

## Where to from here? – LCER Discussion, 24-04-2024

Sandy Martin, Chair of LCER, introduced the session, which was attended by 70 members and supporters. There would be 3 themes, each outlined by a member of the executive and followed by an open discussion, and then 10 minutes at the end for any other issues to be raised. He mentioned the success we have had so far in the Labour for a New Democracy campaign, in gaining the support of the Party as a whole, but we do now need to consider where we want to get to and how we're going to get there.

### **Scope of LCER: a tight focus on PR, or extending the focus to other aspects of democratic renewal?**

Sandy briefly introduced this theme, asking which aspects of the democracy agenda we would want to address, and what our views were on those. He identified various elements:

- House of Lords
- Voter ID
- Votes at 16
- Supplementary Vote or a full ranked system for Mayors and Police & Crime Commissioners (PCCs)
- Automatic Registration
- Citizenship Education
- Media Independence
- Prime Ministerial Patronage

#### *Points from discussion:*

Many members felt that our campaigning needs to be simple and focused on PR for the House of Commons. That didn't necessarily mean not taking a position on other matters, but we could be clear what our position is without needing to campaign on them.

On Voter ID, people identified the advantage of possessing a valid ID for more marginalised people, some major injustices could have been avoided, and there was some support for introducing national ID cards, but it was pointed out that this had been tried under Tony Blair and had had to be abandoned for political and financial reasons. Some felt that no ID at all was needed. Whether or not we have ID cards is a contentious issue and we should avoid it. What was agreed was that the current situation is deliberately biased and needs to be rectified.

Automatic Voter Registration was felt to be a "no brainer" and easy to implement. There was also universal support for reversing the Tories' introduction of FPTP for Mayors and PCCs, with most favouring a full ranked voting system rather than reverting to Supplementary Vote.

Members had various views on the House of Lords. Outright abolition was proposed – the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Senedd are unicameral, as are local authorities. Andy Burnham and Steve Rotherham apparently favour an interim federal HoL using general election votes for the HoC to generate proportional numbers of delegates from the regions. However, "interim" can become permanent. One idea was to use FPTP for the HoL and PR for the HoC. What was agreed is that the HoL needs to change, reform of the HoL is very popular amongst voters, and we should be seen to support democratisation. We would need to explain what our expectations of HoL reform would be, even if we don't propose an actual scheme.

PR is essential for improved democracy but we also need 'external anchors' such as a Constitution and a Second Chamber to let government work effectively. A Constitution will be particularly important when we normally have a coalition government. MPs should decide who becomes PM, not a Party.

We need to consider the entire constitutional infrastructure from the Monarch down. Institutions are subject to the whim of Government. At some point, the Tories will win again so how do we embed such changes and stop a reversal?

Compulsory voting was raised, but not explored.

The idea of a “campaign pledge card” for LCER was floated, with 5 simple clear statements of our democratic views, and with the emphasis on PR for the House of Commons.

A strong case was made for campaigning for PR for local government, with a recognition that “one-Party states” create bad administration.

Although we should be clear that PR for the HoC is our main priority, there would be some advantage in “nibbling away” at other more easily achieved goals in the meantime.

### **How should the public be involved in decisions on the voting system?**

Ken Ritchie introduced this theme. MPs should not be the only ones deciding on how they get elected; Labour’s policy documents make clear that this cannot be an imposed, top-down change.

*A Referendum* makes it difficult for any government to reverse a decision, but votes are often not cast on the issue – they tend to follow party lines, or are just anti-politics. Any responsible government needs to ensure that the arguments are well-understood by the voters before launching a referendum.

*A Constitutional Convention* can mean whatever you want it to mean. They tend to involve “the Great and the Good” but not the general public. However, it could be a useful part of the process.

*Citizens’ Assemblies* involve random electors with in-depth discussion of the issues. CAs must be carefully organised, big enough to be representative of the general population, and properly facilitated to avoid giving precedence to the loudest voices. The CA in British Columbia (BC) took a year. There must be opportunities for experts and stakeholders to take part. Any result cannot be binding, but would be persuasive. The CA would need buy-in from the politicians (which in BC they did not have).

#### *Points from discussion:*

People don’t have time to engage properly in the pros and cons of political arguments, which is why referendums are so often disastrous. They are also open to undue influence – especially from wealthy vested interests. If/when we need to persuade the voters, we will need to understand what a “common perspective” of those voters might be, and produce a clear message that appeals to that. We need to be able to appeal to all, including those who are disengaged from politics and those who are neurodiverse.

Citizens’ Assemblies had broad support, but they need to be balanced in class/gender/race and other characteristics. They mustn’t exclude housebound people. Politicians will tend to disparage CAs because they have a vested interest in doing so, but they could be a valuable way of building a consensus on change for PR, and for other policy areas in the future.

The Policy Programme says we can’t impose any changes from above – so public participation is agreed Labour policy. It would be helpful to have a statement about that in the Manifesto. Generally, effective representative democracy is the best way to answer the public’s alienation from politics, but we should make some effort to define what an effective democracy would be.

CAs and other mechanisms could just become unnecessary hurdles to achieving PR.

A Constitutional Convention or Royal Commission could be used in conjunction with a Citizens Assembly, to ensure a sensible scope for the CA.

One option would be to simply campaign for a Royal Commission on Democracy.

### **Voting systems: how far should we seek to converge on a recommended system?**

Maria Iacovou introduced this theme. So far, we have focused on ditching FPTP, but we are increasingly asked about systems. We have signed the Good Systems Agreement (5 years ago) and have posted a set of agreed principles on the website. Should we go further and seek to converge on a recommended system?

Arguments against include the risk of splitting the campaign between supporters of different systems or getting bogged down in technicalities. Arguments for include the danger that a lack of consensus will be used as a weapon against the campaign, and the fact that at some stage someone will have to make that decision, and it had better be people who are committed and informed.

One way of squaring the circle at this stage could be to have a clear message about “system X” AND a clear message about “system Y” – and that both are vastly better than FPTP.

#### *Points from discussion:*

We already have the report of the Jenkins Commission – we shouldn’t re-invent the wheel.

We won’t reach an agreement on an exact system, so it is not sensible to try to produce one.

On the other hand, if we don’t come to a decision, someone else (possibly less informed) will do it for us. We could look weak if we can’t say which system we would support. We will need to educate people about systems at, or prior to, a Citizens’ Assembly. We should ask the members what they think – Sandy promised a members’ survey on this. It was suggested we might have a “hustings” for alternative systems before carrying out a survey.

People want a Constituency MP – Additional Member Systems achieve this. AMS is proven in Scotland and Wales and London, and shows that people can easily learn how to use it.

One way to introduce AMS for the House of Commons would be to double the number of MPs (there was not much support for this). Additional members could be the runners-up with the highest number of votes.

The Good Systems Agreement needs refining. We need PR for the House of Commons to be far more proportionate than what has been achieved in Scotland or Wales. Any system also needs to be easy to understand and use. In any case, a consensus on principles should be much easier to achieve than a consensus on an exact system.

#### **General points:**

We will be in the most powerful position immediately after a decisive GE win – we should not be putting things off until a subsequent Parliament. Chartist is promoting a programme that can be introduced in the first King’s Speech. Alternatively, we could call for a Green Paper in the period immediately after a GE. If a new Labour Government does ignore the need for change, demonstrations might be effective.

Senior people in our Party are still talking down the need for democratic change – progress is not guaranteed.

Compass is aiming to get as many PR supporting MPs into parliament as possible at the GE.

PR will attract widespread support inside Labour and outside Labour. We MUST engage the PLP. If not us, then who? It will be interesting to find out MPs' views after the General Election.

1/3 of CLPs are having their PPCs imposed, with the direction that they (and by inference the members) will NOT be campaigning in their constituency but in a target seat. This could provide us with a campaign opportunity, linking the marginalisation of those constituencies with First Past the Post, and making the point that PR makes votes in every area valuable. It could also be a valuable recruiting tool for LCER.

Trade Union support has been vital in achieving our Conference motion and will be vital in achieving our goals – we need to make sure we continue to engage with TUs.

Several inaccurate points have been made, especially in comparisons with other countries – we need to be very careful with our facts before using them in argument.

We should have an identified “Pathway to PR”.

We need to find a role for members, with similar effectiveness as the L4ND campaigns for the Conference motion and the NPF.

### **Summing Up:**

Alex Zur-Clark and Joe Sousek thanked members for their involvement in the L4ND campaigns, and Alex outlined 3 things members can do now:

- 1) Write to your MP or PPC if you have not already done so – talk about fairness and equality rather than delving into systems
- 2) Pass a motion at your CLP – many CLPs are now different from pre-Boundary Change, so a fresh motion will be an effective way of raising the issue
- 3) Canvass for pro-PR candidates – L4ND is hoping to organise phone-banking for those unable to attend a canvass session in person.

Members are encouraged to join us for the L4ND event on May 8th.

Joe pointed out that we need to focus on what we have the capacity for and what will work. Having a policy position doesn't necessarily mean we have to campaign on that policy. One possible action in the coming year will be to speak to GMB branches, the GMB being the one big union that still supports FPTP.