

# Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform (LCER) – past, present and future

By Mary Southcott, June 2018



The Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform (LCER) has its roots in the 1970s when Labour was in government and Lord Hailsham used the phrase “elective dictatorship”. Labour MPs formed a parallel campaign to CAER, its Conservative equivalent, which claimed some 70 MPs support. The Labour Study Group for Electoral Reform became LCER sometime after Labour’s 1979 defeat. Ron Medlow, an Electoral Reform Society (ERS) member and Single Transferable Vote (STV) supporter, became its honorary Secretary after 1983 and it began circulating draft resolutions for Annual Conference, recruiting members, arranging speakers and talks. It took off in 1987 when Robin Cook (who converted to Alternative Vote (AV) in 1983) and Jeff (now Lord) Rooker joined.

1988 saw a flurry of activity including the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly’s Claim of Right for Scotland – the Labour members of which pushed for a PR system (the Labour system being Additional Member System, AMS); Patrick Dunleavy, an executive member (now famous for his support of Supplementary Vote (SV)) wrote *Why Labour should think again*; Martin Linton wrote *Labour can still win* and an article was published in the Charter 88 series in the New Statesman, Mary Southcott’s *Electoral Reform and me*. Martin joined the Executive along with Mary and together they started drafting model resolutions, articles, material for stalls and conferences, and the pamphlet, *Labour’s Road to Electoral Reform: what’s wrong with first-past-the-post?* (1993). This formed the basis of the book, *Making Votes Count: the case for electoral reform* which came out in the summer 1998 before the Jenkins Commission report. Both publications were supported by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust.

After advertising, LCER employed Mary as their parliamentary and political officer, from 1989 until 1994 after the Plant Commission reported and John Smith recommended the voting referendum to “let the people decide” in 1993. LCER worked with key politicians, including Robin Cook who was briefed on electoral reform until his early death in 2005, and a list of the Chairs shows some of the history: Austin Mitchell (-1989), Jeff Rooker (1989-95), Mary Southcott (1995-1996), Richard Burden (1996-1998), Stephen Twigg (1998-2000) Oona King (2000 – 2002) , Anne Campbell (2002-6), John Denham co (2005-7), Mark

Lazarowicz co (2006-7), John Grogan (2007-2010), John Denham (2010-12) William Bain (2012-2016) and Paul Blomfield (2016- ).

It was LCER which opened up the Plant Commission to discuss the voting system for the House of Commons. It then worked with members of the Plant Commission: Raymond (now Lord) Plant became LCER President, Jeff (now Lord) Rooker, Judith Church (NEC member, then MP) and Richard (now Lord) Rosser (then TSSA General Secretary). When Plant reported LCER defended not its recommendation of Supplementary Vote (SV), now used for elected mayors and police & crime commissioners, but the referendum to let the people decide.

Particularly LCER supported the Plant statements: “We are looking for a renewal of British democracy. We believe voting reform is an indispensable element. Labour will be judged on its commitment to democracy by the attitude to voting reform. We believe Labour should stand for a new style of politics - which accommodates pluralism – which allows majority interests in society to assert themselves.”

“Voting reform is therefore an opportunity for Labour to distinguish itself completely from the Conservatives and place democracy above all the vested interests in the nation.”

The Referendum went into the 1997 Manifesto despite attacks and attempts to reverse this position by the well-funded First Past the Post Campaign. The landslide majority rather eclipsed the pragmatic argument for electoral reform, although Robin Cook consistently argued that the role of a Labour government is to prepare for opposition. However Tony Blair set up a Commission under Roy Jenkins, with two Labour members, Joyce Gould and David Lipsey, the late Conservative peer, Baron Alexander of Weedon and the retired civil servant who had been Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the Northern Ireland Office, Sir John Chilcot who went on to head the inquiry into the 2003 Iraq War.

1998 before Jenkins reported in October, Stephen Twigg and Mary Southcott worked with Ken Jackson and Tom Watson (at that stage in AMICUS/now UNITE) to put together a concordat which allowed the trade unions to accept remittance on a resolution rather than have the report voted down before Jenkins produced it. The Jenkins recommendation was Alternative Vote Plus (AV+) and his report introduced elegant phraseology as in:

“A fundamental weakness of FPTP is that it is inherently ill-at-ease with anything more than a two-party system. It is a heavy count against a system which claims the special virtue of each MP being the chosen representative if, in the case of nearly half of them, more of the electors voted against them than for them.”

“The same properties of FPTP tend to make it geographically divisive between the two main leading parties, even though each of them can from time to time be rewarded by it with a vast jackpot. ... the 1997 election drove Conservatives out of even minimal representation in Scotland, Wales and the big provincial cities of England. ... in both 1983 and 1987, there was not Labour MP for a predominantly rural English constituency. This is a bifurcation

which has recently become increasingly sharp. Such apartheid in electoral outcome is a heavy count against the system which produces it. It is a new form of Disraeli's two nations."

"The semi-corollary of a high proportion of the constituencies being in "safe-seat" territory is not merely that many voters pass their entire adult lives without ever voting for a winning candidate but that they also do so without any realistic hope of influencing a result."

"FPTP does not allow the elector to exercise a free choice in both the selection of a constituency representative and the determination of the government of the country. It forces the voter to give priority to one or the other, and the evidence is that in the great majority of cases he or she deems it more important who is Prime Minister than who is member for their local constituency."

1999 was particularly difficult with the closed PR system for European Parliament used by the party to ensure certain candidates would get elected, just as critics of PR say. However a slightly open Belgium method was also in the frame and two press releases were produced, one open, the other closed. Resolutions to Conference petered out but attempts to hold policy forums on democratic and electoral reform had some success.

During this time elections took place for a Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly of Wales, the Mayor of London and the London Assembly. All these bodies were elected by AMS, additional member systems.

Trade unions had a big say with the block vote and LCER worked closely with individuals including General Secretaries to win over trade unions to be open on electoral reform, first supporting Plant, then the referendum, then Jenkins. We worked through the National Policy Forum from its inception in 1993 and managed in 2000 to keep the referendum in Labour's 2001 manifesto.

When Make Votes Count was set up it took over the LCER database and set up Make Votes Count in Labour. This morphed back into LCER which worked with and for MVC. Stephen Twigg stood and was elected to the ERS Council and then recommended people to vote for Mary Southcott when he stood down. Subsequently Andrew Burns an Edinburgh Labour councillor (later Leader) became ERS Chair. Links with wider umbrella and electoral reform groups were useful to LCER. Each year we ran a strategy day which drew in other organisations and experts, Jon Cruddas MP, David (Lord) Lipsey, Ann Black (NEC), Neal Lawson (Compass), Alex Runswick (Unlock Democracy) but particularly Lewis Baston and ERS Staff who were in the Labour Party.

The 2005 might have been a turning point with *The Independent* leading a campaign for electoral reform during and after the General Election. Robin Cook addressed the LCER AGM but died a month later. His speech was the centre piece in a Chartist Magazine

supplement on electoral reform was available at the Party Conference and Neil Kinnock inspired at the Make Votes Count/LCER fringe.

The 2010 General Election ended the 13 year spell of Labour Government. The Liberal Democrats chose to work in a coalition with the Conservatives and their coalition agreement read:

*“We will bring forward a Referendum Bill on electoral reform, which includes provision for the introduction of the Alternative Vote in the event of a positive result in the referendum, as well as for the creation of fewer and more equal sized constituencies.”*

Make Votes Count was not seen as the right place to fight the referendum and the YES2AV was set up. LCER was given a copy of the Labour supporters on the MVC database. Some Labour PR supporters would not support AV but LCER joined the LabourYes! Campaign. The Conservatives threw their whole campaign into the NO2AV and the Referendum held in May 2011 was lost. Some said this was the wrong system at the wrong time but it effectively killed off electoral reform until 2015. All the organisations spent everything on the referendum and no one was able to break through to activity on the level needed.

In 2013 there was an attempt to build the LabourYes! coalition with LCER into Labour 4 Democracy. This proved unsuccessful although they held a 2013 fringe with ERS. In summer 2014 LCER held a fundraising Democracy Dinner, with an auction of books and reform memorabilia. The LCER Chair was busy with the Scottish Referendum in September 2014.

Things began to come together after Labour won more votes than 2010 but lost seats so that the Conservatives had a majority with 24 per cent of the potential vote. LCER found four new MPs on our database and wrote to all the rest of the new MPs. A Labour registered supporter set up twitter @Labour4PR and linked up with LCER. After a LCER Executive meeting in July with Paul Blomfield, Ben Bradshaw, Justin Madders, Baroness Ruth Lister and Jeff Rooker, LCER was able to hold a joint fringe meeting with Make Votes Count at Conference 2015, entitled “changing the political map of Britain”. This majored on registration, dealt with by the Party after the Leader’s speech, with newly two elected MPs, Justin Madders, Daniel Zeichner, with Stephen Twigg and Mary Southcott, with Martin Linton introducing Lewis Baston, a their new pamphlet arguing for STV for local elections. Many of the 2016-7 LCER interim Executive were there at the meeting and form the core of the Social Media group (May 2016).

2015 was the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta when we followed the work of Unlock Democracy and Graham Allen in the *Political* and Constitutional Reform Select committee abolished after the General Election. A Downing Street resolution resulted in a demonstration in London which led to the formation of Make Votes Matter emphasising PR for electing

MPs by 2021 (after a 2020 general election). The TUC received two resolutions on electoral reform and decided to do a report.

An LCER Executive meeting tasked Damien Welfare to lead a working party to tackle two issues, first, to rediscover the LCER constitution and update it; and second to compose a letter which could be sent by email and post to people who hadn't heard from us since the 2012 AGM and/or to people who might either renew their membership or upgrade their standing order (£5 to £10). Jonathan Reynold's Bill attracted Labour MP support in December.

A PR Alliance in **February 2016** enabled by Make Votes Matter had Stephen Kinnock, Jonathan Reynolds, Chuka Umunna, Neal Lawson, Mary Southcott attending for Labour. In **March**, Jonathan Reynolds convened a meeting with Labour electoral reformers in the PLP, ERS, Unlock democracy, Compass and the Fabian Society with Chuka Umunna, Stephen Kinnock, Paul Blomfield, Neal Lawson, Olivia Bailey and Mary Southcott. A Social Media group was convened after Chuka Umunna called for a Rally for PR at conference. Terry Ashton convened the Social Media Group to bring together work on twitter, Labour4PR, Facebook and our website.

Billy Hayes and Ann Black joined the Fabian work on Project Participation: A Fabian charter for democratic reform. The EU Referendum brought higher registration, higher turnout and exposed the vulnerability in traditional Labour constituencies outside the main metropolitan cities. In **July 2016**: MPs [Clive Lewis and Jonathan Reynolds published an article \*It is time for Labour to embrace PR\*](#) in LabourList. Caroline Lucas' Bill on PR and Votes @ 16 was supported by some additional Labour MPs. The Trade Union Report, *Getting it in Proportion*, was produced with fringes by Electoral Reform Society and Make Votes Matter. Paul Blomfield was adopted as Chair after the 2016 AGM in September which elected an interim Executive to oversee the work on the membership and constitution. Damien Welfare became Secretary for the year until the next AGM in November 2017.

The LCER and Make Votes Matter fringe in Liverpool had queues in the streets and a spill over room with repeat performances from speakers: Stephen Twigg in the chair, Ben Bradshaw, Richard Burden, Mary Honeyball, Owen Jones, Stephen Kinnock, Neal Lawson, John McDonnell, Jonathan Reynolds, Cat Smith, Polly Toynbee, Chuka Umunna, Alan Whitehead and Daniel Zeichner.

The 2017 General Election has now been called for 8 June. Leading Labour electoral reformers Graham Allen, Fiona Mactaggart and Alan Johnson have stood down but more first past the post supporters. We thank them for all the work they have done over their time in the Commons.

The aim to have a PR supporting House of Commons elected will depend on non-aggression pacts, Labour candidates supporting electoral reform, decisions, normal in FPTP elections, to run paper candidates in some constituency by parties who normally resource tactically and

focus on marginals. First past the post is a two edged sword and Labour can learn a new politics of cooperation where we work with other parties where they agree with us to get things achieved. With a Labour majority or minority rainbow government, the change we have been working for, change to our anachronistic voting system, may actually materialise.