

## **The Labour Party, the Constitutional Reform Tradition, and Reform of the Voting System for Westminster Elections**

*Antony Taylor, Emeritus Professor of Modern British History, Sheffield Hallam University*

The argument that reform of the electoral system at Westminster is primarily a preoccupation for smaller parties, and an alien import from traditions outside the Labour party, is a familiar one. It was much used in the late 1990s at the time of Tony Blair's acknowledgement of the formative role of liberalism in the creation of the Labour party.<sup>1</sup> Internal critics used the launch of the Jenkins Report on reform of the voting system for Westminster elections in 1998, to suggest that supporters of PR were secret Liberal Democrats, a view that drew on the deep wounds and scars felt by the defection of the Social Democratic Party in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> During this period, voting reform was depicted either as a minority interest, or as a distraction from the real business of meeting the aims and aspirations of voters, or of reforming national institutions like the NHS. Such views were in a long tradition. For some within Labour, support for voting reform by groups like the Communist Party of Great Britain and, specifically, a move towards a Single Transferable Vote system (STV), ran the risk of seeing the party supplanted by groups further to the left than Labour.<sup>3</sup> For many historians of the party, debates about parliamentary reform from the 1950s onward were simply overshadowed by the work of Anthony Crosland and T.H. Marshall, who in formulating approaches to the economy placed an emphasis on voters as consumers, rather than as citizens.<sup>4</sup> In these readings the Labour party's traditional emphasis on constitutional matters was sidelined, rather than foregrounded.

This view overlaps with a standard view of the party's history that depicts it as both cautious and conservative on constitutional reform matters, and as privileging welfare and social reform over matters of the constitution. Moreover, the history of the party is strewn with the corpses of commissioned reports on constitutional reform that were never implemented, notably the report of the 1932 Fabian Research Bureau, the 1995 Plant Report, the 1998 Jenkins Report and the 2000 Wakeham Report, all of which included some element of voting reform: the Plant Report recommended a supplementary vote system for parliamentary elections, the Jenkins Report an Alternative Vote + system (AV+), and the Wakeham Report a list system for regional representation under proportional voting systems for a partially elected House of Lords. On these issues the Labour party has been judged for its failure to deliver a fairer voting system. In this view, Labour is frequently represented as a party of reluctant parliamentary reformers with ill-defined constitutional aims who, in the words of David Marquand, embarked on a 'revolution of sleepwalkers' during the Blair/Brown governments.<sup>5</sup> Martin Pugh has developed this argument still further, stressing the debt the Labour party owed to the Conservative party in its origins, and highlighting an unacknowledged conservative strain in Labour politics that sought stability and continuity, rather than profound change.<sup>6</sup> Some historians point out that all too often, the role of backbench Labour MPs has proved instrumental in defeating reform legislation and proposals for constitutional change, rather than in encouraging them, notably over House of Lords reform under Harold Wilson and devolution in the 1970s.<sup>7</sup>

Significant evidence, however, suggests that constitutional traditions and notions of historical liberty are too easily discounted as part of the Labour tradition. From James Ramsay MacDonald's 'New Charter' of 1892 inspired by the nineteenth-century Chartist movement, via Clement Attlee's statement that the Labour Party was 'the inheritor of the achievements of those who fought for liberty in the past'<sup>8</sup> to Gordon Brown's view of English liberties as 'that golden thread...that runs from that long ago day in Runnymede in 1215 to the Bill of Rights in 1689'<sup>9</sup> a continuous vision is apparent of Labour's central role in initiating constitutional change. The re-running of election results under alternative voting systems with more positive results for Labour became something of a parlour game in Labour circles after the general election defeat of 1992.<sup>10</sup> This tendency to embrace constitutional reform has proved most apparent in continuing debates about reform of the House of Lords but also includes voting reform for Westminster elections and for local government elections in England and Wales as well.<sup>11</sup>

From its origins, the Labour party recognised the role of first-past-the-post in sustaining continuous periods of Conservative ascendancy and in preventing a breakthrough by a political party dedicated to the representation of labour. The first generation of Labour politicians saw constitutional reform as necessary work undertaken by the nineteenth-century Liberal party that paved the way for the rise of the Labour party, providing legacy issues and, sometimes, a grudging inheritance on issues of House of Lords reform, or devolution.<sup>12</sup> The preference for proportional voting systems within the party emerged, in part, from the practices adopted for the election of officials in the allied trade union movement. It was common for trade unions to run their own ballot

systems for elected officers under the STV system after the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants in Scotland adopted STV for the election of officials in 1910, followed by the Trades Union Congress in the same year. Keir Hardie, founder and first leader of the modern Labour party, was a member of the Electoral Reform Society; in 1913, the Labour party passed a motion in support of proportional voting systems.<sup>13</sup> Thereafter, Labour branches, like that at Dundee, performed mock simulations of British elections fought under non-first past-the-post models, with, at Dundee, Keir Hardie in attendance.<sup>14</sup> Despite STV's ubiquity in the trade union movement, both Ramsay MacDonald and George Lansbury believed that first-past-the-post would prove useful in helping the Labour party supplant the Liberal party, thereby paving the way for majority rule by Labour at Westminster. In 1926 Lansbury counselled that rather than abolishing first-past-the-post, Labour should make the system work for it, as other parties had done.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, in 1918 and during the 1929-31 parliament, Labour's formal position was an acceptance of the not strictly proportional Alternative Vote system (AV), rather than first-past-the-post. In 1931 a motion for AV during the second Labour government passed the Commons but fell in the Lords.<sup>16</sup> Subsequently the party remained mesmerised by proportional voting systems abroad, notably STV, especially where they led to continuous periods of Social Democratic party rule, as in Sweden.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the Labour party's strong pedigree on voting reform, questions persist about the degree to which the electoral reform tradition remains a shy one in the history of the party. The Conservative party's views of wild and radical Labour agendas promoting constitutional upheaval in government during the inter-war years, have remained formative for the memory of the party.<sup>18</sup> Ralph Miliband's vision of a labourism bent to the will of the state, reluctant to release the levers of power once acquired, and hobbled from deep-rooted reform by its innate statism have also proved influential.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the Labour party's propensity to explore alternative voting systems whilst out of power, only to jettison them on assuming office under the first-past-the-post system was noted by Roy Jenkins amongst others and has contributed to the party's reputation as unreliable constitutional reformers.<sup>20</sup> The current position of the party that rejects the 2022 conference resolution in support of PR once in power is in this tradition.

Internally, the issue remains that very few Labour politicians have represented themselves as constitutional reformers, first and foremost. Robin Cook retains the reputation as the primary standard bearer for a more inclusive and pluralist style of politics. He suggested that: 'the acid test of any commitment to pluralism is whether we are prepared to allow Britain a proportional voting system that returns a pluralist Parliament'.<sup>21</sup> Mo Mowlam and Alan Johnson also embraced proportional voting as a system that they believed broke down the tribalism and entrenched political, geographical and community divisions in British politics.<sup>22</sup> For an earlier generation of Labour politicians, whilst reformers like Herbert Morrison and Dick Crossman gained a reputation for reform, eradicating plural voting in 1948, Morrison was seen primarily as a consigliere whose agenda put reform at the service of party advantage and helped reinforce the monolithic two party structure of the 1950s. Moreover, constitutional reform agendas have often occurred at the tail end of governments often remembered for other priorities. The 1948 Representation of the People Act which eliminated the independent university MPs and introduced postal voting for British citizens living overseas and the highly significant measure lowering the voting age to eighteen introduced by Harold Wilson's government in 1969 came at the end of long legislative cycles and were also introduced against the background of devaluation and economic turbulence that overshadowed their importance.<sup>23</sup>

Sometimes seen as a politics tethered to the left of the party, with its origins in opposition to the National Government after the fall of a measure for AV at the end of the 1929-31 Labour government, support for reform of the electoral system, has, in practice, spanned the different wings of the party.<sup>24</sup> By the 1970s it was seen as a politics that provided opportunities on the part of the Labour right to re-align with the Liberal Party during the Lib-Lab pact of 1977-78 and Labour's period in opposition after 1979. Opponents of closer ties with the Liberals on the left of the party often saw PR voting systems as promoting a politics of pacts, compromise and watered down manifesto commitments that relieved the party of the necessity of converting a broad mass of the electorate to socialism and robbed the Labour party of its reputation as the sole vehicle for progressive change within the British political system.<sup>25</sup> This outlook proved instrumental in shifting the trade unions away from support for PR.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, support for PR still attracted broad support from the left of the party. One prominent sponsor of the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform after its foundation in 1979 was Arthur Scargill.<sup>27</sup> Frequently, as well, internal divisions over electoral reform provided a horizontal, rather than vertical, split in the party: a politics favoured by constituency parties and rank and file often to the left of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) to curb the establishment embrace of Labour in office. Overall, though, there may well be something in the idea of a marked element of continuity over constitutional reform within Labour, supplanting transitions from 'old' to 'new'

labour, and swings between left and right, within the party. Despite the reservations of some internal critics, the first term of Tony Blair's government was characterized by an unprecedented era of constitutional change, bringing reformed electoral systems to devolved assemblies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the Greater London Assembly, an elected mayor for London, amendment of the composition of the House of Lords, and a new voting system for the European elections.<sup>28</sup>

Reform of the voting system has featured significantly in the history of the Labour party. In the 1950s it appeared a muted agenda, often overshadowed by concerns for the implementation of social democracy, on other occasions it has reached a highpoint of support. During the 1929-31 Labour government, in particular, electoral reform materially influenced the course and direction of the Labour party in power; it also played a major role during the period of the Blair reforms where it featured as part of the shift towards national assemblies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and a Greater London Assembly for the capital. After 2007, the party's inability to reach a consensus on Lords reform was a factor in the decay of the Blair/Brown governments.<sup>29</sup> Important, rather than tangential, to the history of the party, constitutional reform agendas demonstrate Labour's debt to the nineteenth-century reform tradition. In subsequent debates this has enabled electoral reformers within the party to depict constitutional change as part of the fabric of the labour movement. Against a background of the persistence of first-past-the-post for Westminster elections, failed reform projects to introduce an elective element into the Lords, and in the light of pressure from Constituency Labour Parties and trade unions, who have now returned to their original support for PR, it remains, however, unfinished business for Labour.

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Blair, *New Britain: My Vision for a Young Country* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996), pp. 13-15.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Hain, *Proportional Misrepresentation* (London: Wildwood House, 1986), pp. 49-60 and *How Should We Elect Our MPs? Peter Mandelson MP's Lecture on the Northern Ireland Peace Process and the Renewal of British Politics* (London: Make Votes Count, 2000), pp. 5-14.

<sup>3</sup> Hain, *Proportional Misrepresentation*, pp. 64-68.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (London: Constable, 1956 [2006]), pp. 27-48.

<sup>5</sup> [A new and fair constitutional settlement? Beware of constitutional hyper-activism | British Politics and Policy at LSE](#)

<sup>6</sup> Martin Pugh, *Speak for England: A New History of the Labour Party* (2010), pp. 14-56.

<sup>7</sup> Vernon Bogdanor, 'Constitutional Reform' in Anthony Seldon (ed.), *The Blair Effect* (London: Little Brown, 2001), p. 142.

<sup>8</sup> Clement Attlee, *The Labour Party in Perspective* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937), p.22.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon Brown, 'The Golden Thread that Runs Through Our History', *The Guardian*, 8 July 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Alex Renton, 'How Would PR Have Changed the Face of Parliament?', *The Independent*, 21 April 1993, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> For reform of the voting system in local government elections, see Lewis Baston and Will Brett, *Towards One Nation: The Labour Case for Local Government Reform* (London: Electoral Reform Society, 2012), pp. 14-19.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Dory, *The Labour Party and Constitutional Reform: A History of Constitutional Conservatism* (London: Palgrave, 2008), pp. 14-48.

<sup>13</sup> *Fulfilling Labour's Promise* (Electoral Reform Society, n.d.), pp. 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> *The Labour Leader*, 19 February 1914, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Vernon Bogdanor, 'At last the Tide is Turning', *New Statesman*, 9 November 2009, pp. 24-26.

<sup>16</sup> S.R. Daniels, *The Case for Electoral Reform: With an Explanation of the Principal Objections* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1938), p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Linton, *The Swedish Road to Socialism* (London: Fabian Society, 1985), p. 5-9.

<sup>18</sup> Laura Beers, *Your Britain: Media and the Making of the Labour Party* (London: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp.50-67.

<sup>19</sup> Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism: A Study of the Politics of Labour* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1961).

<sup>20</sup> *The Report on the Independent Commission on the Voting System* (October 1998), p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Robin Cook, *The Point of Departure* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2003), p. 353.

<sup>22</sup> See, also, Robin Cook, 'foreword' to Martin Linton and Mary Southcott, *Making Votes Count: The Case for Electoral Reform* (London: Profile Books, 1998), vii-ix.

<sup>23</sup> Miles Taylor, 'Labour and the Constitution', in Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tiratsoo (eds), *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 165.

<sup>24</sup> Hain, *Proportional Misrepresentation*, p. 61.

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<sup>25</sup> Emily Robinson, *History, Heritage and Tradition in Contemporary British Politics: Past Politics and Present Histories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 29.

<sup>26</sup> Cameron Rhys Herbert, 'Labour, the Unions and Proportional Representation', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 85 (1) (2024), pp. 139-147 and J. Miles, *The Labour Party and Electoral Reform* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), chs 2-3.

<sup>27</sup> Hain, *Proportional Misrepresentation*, p. 61

<sup>28</sup> David M. Farrell, *Electoral Systems: A Comparative Introduction* (London: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 36-37.

<sup>29</sup> Will Woodward, 'Historic Vote for All Elected House of Lords', *The Guardian*, 8 March 2007.