas over a number of seats).

But instead of using an "X" the voter would put 1 by their "head" vote, 2 by their "heart" vote (or vice versa) and so on down the list. If they forgot, or could not cope, an old-fashioned "X" would be counted as a 1.

The 1s would be tallied as Xs as now. A candidate with over 50 per cent of the 1s cast is elected. If no one gets 50 per cent, the bottom candidate(s) drop out and their 2s are re-allocated as 1s to the remaining candidates.

The candidate with most 1s starts the second round at an advantage.

THE process continues until one candidate has more than 50 per cent of available votes. The winner has at least the conditional support of over half those who vote, head and heart voters alike.

A second-round run-off is not necessary under AV. Does this sound familiar? It is the way we select Labour candidates under the one-member, one-vote system. In practice, it may not make a lot of difference to the the House of Commons. The first time round, some seats would change hands – but not all in the same direction. It would keep incumbents of safe seats on their toes, and the Commons would at last be full of people who did not have a majority of their electorate who had voted in vain to keep them out.

Electoral reform is about local accountability, easily understood and mitigating against complacency, while allowing the stability previously thought to be possible only under FPTP. We should also consider fixed-term Parliaments, compulsory voting and electronic balloting.

● *Tom Levitt is Labour MP for High Peak.*

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