

**What is the likelihood that electoral reform for the House of Commons will happen under a Labour Government with a historic landslide majority delivered to them by the first-past-the-post electoral system?**

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*"The Catch 22 of electoral reform was always that no party in government elected by the present system would ever question, let alone change, the system that got them there."*

**Robin Cook, *Making Votes Count*, 1998**

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## Introduction

The debate about electoral reform is one which I have been aware of for some time. Living with my mother, who campaigns for change inside the Labour Party, before coming to Ruskin, meant that the latest goings on were always being talked about in our house. When I was thirteen she wrote an article for the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform (LCER) Newsletter entitled "Dear Emily". This was to explain simply, as if to a child, the importance of and the reason for "banging on about electoral reform." However, because I had unrecognised functional deafness, I missed out on most of what was said. I was cautious of being thought to be pro-reform just because my mother was but not being able to justify it for myself. I decided that by taking this opportunity to write a project on the subject of electoral reform I could educate myself more fully about the debate and come to my own conclusions. I did, however, memorise a speech made by Roy Hattersley, a supporter of the present system, to Labour Party Conference in which he said:

“This party, will not in the end support an electoral system which prevents Labour from ever again governing in its own right.”

This is a very exciting time to be studying politics. After eighteen years of Conservative governments, I have grown up remembering nothing else. But finally, on 1 May 1997 the British people voted overwhelmingly in support of a change and the Rose finally took the place of the Torch at Number 10. This joy was dampened only slightly by talk of the colour purple in the last week and a feeling that new Labour might effectively be only new faces. This I believed was somewhat the fault of the electoral system which meant that only those floating voters who could not make up their mind which way to vote, or former Conservatives switching to Labour, were of any concern to the Labour Party in the election campaign.

I have always instinctively considered the present electoral system to be unfair but I also believed, rather cynically, that political parties always do whatever is in their best interest. Therefore, I thought that if the Labour Party were going to come out for electoral reform they would have had to do so before the election. When they won, I believed that the old Catch 22, that no party which got into government under a system would seek to change it, would set in as they had reaffirmed that they could win under the present system, first-past-the-post (FPTP). The idea of change for the

House of Commons would again disappear, except within parties that at present are not contenders for government, perhaps over time in the Conservative Party and, of course, among citizens of the UK.

There is perhaps this time reason to be more optimistic or less cynical. Britain is now just over one year into its Labour government and yet already we have seen the unfolding of a package, agreed with the Liberal Democrats and foretold in their manifesto, which has produced historic constitutional change. Along with this, electoral reform seems to have risen up the agenda in both politics and the media. After the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, London Assembly, with directly elected mayor, the 1999 European Elections and a peace deal in Northern Ireland, there will be, for the first time in history, new voting systems throughout the UK and who can say that there is no hope for change for the House of Commons. The systems that will be in use will be, all but Supplementary Vote for the London Mayor, forms of proportional representation (PR). However, this is also not to say that change will automatically follow for the House of Commons.

What I hope to do in this dissertation is to judge the present mood, and that which is likely at the time of the promised referendum on the Commons voting system, to assess the prospects for reform. This will involve scenario setting as we are talking about an unpredictable future. I hope to do this by setting out the arguments for change and comparing these with the benefits of the status quo, as these will be of great importance when it comes to the crucial deciding referendum. I will look at the Labour Party's current position, official and behind the scenes in terms of factions within the party, the party's historical position on this issue and of course what has been done since they took up office in May 1997.

As the decision of whether to introduce change will involve the general public, I shall also be looking at positions outside the party including those of pressure groups campaigning for and against change. I have looked at the current literature available on this issue in newspapers, periodicals and papers from the House of Commons library. I was present at the House of Commons debate on the British Electoral System on 2 June 1998 and have read the Hansard report. In addition, I attended several meetings of the Make Votes Count campaign, the Voting Reform Group, LCER's strategy seminar and the all-party Constitution Group addressed by Peter Kellner

and conducted interviews with some key figures to try to capture the mood without the filter of academics and journalists who are trying to sell what they write. The media coverage tends to all say the same things as they double guess what Blair will do and try to get it right. I experienced some difficulty arranging interviews with supporters of the current system but have tried to compensate for that by reading articles which clearly support the status quo or argue for Alternative Vote (AV) as a way of stopping PR. I have had access to questionnaires which have been widely distributed at Labour events, conferences and fringe meetings but these have mainly been filled in by supporters of change.

Although it will be more difficult to test this, I believe that the debate over the electoral system will not be dominated by an analysis of the niceties of each system but by the feelings of a growing number that politics is conducted in a childish, corrupt, short-term, unrepresentative and unnecessarily adversarial way. As I hope to show, changing the voting system for the House of Commons could well be the catalyst for change in the whole political culture. Improving democracy may well be the incentive which could win the referendum 'Yes' vote.

Labour's 1997 Manifesto promised to hold a referendum on the electoral system for the House of Commons and the government has already set up an independent commission chaired by Lord Jenkins to look at both the present voting system and to recommend a possible alternative. Once Jenkins has made his report, the referendum will be held and the electorate will be given their chance to decide the fate of first-past-the-post and indeed Westminster. The chances for reform seem to me greater than ever before and it is at this exciting time that I wish to look at the balance of opinion in the Labour Party which may well determine the outcome.

## Chapter 1

### Arguments for and against the electoral system

“An electoral system in a democracy is required to perform two functions - first, to ensure that the majority rules, and second to ensure that all significant minorities are represented. Plurality and majoritarian systems of election fail to achieve either of these two aims.”

(Vernon Bogdanor - *Representation*)

“Electoral Systems lie at the heart of a nation’s arrangements.”

(Dr David Butler, cited by Jack Straw, *Hansard*, 2/6/98)

The electoral system used to elect members of parliament to the House of Commons is the plurality system commonly known as first-past-the-post (FPTP). The system is based on dividing the country into constituencies which elect the candidate who has the highest number of votes. Britain has no written constitution but there is some mention of electoral law to be found in the Representation of the People Act, 1983. For something which is so fundamental it is surprising to find only one sentence which refers to how votes should be transferred into seats;

"The votes at the poll shall be given by ballot, the result shall be ascertained by counting the votes given to each candidate and the candidate to whom the majority of votes have been given shall be declared elected."

(*Representation of the People Act*, 1983)

This begs the question: what is a 'majority' of votes. Is majority defined, as normal, as over 50 per cent of the votes cast or is it really the largest minority? The idea that the candidate with the highest number of votes may at first appear to most to be a fair way to elect MPs as even children running in a race can accept that the first person to reach the finishing line should win. In the case of the FPTP system the finishing line, or 'post', is provided by the second placed candidate although there may only be an extremely narrow gap between the two, such as two votes in Winchester in May 1997. The simple logic is why many advocates of the status quo, such as John Major, might presume to have evidence that people support their stance of "If it ain't broke, don't fix it". Under FPTP the second placed candidates may have very few votes less than those who came first and yet despite their obviously strong support they receive no share of power. It is a winner-take-all

system. This logic ignores the evidence of the effect of geography; the boundaries, the exclusion of small parties and third party candidates and the distorting effects that extra parties have on the result.

FPTP is a system which works best as a contest between two parties. On the whole it only offers power, in the sense of government, to the two main parties. In the Nineteenth Century this was the Whigs and the Tories. However, today Wales and Scotland already have four main parties and England has three. In Scotland, the Scottish National Party (SNP) is the main opposition to the Labour Party, not the Conservatives. Thus, it is not surprising that many supporters of the SNP, the Liberal Democrats, a third party in general if not local elections, and the Green Party are in favour of electoral reform. Lord Hailsham said of FPTP:

"Our system of voting at elections as it has developed into universal suffrage favours, although it does not actually prescribe, a two party system. Retaining the confidence of parliament has come to mean in practice, though paradoxically, that the executive government controls the House of Commons far more obviously than the House of Commons controls the executive."

(Lord Hailsham, *On the Constitution*)

Even if third parties get elected, it is the government, provided it has an overall majority, not members of any opposition parties, or even with large majorities backbenchers of the Government party, which determines policy. Third parties produce a problem known as 'splitting the vote'. Under FPTP, as soon as more than two parties stand for election the results of this 'majority' system are distorted. As Linton and Southcott put it; "It does not take children in a playground long to discover that you cannot toss a coin between three." One of their examples is that if you have a left, right and far left candidate then even if the majority of voters collectively support the left, because this vote is split, then the right can win.

FPTP does not ensure representation of all significant minorities. In the 1992 general election, it produced a roughly proportional result for Plaid Cymru and the Ulster Unionists but drastically under-represented the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish Nationalists. (Source: Vernon Bogdanor, *Representation*) The problem is one of geographical location. The people who vote for Plaid Cymru and parties of Northern Ireland are geographically concentrated cultural and religious minorities. The parties are able to gain a significant majority of the votes cast in certain areas and

their candidates are elected. However, because the number of seats a party wins depends not only on how many votes it wins but where these votes are cast, parties with significant but geographically dispersed support such as the Liberal Democrats and the SNP do not do well under FPTP. They are not represented in Parliament in proportion to the votes cast. Vernon Bogdanor said of this:

"[FPTP] represents minorities not according to their electoral strength, but according to the geographical structure of their vote". *(Representation)*

The effect is that the government is not the one that the majority of people really wanted in power and their policies may have only minority support. The Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, is a long-standing advocate of electoral reform. In a speech he made at Hamburg last year, he told the German people of Labour's plan to look at Britain's voting system and of his own opinion of FPTP:

"The first-past-the-post system is one that is well understood by racing tipsters such as myself but it is not necessarily the best basis on which to reflect the wishes of the electorate".  
*(Robin Cook, Hamburg, 9/9/97)*

In 1987 the Conservative party polled only 42 per cent of the votes cast and yet they received 58 per cent of the seats in the Commons. In 1992 they again polled 42 per cent of the vote but this time with more votes barely a majority of seats. Under the present system, no post-war government has been elected on a majority of the popular vote. Britain is referred to as democratic but arguably if it were a real democracy then the number of seats a party won would broadly match the number of votes it received. In 1997, Tony Blair enjoyed a landslide election result on fewer votes than John Major polled in 1992. In 1992, the Conservative majority was only twenty although the votes cast were the most any British Party has ever received. Labour's majority in 1997 was 179. When he spoke at the All Party Constitution group meeting, Peter Kellner's argument was that although FPTP sometimes produces bizarre results, it usually gives a majority to the party that most people back if they had voted for the government rather than in constituencies. The whole point, though, is that FPTP does not allow people to vote for governments or parliaments, only for MPs.

The psychological effect of the present system on people's attitude towards politics is evidence in favour of change. Because the majority of people's votes don't really count, the system breeds

apathy. It is difficult to understand how FPTP can be defended in terms of its production of accountable government, popular consent, or indeed any of the other principles of democratic theory. Terry Harding believes that PR is now a necessity because under FPTP, “apathy has allowed the quality of politicians to deteriorate”. He suggests that Blair’s massive majority resulted not from a massive swing to Labour but;

“surely from the absence of Conservative voters, who had lost faith in their party and failed to vote”. (PR System is now a necessity, 12/5/98)

"Never have our policies and political institutions been held in such low esteem."  
(From *Time For Change*, the Electoral Reform Society)

Politicians are thought by many to be out of touch with the public. This opinion is also held by some MPs, although the extent to which this is felt usually depends on how safe the member’s seat is. Jack Straw suggested that:

“If the public at large are asked what they think of politicians at large, they dismiss us and rate us equal with estate agents and journalists.”

To which the Conservative David Maclean MP exclaimed; “That high?” (*Hansard*, 2/6/98)

For those who choose to be involved in what is offered as the democratic system there is often no choice but to play the system. Many people vote negatively to keep a candidate out rather than positively to elect somebody in a process known as tactical voting. The safe seats which exist under FPTP mean that at election time, politicians do not have to worry about voters in safe seats which means that many of the problems in those areas are not properly addressed. It is the 'switchers' in marginal seats who really matter to parties under FPTP. This not only encourages non-participation, indicated by low turnouts at the polling stations, but also bland policy promises. This could be said of New Labour at the last election who did not give prominence to problems such as poverty, homelessness, racism or even the environment. The turnout in the 1997 election was the lowest since 1935.

FPTP has been used to elect MPs since Simon de Montford summoned the Commons to Lewes in 1265. However, the electorate at that time was very small and Parliament was not the institution that we know today. "The British Parliament suffers from serious overload" (Speech by Robin Cook, Hamburg, 9/9/97). Evidence to suggest that the FPTP system is outdated is given by all

those countries and political institutions which have recently chosen to use an alternative to our plurality system such as Japan, South Africa, New Zealand, Poland, Hungary, Russia, in fact all the emerging democracies of Eastern Europe.

Much of the academic literature that has been written on electoral reform has concentrated on the debate over systems - which one would be most suitable for a British Parliament and would provide the fairest transfer of votes to seats. The main voting methods recognised are, First Past The Post (FPTP) and Alternative Vote (AV), the Second Ballot (SB), the Supplementary Vote (SV), and the proportional systems of the Additional Member System (AMS), the Single Transferable Vote (STV) and the Party List System. (From Oonagh Gay, *Voting Systems - The Alternatives*, Research Paper 97/26).

The controversy over Britain's voting system is nothing new. In the Nineteenth Century, John Stuart Mill and Walter Bagehot debated changing the voting system to make it more proportional. Mill advocated a representative system that was essentially STV while Bagehot argued that the present system should be retained as it was the most effective means of electing a governmental body capable of leading the country well. Mill argued that FPTP did not create a democracy in its true sense:

"The pure idea of democracy, according to its definition, is the government of the whole people by the whole people, equally represented."

( JS Mill 1806-1873, *On Liberty and Other Essays*)

Mill talks of minorities being excluded by FPTP, while accepting that there are problems with the system he is advocating. He talks of the loss of constituencies and the confusing nature of a new system for the electorate who are used to the simplicity of voting under FPTP. His argument for reform though is that despite these problems it is democracy which should come first and this required a new, proportional voting system. He also argues that good government should be about consensus seeking rather than the adversarial nature of the politics of his day. Bagehot disagreed with this opinion.

Bagehot's (Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution*) basic belief was that strong government should remain the priority of any voting system. His main argument was that the new system

would destroy parties as dissenters would become separate groups rather than remain within the party where he felt they played a useful role. This was an important point for Bagehot as he felt that dissenters kept a party from doing anything too radical and that this would be lost under a system of PR. However, he might not have said the same had he been witness to new 'on message' Labour MPs. This is interesting for today's debate as the formation of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1981 and the Socialist Labour Party in 1996 are evidence to suggest that FPTP does not keep dissenters from leaving the party, although in the first case it was because they felt that the Labour Party was too left wing and in the second, not radical enough. More members would almost certainly leave to join a left of Labour party under a PR system.

What seems most interesting in the comparison of Mill's and Bagehot's views with the contemporary debate is the continuity of the debate over the way politics should be practised. Many people who admit the faults of the FPTP system would still support it above the alternatives as they say it is the only way to maintain "strong and stable government". Similarly to Bagehot, supporters of FPTP often see coalition government as the outcome of a system of Proportional Representation (PR) and they tend to favour strong, one-party government, seeing coalitions as giving too much power to minorities. The academic Philip Norton (*Reinvigorating Government in the UK*) has for a long time argued this point and believes that uncertainty and weak government will be the result of PR but many other academics would disagree. One notable opponent of change, Nevil Johnston, argues that PR gives *too much* stability and prefers a system where you can kick the government party out. It is his opinion that PR for the Commons would;

“make coalition rule the norm and tend to stabilise over time the proportions of votes gained by the larger parties. The idea of a party gaining a mandate for a programme would soon become obsolete as would the practice of opposition as presently understood. Indeed, alternation of parties in government, following a decision by the voters, might become a rare occurrence”.

*(Electoral Reform: The Risks of Unintended Consequences, CPS)*

Opinions about coalition governments are varied but a recent National Opinion Poll (NOP) suggests that the public, far from believing that PR creates weak government, believe that coalition

governments are not only stronger, but more stable and democratic than those created under FPTP. Appendix 1, *Coalition vs. One-Party Governments*, shows this information as a bar chart.

Today's arguments are moving away from systems and statistics to a discussion about how politics is conducted and about what would happen between elections rather than precisely how voting happens in the first place. Just as Mill talked about the pure idea of Democracy, many pro reformers now talk about their wish for adversarial politics to give way to a politics of consensus. Professor Finer takes the view that adversarial politics needs to be avoided and that consensus seeking should be the aim of any government (S.E Finer, *Adversary Politics and Electoral Reform*). This he feels, aids continuity and means that long-term policies can be effectively laid down and carried out. It is this debate which has become more important than systems as we move closer to a decisive settlement on this subject. In his foreword to *Making Votes Count*, Robin Cook says:

“In the past it was hard to persuade commentators that Labour’s interest in examining electoral reform was about democracy and not simply a cynical reaction to a long period in opposition. It should now be clear that Labour is committed to democratic reform of our political culture. That culture is Profoundly affected by the system we choose to elect our political representatives”.

(Linton and Southcott)

In a recent article by Polly Toynbee of *The Guardian* she states that, despite the Government's popularity, disillusion with the process of politics is growing. The results of a NOP which were made public on 2 June this year, the same date as the House of Commons debate on the British electoral system took place, showed Labour at 51 per cent. However, 70 per cent of the same respondents thought politicians couldn't be trusted and are out of touch with ordinary people. It seems that many members of the public have already recognised the role that a change in the electoral system could play in changing the way politics is done:

"The same NOP poll finds an astonishingly high level of support for PR. 72 per cent said they'd vote YES for a fair share of seats on a proportional basis."

Although the results of opinion polls depend to some extent on the way in which the question is asked it does seem that, considering that the referendum campaign has not yet begun, this result

gives a promising outlook for reform.

On the other hand, Peter Kellner disagrees with this scenario. At a meeting in the House of Commons chaired by Tony Wright MP, he said that he would like to see the Government present the public with a package of constitutional reforms, including replacing the House of Lords by an elected second chamber, elected by PR, and the House of Commons by a majoritarian system, in a referendum to be held in the second rather than the proposed first term. Some people believe that it is possible to change the nature of politics without changing the system. Tony Wright MP said in 1995 that although FPTP "promotes arid adversarialism and inhibits a politics of agreement" and "restricts civic participation and corrodes civic sensibility" (*Representation*) he sees Blair's form of "old politics with a new gloss" as a way to try to get rid of some of the unpopular symptoms of FPTP while still maintaining its use. Wright wrote that he has changed from being a front-teether to a back-teether and seemed to have retracted his support for PR since the election. His *Prospect* article, published in April 1998, seems to suggest this only by arguing for strong government. This belief it seems has been strengthened by new circumstances, devolutions and new checks and balances. These are reasons why many have changed their mind, believing that you cannot have a stationary way of electing MPs when the rest of the country and constitution is moving on. It could be argued that Wright has been misinterpreted by people who expected the Labour government to give up on electoral reform. In the Commons debate on the British Electoral System he gave strong arguments in favour of PR. In response to the Conservative, Michael Ancram's "curious argument on disproportionality of power", Tony Wright inquired:

"Regardless of the proportionality of our system, can we tolerate one in which the party that wins loses?" (*Hansard*, 2/6/98)

Wright cites that at two elections this century, (it was actually three), the party that won the most votes lost the general election and obviously feels this was an injustice caused by the present system. These do not sound like the words of a back-tracked reformer especially as he was among those who voted with the No's at the end of the debate and he remains a sponsor of LCER. Perhaps Wright believes in the importance of strong government at the same time as recognising the unfairness and unrepresentativeness of the FPTP system. There are others who are unhappy about the possible loss of the link between an MP and their constituency. They have formed a group

called the Labour Keep the Link Campaign which reformers immediately dubbed SOS, Save Our Seats. However, there are rumours about the Jenkins Commission coming out in favour of a hybrid system of AV and AMS called AVplus under which the constituency link could be maintained at the same time as being a more proportional system than FPTP.

## Chapter Two

### History of attempts to change the electoral system and Labour's changing position on electoral reform.

During its ninety-eight year history the Labour Party's position on reform of the voting system has undergone change. In Labour's early years support for electoral reform was strong, although not universal, but by the 1920s Labour had tasted power and its interest in reform declined. The issue was pushed off the agenda in the 1930s and 40s as Labour re-built itself after Ramsay MacDonald's 'treachery', then entered the Wartime Coalition and finally won its first landslide majority. Between 1945 and 1970 it appeared that Labour was one of the two natural parties of Government, sharing the honours with the Conservative Party. However, the revival of three-party politics in the 1970s led to minority government in 1974, then the Lib Lab pact and then eighteen years of Labour opposition which encouraged a revived debate on electoral reform in the party. The Conservative interest on this issue in the 1970s went underground after their victory in 1979 which is not surprising considering the benefits they reaped from the FPTP system.

The Labour Party's first leader, Keir Hardie, was in favour of PR not only because it would have given the party more MPs but it would also have provided a distinct identity and eradicated their dependence on the Liberals. The 1900 election clearly showed how they spoilt each other's chances where Liberal and Labour candidates split the vote and allowed the Conservatives through in seats where both parties stood. In the Commons debate on Britain's electoral system, the Secretary of State for the Home Department, Jack Straw, talked of the Party's historical position on this issue;

“My party's interest in electoral systems dates from when the very first Labour

Members were elected to this House; from the first moment that there was any prospect of power for the Labour party. As a minority party in those early days, it was, I suppose, natural for senior party figures such as Keir Hardy to be in favour of a proportional system in order to gain more seats in Westminster and so move out of the Liberal party's shadow.”

*(Hansard, 2/6/98)*

In 1903, Labour and the Liberals formed a pact to counteract the problems created by the electoral

system. The secret memorandum agreed by Herbert Gladstone and Ramsay MacDonald said that each party would not put up candidates in seats where the other party was favourite. The result was a success for both parties but particularly helped the Labour Party to grow rapidly from 1906 to 1910. This period was also responsible for laying the foundations of the welfare state. The victory of 1906 has been compared with 1997 when the people, not the parties, decided which party could beat the Conservatives in their seat helped by opinion polls such as the ICM poll which was in *The Observer* newspaper the Sunday before the general election.

Neither party gave much credit to the pact for the role it had played in their fortunes though it did cause interest in PR within the Labour Party to rise. This was partly due to the fact that many Labour supporters did not want to have to rely on Lib-Lab pacts in order to win future elections, they wanted to stand in every seat. Pressure for change was strong at this time with a majority of Labour and Liberal members of both the Commons and the Lords supporting change. However, when the Bill was heard in 1918, neither House would stand down on their preferred system and in the end both opted not to have either but to stay with the status quo.

The Labour Party conference of this same year and that of the TUC in 1921 and 1922 all voted in favour of reform but when Labour came to power just a few years later the issue was not pursued. Linton and Southcott state that the reason for this had something to do with the fact that Labour "had just been the beneficiary of the biggest jackpot the system had ever produced" but also that Labour was becoming more convinced that they could not only overtake but replace the Liberals. Already in 1923 FPTP was much kinder to Labour than it was to the Liberals, giving Labour seats for votes. This is a trend which has continued and in fact worsened with the increase in support for the Labour Party. This was mainly because of the enfranchisement of working men in 1918 which boosted electoral support for the Labour Party.

This belief held by many in the Labour Party that support for, and so the threat of, the Liberals would soon disappear may well explain why the idea of reform went out of fashion at this time. In May 1924 the Fabian Society published a pamphlet by Herman Finer which argued just this:

"our electoral system suffers from temporary dislocation rather than permanent error. As it is likely that within 15 years the Liberal Party will be defunct, we shall then be troubled with fewer of such multiple-candidate contests."

(cited by Linton and Southcott)

Although the 1925 Labour Conference turned against PR, the strange arithmetic of the 1929 election, when the Conservatives got more votes and Labour won their seats, led to a Speaker's Conference where Labour MPs split and the Lords stopped voting reform in 1931. In the 1931 election FPTP was harsh on Labour reducing the number of seats from 287 to 52 even though their share of the vote had only fallen by six per cent. However, the reaction to this was not to return favour to electoral reform but to see the prize of government as something which was won through luck and theirs wasn't in. It was after this election that the party secretary, J.S.Middleton said: "There is no greater gamble on earth than a British general election." Politicians live and die by the cast of the vote and may be more attracted, or even addicted, to FPTP than those who are not so involved in the maintenance of their own jobs and see things more objectively. This is why today the chances for reform have been made much greater by the implementation of a referendum. In 1943 there was renewed debate about PR at Labour's conference because by-election agreements frustrated local Labour attempts to win seats. Following the decisive election result of 1945, electoral reform was put well and truly on the bottom of the party's agenda where it stayed for the next thirty years.

Until 1979 Labour had been in government for eleven of the previous fifteen years and because of this, despite some support, electoral reform had not been an issue for the party. However, their fortunes took a serious blow in 1979 when they lost the election to Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party and were to remain in opposition until just one year ago in 1997. 1979 was also the year which saw the establishment of the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform (LCER). In the late 1980s there was a revival of interest on the issue as by 1988 electoral reform was starting to be seen in the context of democracy and constitutional reform. The growth in support is illustrated by the LCER membership figures shown in Appendix 2. After Labour lost in 1983 and 1987, many party members feared they would lose further elections under the present system. According to LCER, the main component of reformers, who had to beat the system to change it, signed up for democracy not because of defeatism. They had understood how the FPTP system worked but officially the party remained against electoral reform. The strength of Thatcher's government highlighted the problems of FPTP as with less than 43 per cent of the vote, less than a third of the electorate, she appeared to be running away with power. It was around this time that electoral reform was put back onto Labour's agenda.

Neil Kinnock never came out for electoral reform while he was leader of the Labour Party but his experience of two election defeats to the Conservatives obviously caused him to have a rethink. He came to realise that electoral reform was inevitable after the 1987 election and joined LCER as an MP sponsor after the 1992 election. Although Kinnock had been careful not to commit himself while he was leader, at the end of 1992, in a television interview with David Dimbleby, he said that he had been privately convinced for some time of the need for a change in the voting system (Linton and Southcott). Following the 1987 election defeat, Kinnock initiated a policy review which helped to evolve Labour's agenda for constitutional reform and led to the establishment of the National Executive Committee (NEC) Working Party on Electoral Systems, now commonly known as the Plant Commission. Chaired by Raymond Plant, the Commission was originally asked to recommend voting systems to be used for elections to the European Parliament, the House of Lords and the Scottish Parliament. The Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform (LCER) note in their literature that their historic victory was when they managed to;

"persuade Labour's 1990 Annual Conference to include the Commons in Labour's working party on electoral systems, later known as the Plant Commission."

(LCER recruitment leaflet, *Cast your vote for democracy*)

The Plant Commission presented its findings to the NEC in May 1993. There was no majority in favour of a PR system for the House of Commons so, as an alternative to FPTP, the Commission recommended a system which allowed voters a first and second choice, the Supplementary Vote (SV).

Labour's leader was now John Smith who was therefore responsible for responding to the recommendations of Plant. Smith's reaction to the proposal of this system was that he believed that the choice of voting systems for the Commons was too important to be left to politicians. In his own words;

"I firmly believe that the final decision must be taken by means of a referendum .... to be held during the first Parliament of the next Labour government"

(Linton and Southcott)

Thus, although Smith himself never came out for PR for the Commons, it is because of his

proposals for a democratic decision that we will now have a referendum on this issue. Smith was known as a cautious leader and often seen as afraid of change but when it came to democratic reform he was not at all cautious. At the 1993 party conference he said:

"We are proposing nothing less than a new constitution for a new century. I want to lead a Labour government that will introduce the most radical package of constitutional reform ever proposed by any major party. This I believe will be the battleground of the 1990s as we define the new politics of the new century. Our choice - Labour's choice - is to build a democracy founded on pluralism, participation and justice.

(John Smith, Brighton 1993, cited by Graham Allen MP in *Reinventing Democracy: Labour's mission for the new century*)

Smith's statement was a very clear statement in favour of positive change. Graham Allen said of him:

"In less than two years as party leader, his deep personal commitment to fundamental democratic renewal had shifted Labour from a conservative position on the Constitution to proposals for the most radical reform package ever put forward by the party."

(*Reinventing Democracy*, 1995)

Sadly John Smith was to die before he could realise his dreams of reform but he would surely not be disappointed to see what his party has done since on this issue. After a strong attempt to ditch the referendum from May 1995, the Party Conference supported it, thanks largely to the GMB, and Tony Blair put Smith's promise to hold a referendum on reform for the House of Commons into the 1997 manifesto. Since coming to power in May 1997 the Labour government have presented referendums to the British people which have now promised us a Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and a London Assembly with an elected mayor. Northern Ireland held its referendum at the end of May this year to which the response was convincingly YES to a power-sharing Assembly to be elected this month. All of these will be elected by various PR systems, as will members of the European Parliament in June 1999.

Many people, such as Leo McKinstry, are cynical about why the leadership under Blair have carried out such radical constitutional reformation. In his book, *Fit To Govern?*, he states that:

"Labour's plans to ditch key elements of Britain's traditional parliamentary system stem partly from the desire to appear modern and in touch with fashionable

intellectual thinking, the same spirit that brings us the promise of the laptop on every school desk and the information super-highway running down every street."

The cynic's argument is that it would have been very hard for Blair to go back on Smith's promises to hold the referendum as he would have risked splitting the party at a time when he could not afford to lose the support of either side. It would have shown a split when the party wanted to focus attention on the split in the Conservative party on the issue of Europe. Many believe that Blair was not supportive of the referendum in the hope of change but that it was a way of pleasing everyone at a time when the formation of New Labour was causing enough upset amongst certain party supporters.

The historical stop-go pressure for reform within the Party is surely good evidence for cynics that electoral reform is a matter of pragmatism rather than principle for the leadership. As Robin Cook said, electoral reform has an element of Catch 22 about it which means that those who are in a position to make change no longer need to as they are already in power. However, there is nothing to say that principle and pragmatism cannot go hand in hand. Certainly Blair's vocabulary of 'citizenship', 'pluralism' and 'consensus' fit very well together with the kind of politics which would be created under a PR system.

This optimistic view, however, is not one shared by Peter Kellner. It is his belief that; "In Politics, when principle collides with self-interest, principle tends to retreat with a bloody nose." In an article he wrote for the journal of electoral record and comment, *Representation* (Volume 33, Number 2), he argues that what Labour does in government and indeed ever has done has been in its own 'self-interest'. He reminds us that although Blair committed himself to a referendum in June 1994, he has since rarely made reference to the issue although he concedes "despite a formal reaffirmation of the referendum policy by Labour's annual conference in 1994."

However, this article by Kellner was written in 1995 and although he remains cynical, we have seen many changes in between. Britain is now governed by a Labour government with a massive majority delivered to them by the FPTP electoral system. Despite this they have already shaken up Parliament by the hugely significant changes which have been made. Indeed, although Blair is 'not yet persuaded by PR' and although PR for Westminster has come so close in the past yet failed, this is not to say that it will not happen. Perhaps it is not even a matter of whether Blair comes out for

reform as it is the referendum which will decide. Even if Blair is sitting on the fence on this issue, so as not to become unpopular, then what is to say that if the 'Yes' campaign is impressive enough to gain a substantial amount of public support that Blair will not become persuaded.

In a recent interview with Stephen Twigg MP, one of the new Labour intake, famous for taking Michael Portillo's 'safe' Conservative seat and Chair of LCER, he stated that it was his opinion that Blair would come out either for or against reform:

"Obviously it's a theoretical possibility that he could stay on the middle ground, I think it would look very peculiar for a Prime Minister to call a referendum which in practice is effectively what he would be doing but say that he doesn't have a view one way or the other on how people should vote, I don't think that would be a tenable option for him."

When I asked if he thought Blair would back the recommendations of the Jenkins Commission he replied that he was:

"Cautiously optimistic that if Roy Jenkins can come up with a workable scheme then that scheme will get the backing of Tony Blair. As to what difference that makes, I think unless a lot changes between now and the referendum, it would be a major asset to have Tony Blair on side and a major problem not to and I think it would be foolish to deny that."

This was not, however, the opinion of another of my interviewees, Professor Iain McLean of Nuffield College, Oxford whose academic speciality is electoral systems. To the same question of whether he thought Blair would back Jenkins' system he replied:

"I think he will neither back it nor not back it. He'll stand off and say it's up to the public. I think he'll ostentatiously not take sides."

When I asked if he thought this would be a tenable option for Blair he responded by saying that even though the public might expect him to come down on one side it wouldn't be necessary for him to do so because of his reason for holding the referendum:

"He's doing this as part of his reaching out to the Lib Dems and I think that extends to a point in the Jenkins Commission, it doesn't extend necessarily to backing a change because there are so many people in the Labour Party who object to that that he would

lose credibility unnecessarily with those people."

Iain McLean did, however, concede; "That's my reading but I may be wrong."

## Chapter Three

### One Year On

History seems to repeat a pattern where just as all hope of change seems futile, a period of momentous change springs up. As we move into the new millennium it seems that this period is once again upon us. After years of what seemed like stagnation 1997 and 98 have seen some historic changes. What is more, the package is not yet complete. For the first time since 1265 Britain has got the chance of a real change in the way members are elected to the House of Commons and consequently a change in its political culture.

Whenever change has been on the cards in the past vested interest has always got in the way. John Smith seems to have understood this as his proposal of referendums to let the people decide appear to stem from his belief that the choice of voting system for the Commons was too important to be left up to politicians with a vested interest in the present system. In conversation with Andrew Marr of *The Independent*, 29/7/93, Smith said:

"People elected under system A are not the people to decide whether it should be system A or system B."

Whatever his reasons, Blair has fully taken on board Smith's agenda to realise change. It is difficult to judge where exactly Blair himself stands on the issue of electoral reform. This is partly due to the fact that he is the Party's front man and as such cannot freely express his own opinion. Also because of the nature of FPTP, he must target his policies to mainly middle class floating voters in the marginal constituencies without whom he could not have become Prime Minister and they may be the ones who didn't want reform. Although polls done for the Economist in the run up to the election showed that former Conservatives intending to switch were more likely to favour reform.

If Blair is, as he seems to be, keen to stay popular with the many and not the few then he may well not come down on either side of the debate of reform. Perhaps he is wants to know what the many wish and will vote for before he makes up his mind. Blair has only said that he is not yet 'persuaded' of the case for reform which leaves him open to come down on the side of pragmatism

at a later date. The referendum will surely be crucial as if the outcome favours reform, he will find it very difficult to ignore the people's decision.

The last year and a half have clearly showed that the country is in the mood for change, although arguably this does not necessarily mean for the House of Commons. We have seen change in Scotland, Wales and Ireland but must consider the strong sense of nationalism which played a part in these outcomes. However, we have also seen change for England in the form of a successful referendum for an elected Mayor and Assembly for London. Tony Wright MP wrote in an article in *Representation*:

"Labour has travelled a long way in a short time on the whole constitutional agenda. Nobody should underestimate the significance of this for British politics."

Although he wrote this in 1995 it still seems highly relevant today. What we should not underestimate now is the effect that all the changes that have already taken place will have on people's views for change in the future. Many people are cautious about change, especially for the House of Commons, because what they have is all they have ever known. However, it seems likely that this sense of caution will have been lessened by the avalanche of change we have recently witnessed. In addition it seems less likely that the system for the House of Commons can stay the same when everything around it, even elections for Europe, have changed.

Although Tony Blair has not, at least publicly, formed an opinion about PR for Westminster, he at least appears to be taking the issue seriously. On 1 December 1997, the Labour Party announced the setting up of an Independent Commission on the Voting System. This was welcomed with open arms by reformers. Mary Southcott, the Parliamentary and Political Officer of LCER said of it:

"The long awaited start to the process of appraising and maybe changing our voting system has arrived."

*(Commission on People's Choice, 1998)*

Lord Jenkins was appointed as Chair of the Commission by Tony Blair. The other four Commissioners are Lord (Bob) Alexander, Sir John Chilcot, Joyce Gould and David Lipsey. Blair "tasked" Jenkins with considering and recommending an alternative to the present system for Parliamentary elections to be put before the people in the Government's referendum. The Commission, which began its work in January this year, has been asked to report within twelve months. There have already been eight plus one, in Crawley organised by the Voting Reform Group (VRG), hearings with the final one to be held in London in on 1 July. They have also visited New Zealand, Germany and Ireland because of the PR systems they use. However, these have not been very well publicised so much of the general public will not even be aware that they are taking place. There is no documentation of Green Paper consultation as took place on London government, only individual responses which can be ignored. According to the LCER Strategy Meeting, the audiences tended to be those who had already clearly made up their minds and were more concerned about getting certain systems than the political change that would follow. The Commission is free to consider and recommend any appropriate system or combination of systems but it was asked to:

"observe the requirement for broad proportionality, the need for stable government, an extension of voter choice and the maintenance of a link between hon. Members and geographical constituencies."

(cited in Southcott's; *Commission on people's choice*)

The setting up of the Jenkins Commission was due largely to the Joint Consultative Committee on Constitutional Reform, set up to look at the broader picture of reform, which produced its final report in March 1997. Chaired by Robin Cook and Bob Maclennan, with the blessing of both Tony Blair and Paddy Ashdown, one of their conclusions was that:

"A commission on voting systems for the Westminster Parliament should be appointed early in the next parliament to recommend the appropriate proportional alternative to the first past the post system. Among the factors to be considered by the commission would be the likelihood that the system proposed would command broad consensus among proponents of proportional representation. The commission would be asked to report within twelve months of its establishment".

(Report of the Joint Consultative Committee On Constitutional Reform)

At the MSF Union's conference in June 1998, the Labour Party was asked to come up with a FPTP supporter to speak at a fringe meeting on electoral reform against pro-PR speaker Stephen Twigg MP. Having failed to get Philip Norton, they asked Nevil Johnson to speak. Both are arch Conservatives, and it seems strange that they couldn't find someone Labour.

In the submission to the Jenkins Commission by Nevil Johnson of the *Centre For Policy Studies* (CPS), he wrote that:

“PR would obscure the answer to a vital question: who can I blame when things go wrong?”  
(*Electoral Reform: The Risks of Unintended Consequences*)

It is precisely because of the “blame culture” of FPTP politics that many people favour electoral reform which reformers believe offers responsive and interactive government. This is the same sort of mentality that means political parties always have to disagree with the oppositions arguments even when they would have said or done the same were they in their position.

There has been a fair amount of speculation over which system Jenkins might come out for. According to LCER literature many Labour reformers' preferred system is the Additional Member System (AMS) with a Mixed Member System (MMS), with less additional members and only slightly larger than present constituencies, being something which many of them would live with.

Lord Jenkins is reported to be a close personal friend of Tony Blair's and although or maybe because Jenkins himself is a Liberal Democrat this has caused some mistrust from the Opposition. A cross-party group of FPTPers headed by Lord Parkinson have accused Blair of engaging in "a grubby exercise to gerrymander our constitution". He said the commission was "a rigged body with a rigged remit - with the sole purpose of coming up with a rigged voting system to keep Labour in power at any cost" (Source: *Daily Telegraph*, 22/5/98).

Labour surely has not forgotten what it was like to be in opposition and have no power while everything changed around them against their will. They must remember this when the system is

chosen, and surely Jenkins will especially as a Liberal Democrat, that choosing a voting system which lets Labour run away with power means that when they become unpopular again in the future, they will have no-one to blame but themselves.

In Linton and Southcott's forthcoming book, Robin Cook says that he looks back on having written what he said in a previous booklet by the same authors about "seizing the opportunity to change the electoral system" when Labour got into power "with pleasure and some pride". Pleasure because of Labour's election victory in 1997 and pride because the Labour Government is "proving the cynics wrong".

## Chapter Four

### Positions within the Labour Party

There are more pressure groups within the Labour Party than in any other party. This is likely to be because the party was built out of many factions. The Party is therefore split on many issues, including electoral reform. Support for electoral reform though cuts across some of the traditional divides within the party. Pressure groups within parties are likely to be much more radical than the party core. G.R Taylor appears to believe that elected officials are a lot less radical in their aims and ideas than party activists when he talked of the;

"radical nature of activists untempered by the experience and wisdom engendered by office." *(Labour's Renewal? - The Policy Review and Beyond)*

Thus pressure groups will be radical in their aims because they originate from unelected party activists. This is not true, however, of LCER whose membership includes a large number of the elected Labour Party - MPs, MEPs and Councillors - as well as ordinary members.

The Labour Party has since the 1925 been unsympathetic to the idea of electoral reform. This explains why a large and very influential organisation in favour of reform has been developed within its ranks. The Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform (LCER) is the largest single-issue membership organisation within the Labour Party. In the eighteen years since it was established it has grown from a small group with little support from the party membership or core, into a mainstream pressure group commanding widespread and highly regarded support. After the Labour Party managed to gain power under FPTP it was thought by many that the pressure to change the system would die out. In fact it seems that for activists the opposite is true and there are double the number of MP sponsors. There is now a real chance for reform as Labour in government now has the power to legislate. Kogan and Kogan note that Labour Party reform groups have often succeeded in radically changing party policy. *(The Battle for the Labour Party, 1982 - cited in Whiteley, The Labour Party In Crisis)*.

LCER works with party members, including elected members, and trade unions to try to change the

voting system for the Commons from FPTP to an alternative, fairer system. The campaign now has 120 Labour MP sponsors including such people as the Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook and the Minister for Northern Ireland, Marjorie Mowlam. They also have over 2,000 party members. They are an extremely well organised group that has had a large amount of success, especially during the last ten years. LCER produces regular newsletters, conference and fringe literature, articles, model resolutions and questionnaires. In 1993 two active members wrote a booklet entitled *Labour's Road to Electoral Reform: What's wrong with first-past-the-post?* of which an updated version, *Making Votes Count*, is published next month. This literature is not only of vital importance for its influence within the party but also to the movement of electoral reform as a whole. As well as politicians, academics and journalists are involved with the group which brings a great deal of credibility to what they write, in a similar way that involvement of the Foreign Secretary adds to their image. The campaign are able to attract a greater number of reformers to their membership as, unlike other pressure groups for electoral reform, they are individually a Labour Party organisation and they do not, as a whole, support one single system as they see the reasons for wanting reform as more than about systems. They do not see changing the electoral system as like waving a magic wand and agree that no system is perfect. They believe that changing the system will help to change political culture and make British politics more democratic. Mary Southcott, LCER's Parliamentary and Political Officer, puts it this way:

“If electoral reformers are to win the voting referendum in 1999 or 2000, then the debate has to be about the future for our democracy, not about the mechanism we use to elect MPs.”

*(The Democratic Revolution, New Times)*

The Labour Party was born out of a combination of many different factions who didn't fully agree with each other. Paul Whitely notes that:

“There are revolutionaries, evolutionaries, and for that matter non-socialists in the party, and faction fighting between them is nothing new.” *(The Labour Party In Crisis)*

It is not surprising, therefore, that those people within the party who want electoral reform believe so for very different reasons. For a start, Labour reformers are split between those who want reform but not for the House of Commons and those who believe that you can't change everything else, i.e. Blair's reforms so far, and yet leave the voting system for the Commons unreformed. It is

extremely hard to define the different positions that Labour supporters take on this issue because of their complex reasons for that stance. The electoral reform campaign has found a way of working the new politics, they may disagree on everything else but they all agree that FPTP has to go for the House of Commons. The fact that people can work together on electoral reform despite their differences suggests that it is not a fantasy that politicians could, if necessary, work together in government. Of course politicians will want to protect their own self-interest but this shouldn't be at the expense of the UK citizens that put them there.

Aside from strict supporters of the status quo, there are about four basic positions on electoral reform within the Labour Party. The first are those who want to create another party of the left. Peter Kellner, at the Commons meeting on 9 June, suggested that under a PR system there would probably be a change in party structures with possibly a Labour centre party, left Liberal Democrat, far left Labour and two Conservative parties, one in favour of union with Europe and the other against. This faction favour PR as a means of defining another party. For similar reasons, there are also people, such as Calum MacDonald and Judith Church MP, who support PR because they want to make one party out of the Liberal Democrats and Labour, a process known as LibLabery. There are some people who suspect that this is what Blair wants. Iain McLean seemed to suggest this when he talked of Labour "reaching out to the Lib Dems".

A part of the Labour Party who still support the status quo and who might be called tribalist left wingers are anti-PR because they see it as a way of defining themselves as not being Liberal Democrats. This has strangely remained the stance of many despite the fact that Liberal Democrat positions, as in the lone parent family vote last year, are often to the left of Labour.

The faction which tends to connect with the LCER, although not exclusively, is the consensus seeking pluralists who want to use PR to change the way politics is conducted and to make it more inclusive and democratic. Some of this is what was called the soft Left and the Labour Coordinating Committee. Emma Taggart, the former secretary of Labour Students, says that all the officers of Labour Students are pro-reform "because they see the problem of young people's disconnection with politics". Many women involved in Labour politics agree, with all past Women's Shadow Ministers, except Joan Lester and Jo Richardson, being pro-reform. Clare Short, Mo Mowlam, Tessa Jowell and Janet Anderson are all LCER sponsors.

Finally there are a group who are not really in any camp. These people, such as Jack Straw and Peter Mandelson, are what might be called the intelligent FPTPers. They realise that the present system is unsustainable and indefensible. They are the sort of people who could live with a change to either AV or SV, neither of which are proportional systems, as they see them as the most minimalist change. Interestingly, SV was the system recommended by the Plant Commission in 1993 and there have been suggestions that AV might be proposed by the sitting Jenkins Commission. But equally these have been rejected from other quarters. Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats are projected to do well under this system.

An extensive survey carried out after the 1997 election found that under AV Labour would have gained an even bigger majority; it would have won 436 seats rather than the 419 that resulted in a landslide. It would have done equally well under SV with again 436 seats. Under a strictly proportional system it would have won 285 (Dunleavy et al., *Making Votes Count*, Democratic Audit, 1997: cited in Norton, P., *Choosing between winning 436 seats or only 285*). After quoting this, Philip Norton then goes on to suggest that:

“The attraction is clear; promote AV as a fairer system (each MP being elected by the majority of voters in the seat) and give the party an even greater opportunity to benefit from the electoral system than is possible under the existing arrangements.”

The trade union element of the party also has very mixed views on this issue. There are some who are completely opposed to any form of PR as they believe it will give power to the Liberals and to fascist parties such as the BNP, even though this can happen under the present system too. Conference debates are hindered by their adversarial nature but there are still many trade unionists who have converted to favouring electoral reform. Tony Blair said of the Unions that Labour should have a relationship with them which is about “fairness not favours”. The reaction of Bill Morris to this was to see how well the Unions could benefit from a change in the electoral system. Under FPTP, Labour is being forced to target voters who have traditionally not belonged to the party. Meanwhile, those who have, i.e. the working man (sic), are not being given the support they might have expected to receive under a Labour government. The Government’s attitude to the

Unions is unlikely to change as they cannot afford to upset the switchers and floating voters and when they are in opposition they are powerless to legislate. Electoral reform is seen by trade union supporters as a way to break this pattern and give the Unions a voice. At this year's MSF Conference in Bournemouth, John Volleamere moved a motion calling for research into PR and electoral reform with the aim of producing a submission to the Voting Commission and to open debate within the union. He believed there were a number of archaic practices that needed changing. He said:

“The motion does not mean Conference would take a position for or against PR, but it would develop debate within the union. It's right MSF should be involved in such an historic event”. (MSF Report, Conference, Day two)

These splits in party opinion on electoral reform are a possible explanation of why Blair continued to support the idea of a referendum after John Smith's death. It was a way to keep the different factions quiet. By taking the decision out of all their individual hands he could keep the problem at bay and prevent the party from appearing split - which it is. A less cynical reading would be that the referendum is part of a consensus process and that Blair, like Smith, believes the issue is not something which should be judged solely by MPs with a vested interest. Tony Blair appears very keen to keep the public on-side so he needs to be careful about his stance on an issue which provokes strong opinions. He has said that he is as yet "unpersuaded" of the need for reform but this does not mean he is firmly against and neither does it mean that he won't still change his mind.

It seems that the promise of a referendum and the Jenkins Commission has been welcomed by those within the party who do not seek change. Jack Straw who admitted: “The whole House will know that I have not been exactly a shrinking violet when it comes to electoral systems.” opposed the Conservative motion, proposing instead that this House;

“congratulates the Government on its constitutional reform programme; welcomes the creation of the Independent Commission on the Voting System and its remit; and supports the commitment of the Government to consult the people of the United Kingdom by a referendum on the appropriate electoral system to be used to elect this House”. (Hansard, 2/6/98)

Although the Labour leadership have still not come out in favour of reform, the signs are not negative. It is reassuring to reformers that the Government's amendment still supports the position to let the people decide because of the fears that they might ditch the referendum and go for AV. Considering the size of Labour's majority, it would have been logical to assume that support for reform from within the ranks would have been more low-key. In the Commons debate, many of the speakers from the Government benches were LCER sponsors. Many of these are members of the new intake and credit must be given to the campaign for the work it did in the run-up to the election to recruit these members. An LCER questionnaire carried out since the election asked the question of whether the election had altered their views on electoral reform. The response from the majority was to leave the space blank presumably because they still believed the same of FPTP even though this time, for many, their party had benefited. A Green said; "If PR would have meant slightly fewer votes for Labour, it wouldn't have mattered." It seems that the unrelenting work of LCER coupled with the feelings which result from 18 years of one-party and a strong desire by many never again to experience such "elective dictatorship" have created an atmosphere in which the Catch 22 of electoral reform may be broken. Linton and Southcott say that as the party of government: "Labour can now view electoral reform through the prism of success." In the foreword to their book, Robin Cook suggests that Labour's victory has altered the fact that FPTP is not working:

"Nothing has happened in 1997 to undermine that judgement, only to make it more likely that change will happen". (*Making Votes Count*)

## Chapter Five

### Line-Up Outside the Labour Party

Although they are still split, positions on electoral reform outside the Labour Party are more predictable. It is generally thought, as opinion poll evidence suggests, that Liberal Democrat supporters are in favour of reform and Conservatives are opposed. Material in Seyd and Whiteley's *True Blues*, 1994, showed that the greatest supporters of FPTP were Tory Party members living in the South East, where 106 out of 109 MPs were Tory.

Some Tories seem to want a referendum between FPTP and FPTP. However, this is not to say that all Conservatives are opposed to the referendum. Many are supportive as they see it as a way of affirming support for the status quo and getting rid of the suggestion of PR for at least a lifetime. It is certainly true that the media coverage of opinions about the proposed referendum and the Jenkins Commission have shown rejoicing from the former and indignation from certain ranks of the latter. Historically, the Conservatives have never been out of power for long enough for them to really consider PR as beneficial to them, except Lord Hailsham who talked to David Dimbleby of FPTP creating "elective dictatorship" and CAER in the 1970s. However, the 1997 election caused a Conservative eclipse in both Scotland and Wales and this has provoked radical thinking from certain Tories in these countries. A certain group of Conservatives in Scotland are now advocating a federal solution for the UK (*The New Tory Federalists*, J. Lloyd). In the history of their parties, the Liberals/Liberal Democrats and Labour have experienced unrepresentative representation in the Commons. Jack Straw observed that:

"Our [Labour's] stance in the early years of the century was in marked contrast to that of the Liberal party, which was then one of the big two players. The Liberal party opposed moving from the first-past-the-post system when the issue was first considered by a Speaker's conference at the end of the great war. It is a matter of record, of which we should take account, that it was only when the Liberal party became the third party that it began to look on proportional representation with rather more favour than it had during its time in government - while my party was moving in the opposite direction."

*(Hansard, 2/6/98)*

The reforms and events which have taken place since Labour took office in May last year have sent a wave of discomfort through the Conservative Party. This obvious discomfort was highlighted by a Conservative led debate held in the House of Commons on 2 June 1998. This also showed the deep mistrust of the Opposition as to Labour's motives for reform. In the debate, Mr Ancram showed a degree of paranoia because he had misunderstood what was written in some LCER literature. He said that;

“Before the election the Labour Campaign Newsletter (\*) stated;

“So what are the real politik reasons for electoral reform?”

The answer was we can abolish right wing Tory Government forever”.

In private conversation with Mary Southcott who wrote the article, (\* It was actually LCER literature) she said that he had misunderstood - “We didn't mean we wanted to abolish Conservative governments forever but right wing Tory governments like Tebitt and Thatcher's.”

The Opposition moved that the House “affirms the strength and fairness of Britain's current electoral system” and urged that the Government change the remit of the Commission on the Voting System as it believes that if it did, “the Commission would recommend the status quo”. Michael Ancram, the member for Devizes, went on to say;

“We have chosen to debate Britain's electoral system because we believe that it is being deliberately and systematically attacked and undermined. What makes this debate all the more urgent is the fact that this demolition is happening right now, under the guise of an independent review, which will report in the autumn. We face a process that is clearly aimed at changing the present system not on the balance of any argument that it is right to do so, but because wider political motives are motivating such change. It is a cynical attempt to play politics with people's votes dressed up as an intellectual and even-handed exercise, which it simply is not.”

*(Hansard, 2/6/98)*

He continued by disclosing his mistrust of the “so called independent commission” as Jenkins is a known advocate of electoral reform and the other members are all supporters. He stated his belief that;

“Far from being independent, the whole exercise is pointing firmly in one direction away from the first-past-the-post system, which has served this country so well and for so long.”

Peter Riddell suggested that “the Tories are right to be worried” about the Commission as;

“any shift away from first past the post could have a far greater impact in reshaping the British political system than the rest of the Government’s constitutional reform programme put together. And it could be to the Tories’ lasting disadvantage.” (Riddell, *The Times*, 22/5/98)

After a mostly true blue twentieth century and the threat of change meaning that Conservatives, or any other party, can never again reign supreme, it seems that Michael Ancram’s speech smacks of self-interest.

The debate followed a clear protestation from Lord Parkinson in his Tory submission to the Jenkins Commission in which he voiced strong concern that Labour was attempting to change the electoral system to; “keep Labour in power at any cost”. (*Daily Telegraph*, 22/5/98) Parkinson, the Tory chairman, has set up a high-level party committee to plan the Conservative campaign against reform. They plan to team up with supporters of FPTP from the Government benches. Tim Collins MP has been appointed to take charge of liaison and has organised meetings with Labour MPs. Amongst these will be Stuart Bell, chair of the party’s First Past The Post group, and Fraser Kemp who, until 1996, was Labour’s general election co-ordinator. Derek Fatchet, who was the first chair of the group, is now a Minister in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. FPTP supporters in both parties have decided to run independent campaigns until the Jenkins Commission reports but then pool their resources and work together in a cross-party campaign against reform. Supporters of FPTP are obviously concerned that the Yes vote for change in the referendum may be won. If they

are not they would surely not be organising themselves to defend and maintain the status quo.

However, as Riddell points out, for all Lord Parkinson's "huffing and puffing" about a rigged remit, the Tories are not really part of the debate. The Jenkins Commission was set up to honour a promise made by the Labour leadership to the Liberal Democrats before the general election. Although academics and journalists like to see this as a way of keeping the Liberal Democrats sweet but originally it was a promise by John Smith to Labour's own reformers. It was never intended to be a detached inquiry into the voting system. It was asked to come up with a "broadly proportional" alternative to FPTP that could be sold both to Labour reformers and the Lib Dems and eventually to the general public in the referendum.

The Commission on the Voting System has not, however, been unwelcome by all outside the Labour Party. To many it shows great commitment by the Labour Party to look into the possibility of an alternative, and more proportional, electoral system which would be suitable for the House of Commons. There are cross-party and non-party groups which campaign to change the electoral system for the Commons. However, on June 2 this year, the first all-party campaign to change the electoral system was launched. Members of the group, *Make Votes Count* (MVC), include supporters of the Labour, Liberal Democrat, Green, Scottish Nationalist, Plaid Cymru and Conservative parties. The launch of their *campaign to give politics back to the people* followed the findings of a NOP, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, that 72 per cent of people want a PR system. Their Press Release pack contained a document which uses figures from the 1997 general election to illustrate "ten reasons why first-past-the-post is failing us". A copy of this is given as Appendix 3. Kate O'Rourke, chair of the campaign, said that;

"British politics is staring into an abyss of voter alienation and apathy.

The status quo, that wastes millions of votes, denies choice".

Having got rid of the Conservative government after 18 years has not changed her mind about FPTP;

"Changing the people at the top was never going to be enough to modernise British politics. Now we have to modernise the very system itself".

The Press Release which came out on the morning of the day of the launch said that the current system is not working, people are not voting and even when they do their votes are wasted and don't count. They expressed their delight at the promised referendum but also their fears that the conservatives on both sides, the FPTPers, will stamp out the hope for popular reform. They affirm that the task for MVC is "to ensure that the people's voice is heard." They finish by stating that;

"MVC is working with people throughout Britain, inside and outside politics, to change the political system. It will be a crusade for popular change - based on the realisation that a modern Britain can only only be built on a modern political system."

*(Make Votes Count, Press Release)*

As the MVC campaign has cross party support, including some Conservatives, and the FPTP campaign will link conservative Labour supporters with Tories, it may well be that when it comes to the referendum, some people will prefer to side with the Yes vote for change as their least favourite politicians are the conservative Conservatives.

## Chapter Six

### Speculations and Scenarios

In recent months there have been different interpretations of the events which have taken place around the issue of electoral reform. Many people are concentrating on the two main reasons why people are opposed to PR systems, the fear of weak coalition governments and the loss of the MP-constituency link. There have been rumours that FPTP could only be replaced by AV as it would not be possible to introduce any system which requires boundary changes, such as AMS, because they could not be implemented until after the next general election. However, it has been suggested that it would be possible to introduce AVplus, a hybrid system of AV and AMS, in two stages. AV would be used for the next general election and the use of top ups from AMS implemented once the new boundaries had been drawn. Both AV and AVplus would maintain the constituency link but AV is not a proportional system and if proposed, on its own, may mean that many reformers will stay in bed for the referendum campaign.

The Young Fabian, Greg Rosen, (*AV your cake and eat it, Anticipations*,) argues that Labour's manifesto allows the introduction of AV for elections to Westminster without a referendum. He believes that Blair will not be able to vote No in his own referendum and suggests that he might be wise to forget about his promise of a "broadly proportional system" and come down in favour of AV as the alternative to FPTP in the referendum. He believes that for those in favour of PR, AV has no disadvantages that don't exist under FPTP, it would prevent minority Tory governments behaving like majorities and would also promote a more mature and consensual politics. However, his argument that "this is surely a nettle to be grasped" does not stand up very well. He ignores the fact the reformers have been waiting and campaigning for a long time to get to this stage and it is unlikely that they will be happy with being fobbed off by a system which still bears no relationship to the votes cast. If AV can give even larger majorities to the leading party as it did in 1997 and in Australia the first preference party is often not elected to government. If AV is recommended, it is likely that the support for FPTP will be strong, weak for AV and there will be a low turnout caused by the lack of interest in the offering of minimalist change. The intelligent FPTPers will get their way whichever system wins.

Many of the non-party campaigns for reform, such as Charter 88 and the *Electoral Reform Society* (ERS), support PR systems. The ERS are known to support STV and some say they will not support anything else. But opinion is divided and some indicate that they may support another system as long as it is proportional. LCER will support any system which is propotional as an alternative to FPTP. Since the Jenkins Commission have been asked to come up with a “broadly proportional system”, it seems likely that LCER will be satisfied, unless of course their remit is changed or the Government decides not to back the recommended system.

No electoral system will please everyone. As Philip Norton points out, the only truly proportional system is a national list system, which no-one is advocating (*PollOpinion, Parliamentary Review*, November 1996). Many people are not in favour of proportional systems because of the results in Italy and Germany. The latest election in East Germany was won by the Faschist party. This is less likely under FPTP, but at least the problem will have to be confronted under PR instead of ignored as it is in this country.

In response to peoples fears of coalition government, Martin Linton MP made a submission to the Jenkins Commission suggesting a system he has devised which would avoid this aspect of PR. This system also takes account of the fact that when we vote in general elctions we are trying to exercrise three choices through a single vote. He suggests that;

“it is possible to devise a voting system that allows the voter to choose MP, party and government at the same time”. (*Voting For A Government*)

The Gould, Greenberg, Carvill opinion poll carried out with NOP surprisingly shows support for coalition government but that is not reflected in parties which can win on their own. This is shown graphically in Appendix 1. They also have good news for reformers when the referendum happens. The poll on behalf of the ex-Electoral Reform Coalition, MVC, was carried out between the 13-19 May and surveyed 1000 adults at random nationwide. The results not only show that three-quarters of the sample want reform but that, because it was carried out when Labour are high in the polls, it gives evidence without a pre-election or mid-term taint. Even when the country has the government that it supposedly wanted and voted for, the majority of those asked want a change in

the way politics is done and a PR system for Westminster. The NOP shows the percentage of people who demand an improvement in the system which governs Britain is as high as 98 per cent. Appendixes 4,5,6 & 7 give graphical illustrations of the mood of the public about the way politics is conducted and on change. Appendix 8 gives a postcard which shows the voter apathy that the Conservatives and Labour were as bad as each other existed in the 1997 election despite their landslide majority. Appendix 9 is a copy of the executive Summary of the May 1998 NOP Opinion Poll.

Although some people, such as Rosen, are sceptical of whether Blair will keep his promise on the referendum, many reformers believe that to break it would not be a tenable option as the public would never let him get away with it. Hugo Young said about the attempt to ditch the referendum in 1995 that;

“It will be an ominous disgrace, the worst kind of reactionary power-hunger, if Blair drops the promise of a referendum on electoral reform.”

*(The Guardian, 27/7/95, cited in LCER’s 1995 Conference Briefing)*

Going back to the arguments of Mill and Badgehot, it is clear that much of the resistance to changing the electoral system is not to do with MPs vested interest, but fear of the unknown. The argument’s remain the same and some will have changed their minds through experience others, having not suffered or seen their party suffer, will not have moved. Although the NOP shows strong support for change the campaign to keep the status quo will be hard fought. The result of the referendum, presuming that the sceptics such as Rosen are wrong, will be determined to a large extent by funding and education. If it is left up to reformers to find money for the Yes campaign they are likely to have less of an impact than the opposition as the people protected by the system surrounding FPTP are in a higher income bracket, so will have more to contribute. Funding from the government will be required if the contest is going to be a fair one. Many people will not understand or have heard the arguments and education on both sides will be paramount in this historic once in a lifetime vote.

Looking at the options; if Jenkins supports AV under pressure, then it could be in place by the next election either with or without a referendum.

If the Commission recommends AVplus, this could be ignored by the Government who might choose to replace it and/or the referendum by AV on its own.

It could be put to the people in a referendum to be phased in over two elections.

Tony Blair could back AVplus as a modernising exercise to create pluralism and consensus seeking politics.

Tony Blair could state his preference for a majoritarian system and risk the accusations of vested interest of MPs to save not only their seats but Labour seats. This would go against what he has preached as it would be in the interests of the few and not the many. This is what was suggested by *The Observer* article *Cabinet plot to stop PR* in which Patrick Wintour said that the Jenkins Commission is expected to recommend AVplus but that; “some Labour MPs are holding private talks with Tories to block it”.

Lord Jenkins is writing the last chapter of his autobiography and so will probably want to be able to say that he chaired the commission which recommended the alternative to FPTP for the referendum. Donald Macintyre, ‘On the road with Roy Jenkins’, says that the five members of the Commission are “highly distinguished” and “worldly”. Therefore “they will have no interest in adding to the long list of intellectually fertile, but utterly ignored, reports on the British political system”. He suggests that “they will therefore want to recommend something that has a reasonable chance - at the very least in part - of being embraced by the Prime Minister” (*Will Blair go all the way on electoral reform?, The Independent*)

## Conclusion

### Will It Happen ?

To the question of whether there will be a new voting system in place for election to the House of Commons in time for the next general election, the short answer is that no-one knows. Academics and Journalists views are usually synical and reformers literature is often biased as both are looking events and providing evidence from certain perspectives. It is therefore difficult to distinguish the fact from fiction and speculation from the truth. On the one hand it seems that the fact we are witnessing such a significant amount of change in political systems is a positive sign but then again reform of the House of Commons would mean interfering with a system which is held as sacred to many. It would mean chopping up power and destroying the power of our hierarchical system. In an article by Caroline Georghiou, she found that people were interested in power, participation and even PR but not in politics. She wrote;

“Politics needs to be opened up if it is to survive into the next century. As it is it remains a bastion of those who have access to information and a fortress to those without”.  
(*To be or not to be - the P question, New Times*)

The fact that hearings of the Commission on the Voting System were mostly attended by ‘system spotters’ is evidence to suggest that she is right. Robin Cook (*Making Votes Count*) says that the success of the referendum will depend largely on the ability of the Yes campaign to educate people and convince them that the benefits of PR outway any fears they have about change and that the results on politics of the alternative will be better than the FPTP system. Georghiou adds that ;

“We have to make the arguments for a change open to everybody, not simply so they say yes in the referendum but because they have made their own informed decision”.

All sorts of suggestions and interpretations have been made about Labour’s plans, actions and motives. Some people believe that Blair may still drop the referendum for AV which the government would have no problem pushing through. Philip Norton argues that the Labour Party

are likely to make the pragmatic choice faced with the option of choosing between winning 436 votes under AV or only 285 under a PR system (*Parliamentary Review*, January 1998). It is true that the referendum pledge was made before the election partly, some say as a means of courting Liberal Democrat support, and it is still possible that he could back down on his promise. But it is also thought that he wouldn't have set up the Cook/McLennan report, the Commission on the Voting System and, according to LCER, twisted arms in the unions in 1995 to support the referendum, to then decide not to hold it after all. Others think it would not be a tenable option because of the support and general trust he would lose if he ditched it. Even a member of the Cabinet, Jack Straw, who would be happy to stay with FPTP said;

“At the last election, the Prime Minister said that he wanted to rebuild the country's faith in Government and politics. Fundamental to that vision was a change not only in what the Government do, but in how they do it. Confidence in our political system has been significantly corroded in recent years. Our challenge is to restore confidence in our democracy, to bring decision-making closer to those who are affected by decisions, and to restore trust in the way in which we are governed. (Hansard, 2/6/98)

This suggests that Blair is keen to be seen as consultative. Even if this is not based on principle, as it appears to be, Blair must know that reformers will not let him get away with practicing something he hasn't preached.

Machiavelli would have foreseen that the electoral reformers were going to have problems as he argued in *The Prince*;

“It should be borne in mind that there is nothing more difficult to handle, more doubtful of success, and more dangerous to carry through than initiating changes in a state's constitution.

The innovator makes enemies of all those who prospered under the old order, and only lukewarm support is forthcoming from those who would prosper under the new. Their support is lukewarm partly from fear of their adversaries, who have the existing laws on their side, and partly because men are generally

incredulous, never really trusting new things unless they have tested them by experience.

In consequence, whenever those who oppose the changes can do so, they attack vigorously, and the defence made by the others is only lukewarm. So both the innovator and his (sic) friends come to grief.”

However, many reformers are now in a position of power as part of the Government and support for electoral reform, after what many feel was 18 years of Tory dictatorship. Appendix 10 shows a doctored billboard which illustrates people’s feelings at that time), from many people is red hot. David Marquand admits that before the election, he feared that Labour’s “reforming zeal might fade away once New Labour bottoms were safely ensconced on the Treasury bench in the House of Commons.” But he now thinks he was wrong and believes that “the implications of the government’s constitutional agenda go further than most commentators have realised” (*The Blair Paradox, Prospect*). Marquand goes on to say that; “the process of constitutional change will almost certainly generate a dynamic of its own, carrying the transformation further than its authors intended or expected”. This suggests that Labour only made the changes for reasons of self-interest but that things went too far. However, Chris Rennard, a Liberal Democrat, believes that Blair is cleverer than this. He also believes that Blair will not back down on the referendum promise because; “he’s not a man who wants to make himself look ridiculous”.

The arguments in favour of reform are strong. The House of Commons debate clearly showed that the reformers always had good arguments in opposition to what was said by supporters of the status quo, whereas they were defensive, with their constant remarks that the reformers weren’t listening when they clearly were. Reformers still remember clearly when Labour was taught a lesson about ‘elective dictatorship’ and the interview by David Frost with Margaret Thatcher in June 1995 when she explained why the Tories could not afford to lose the general election. She said;

“that’s crazy - if you went into opposition you may not get back for many years.

They might change the electoral system”.

(*Linton and Southcott*)

For the first time in history Labour has a real chance to change our archaic electoral system. They also have a real chance to be both pragmatic, by keeping the referendum, and principled by sticking

by their promises to rebuild trust and make politics in this country more democratic. Robin Cook says that; “There is an unappealing defeatism in the argument that Labour could never secure a majority on its own under electoral reform”. The fault line that will determine the outcome of the referendum is not between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, as so often portrayed. The real division is between politicians who want to keep their own seats and the type of politics to which they have become accustomed and those that know, as Tony Blair seems to indicate, that politics has to change and that democracy is important, between authoritarian and centralising tendencies and those who want to give power to people who elect them and make votes count.

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## Appendix 2

### **LCER Membership:**

<b>1984</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>1985</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>1986</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>1987</b>	<b>200</b>
<b>1988</b>	<b>300</b>
<b>1989</b>	<b>700</b>
<b>1990</b>	<b>1000</b>
<b>1991</b>	<b>1500</b>
<b>1993</b>	<b>1700</b>
<b>1994</b>	<b>2000</b>

**Source: Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform figures.**

## Questions asked at interviews

How far do you think the Labour landslide under first-past-the-post has affected the prospects for electoral reform?

Do you think the reforms, such as the setting up of a Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, have made change for elections to the House of Commons more likely?

In what way do you think change might happen?

What system do you think the Jenkins Commission will come out for?

Do you think Blair will back it?

Do you think the House of Commons will support the recommendation made by the Jenkins Commission or will they try to change it, perhaps to Supplementary or Alternative vote?

How likely do you think it is that change will happen?

Do you think people will support change in the referendum and if so why?

How has your own thinking on this issue changed since the 1997 general election?

## **Note to the examiner**

When I first started writing this dissertation, I found it difficult to find enough information to answer the question convincingly. However, the Jenkins Commission hearings, the debate in the House of Commons and the consequent moves made by both reformers and defenders of the status quo have meant that recently I have been flooded with information on this issue.

I realise that I have exceeded the word count, because of having to incorporate very recent evidence, and wish to suggest that if this is significant you should ignore the chapter on arguments for and against electoral reform. I wrote this, in a lot of detail, because I believe it makes the arguments more clear and although I believe the thesis stands up on its own, it is better read with it.

The chapter on Labour's historical position is padded out because I have backed up what happened which increased the word count before I knew just how much I had to say on the rest of project.

Thank-you for reading this.

E.C.S Georghiou 15/6/98

## **Composite Resolution - 1991 Annual Conference**

This Conference welcomes the Plant Report of the National Executive Working Party on Electoral Reform as evidence that the Labour Party is seriously examining the way that Britain votes for all tiers of the Government. This Report will be used to inform the debate on electoral reform now taking place throughout the Labour movement.

Conference supports the continuing work of the NEC's Working Party as a basis for further discussion and consultation while Labour is in opposition and as an integral part of Labour's promised constitutional and democratic reforms when in Government. We call on the Party to seize every opportunity to publicise and discuss Labour's new openness to electoral reform.