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IS SOCIALISM **DEMOCRACY**

WHY LABOUR MUST SUPPORT ELECTORAL REFORM

Neal Lawson

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We live in a world that for too much of the time, in too many ways, is out of our control. The only way we can exert control is through democracy. It is about time we did it properly.

About the author

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I Introduction

Within a year the country is likely to have a vote on whether the electoral system should be changed. The change on offer isn't the leap to a new politics the country needs through a system of proportional representation (PR) that matches more accurately votes cast to seats won. But make no mistake, the Alternative Vote (AV) is better than the First Past the Post (FPTP) system we currently endure. AV will help change the culture of our politics by making every vote count and therefore challenge the sterile tribalism of British politics. AV would also change the electoral landscape by increasing the number of marginal seats and ending the narrow focus of all political messages to a few swing voters in a few swing seats. And a shift to AV will show that the

'Winning the AV vote is only possible within the broader context of the democratic revolution Britain must undergo if it is to be the more equal and sustainable country we want it to be, a country in which people take as much control as possible over their lives.'

electoral status quo is not an eternal framework for determining who governs and how.

This essay is about the AV referendum and why Labour should make the case for change, but it is about more than that. It is about Labour's attitude to and relationship with democracy and why eventually the Party, if it wants to hang on to any credibility and radical intent, must eventually back a system of PR as the way we, the people, elect our most important representatives. Indeed, winning the AV vote is only possible within the broader context of the democratic revolution Britain must undergo if it is to be the more equal and sustainable country we want it to be, a country in which people take as much control as possible over their lives.

Like it or not, AV versus FPTP is the only offer on the table. It is a choice between a terrible system and a better, but far from perfect system. If reformers lose the argument for limited change

now then the cause of a new politics will be set back decades. This is a vote Labour cannot afford to lose if we want to continue the journey towards a politics that gives the Party a chance to transform our country in the way we know it urgently needs.

But to win the country round we must first win over skeptics in the Party. There are four broad objections to electoral reform in general, and the choice the country will face on AV versus FPTP. The first is that the policy and the idea come from the Liberal Democrats and therefore by definition should be resisted given their treachery in throwing their lot in with the Tories, not least because defeat for the policy might bring the whole Coalition down. But opposition for the sake of it leads us nowhere. If an idea is right it should be supported whoever backs it. And even if it is defeated, Nick Clegg has already made it clear it won't bring the Coalition down – it is not that big a deal to them. Staying in office is. When the country is crying out for a politics it can believe in Labour cannot be on the side of the status quo when the old ways of doing politics have so palpably failed.

Second is the argument that electoral reform leads to weak government. Britain is now in the bizarre position of having a coalition government, which is often the result of PR systems, but delivered under FPTP. The Coalition though is behaving in an incredibly strong and resolute fashion. Reform does not have to lead to weak government.

Third is the claim that electoral reform is never an issue on the doorstep and is therefore just a chattering class affair and of no concern to 'the workers.' Of course the doorstep test is a slippery one. I don't suppose many voters brought up issues like fox hunting, the smoking ban or gay marriage on the doorstep but that didn't stop the very same MPs pushing it through parliament, and good on them for doing so. Real politicians cannot just bend to public opinion, they must also shape it. They must lead and not just follow. Equally I am pretty convinced that MPs would have been confronted with concerns about the Iraq war, the lack of council housing and the privatisation of public services – yet in spite of such doorstep concerns many Labour MPs

pursued all of these unpopular policies and more. People do not bring up the hegemony of neo-liberalism, globalisation and individualisation on the doorstep but these are the causes of their anxious and insecure lives. Should Labour MPs ignore these too? Instead voters complain that their MPs are unaccountable under FPTP and the stock of our political classes has never been lower.

The doorstep issue is really just a smokescreen for the fourth objection to reform, that the current system works in Labour's favour and that to change would risk Labour ever governing again like it did in 1945. The prospect of electoral reform challenges the central operating framework of the Party, which goes something like this: if you elect enough Labour governments enough of the time then they will usher in socialism. Exactly what that socialism is, is never defined. Rather socialism is what Labour governments do when they win control of the state. The shining example of this strategy was the 1945 Labour government, which brought in the welfare state. What we need is more moments like 1945 and FPTP is the electoral system that will deliver it. The 1945 myth still permeates Labour's very fibre. New Labour did move on from Old Labour in many ways – but still clung to the rather elitist myth that change comes from a single party controlling the state and changing the world from the top down – a possibility all predicated on FPTP.

So a change to the electoral system challenges the central operating assumptions of Labour. To accept change, Labour needs to understand that the 1945 myth no longer holds and that electoral reform now offers the prospect of both power and the more equal society the Party wants to see.

All five candidates in the Labour leadership election have said they are in favour of AV, although only Ed Miliband has done so with any real force. None of them have yet expressed support for PR. That is because the challenge of such change is disorientating. But change is both inevitable and desirable. The case for electoral reform is growing strongly just as support for FPTP diminishes. In raw numbers campaigns like Vote for a Change have added thousands to the pro-change databases. Important figures like Jon Cruddas and Roy Hattersley have watched, learnt and made the switch from FPTP to PR. They know that socialism is only compatible with deeper democracy, that greater equality of wealth and income can only be based on greater equality of votes.

The AV referendum is a critical step en route to a more equal future. But Labour will only get the choice right on electoral reform if it understands that change makes a better world more, and not less, likely.

This pamphlet starts by looking at the relationship between socialism and democracy, arguing that democracy is the only tool in the locker the left can use effectively. In the struggle with markets that are too free and states that are too remote it is the collective voice of people that Labour can mobilise to build the good society. It then makes the argument that PR is not just desirable, in that it tends to lead to more equal societies, but is becoming increasingly feasible as the electoral dynamics of our country change. It then examines the consequences of changing to PR for the left. Finally it argues that an active intervention to help ensure a referendum on AV over FPTP is won is now essential.

2 Why democracy is an issue for Labour

No one in the Labour Party is going to support AV, let alone PR, unless they understand the centrality of democracy to the possibility of socialism. This may seem a strange statement. No one in Labour's ranks would claim to be undemocratic or anti democracy. Of course not. But the attachment to any meaningful and radical democracy is now so slim with some comrades that it shades into meaningless. Yes we have a system of representative government in which there is a legal duty for an election once every five years in which everyone has a vote, but whether the reality of this matches up to any meaningful sense of a 'democratic politics' is now in serious dispute.

Not since the 1950s has any party won more than 50% of the popular vote. On two post-war occasions the 'winning' party received fewer votes than the 'losing' party. In 2005 Labour won a majority of 65 seats based on only 36% of those voting. This translates to only 20% of the potential voters. This is because turnout has fallen so dramatically, down from sometimes 80% in the immediate post-war years, hitting 59% in 2005, before recovering slightly in 2010.

Once in government, the notion of strong government hits up against the reality of the media, the world of finance and a lobbying culture of big business that makes the room for democratic manoeuvre slimmer than it has ever been. Internal party democracy has suffered greatly too. Within Labour's ranks candidates are parachuted into safe seats by the leader's office and then allow themselves to be whipped through the lobbies to gain promotion; members have virtually no democratic rights, least of all through the National Policy Forum; and conference is a vast exercise in the other type of PR.

The upshot of this shadow of a democratic politics is that nothing really changes. Or at least not enough ever changes. New Labour did some good things in its 13 years in office but it did many bad things too, and crucially failed to build the forces of future advance. The planet burns and the poor get poorer. This is because the political system allowed Labour to be in office but

never in power. Beholden to a few swing voters in a handful of swing seats, to the corporate needs of Rupert Murdoch and the moral whims of the *Daily Mail*, to the flexible labour market demands of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and deregulatory requirements of the City of London. All of this was enshrined by FPTP. Colin Crouch has called the political system we live in 'post-democracy'.¹ It has the trappings of a vibrant democratic polis but is empty, hollow and in many ways pathetic.

In this post-democracy the welfare state becomes residualised rather than universalised. Trade unions exist but too often as a marginal force. The wealth gap widens. Society becomes more polarised between a rich elite and everyone else. Public services are commercialised. Taxation is reduced. Business leaders become more powerful. The state in its social function is reduced while at the same time its policing function of the symptoms of markets (crime, social order and welfare claims) are expanded.

Of course New Labour's timidity cannot all be blamed on the electoral system. But if the defining feature of the New Labour project was winning, then such timidity was wrongly deemed a necessity under FPTP. Sadly such a project ratcheted up the democratic decline. If 'new' was really a signal to the voters that it was 'not' Labour then the head of party leadership had to be separated from the body that still (foolishly) believed in at least the semblance of a democratic socialist endeavor. The inevitable and rather miserable failure of such an elitist project was compounded by the fact that no one other than a small handful of believers could be trusted to see the project through; not the party, the unions, local government, the civil service or NGOs. And as we have subsequently found out from the memoirs of its few leading figures – they didn't even trust each other.

Why anyone thinks 'next time' it will be different is a mystery. One of the leadership candidates, who isn't doing so well, confided in me that he wanted 'another crack at being in government', as if the difference between success and failure would be a tweak here and a twist there to the old policy agenda. They say that the definition of an idiot is someone who does the same thing and expects a different outcome. Sadly this is the story of Labour since the high

watermark of 1945, the belief that socialism, in the words of Herbert Morrison, is what a Labour government does. It is about winning office and capturing the state and then administering 'socialism' from above. It is essentially about doing politics to people rather than with people. The centre is what matters. It must be strong, all seeing and all doing. It has echoes in Bentham's panopticon, Lenin's Soviets and Fabian paternalism. Hence the points of continuity between 'old' and 'new' Labour are much more defined than the points of discontinuity.

Behind this order and influence is the hazy but compelling notion that somehow history is 'on our side' and that, however hesitantly and sporadically, we are on the march to a better land – a land of milk and honey. A nirvana in which socialism is realised. Electoral reform is resisted because it means giving up on this; giving up on the certainty, the control. In the absence of a different way of making change happen, this myth is fought for tooth and nail.

Yet give up Labour must, if the Party wants a world of greater equality and sustainability. Socialism is not possible without greater democracy. But, rather neatly, democracy is not possible without socialism. They are the same thing. Socialism is the democratisation of society, the community and the economy, but without such democratisation there can be no essential equality of people. In the words of the founder of modern social democracy, Eduard Bernstein, 'Democracy is both means and ends. It is a weapon in the struggle for socialism and it is the form in which socialism will be realised.'²

The difference between the politics of a meaningful 'right' and 'left' could not be clearer. The right fears democracy because they know it is the only tool of the powerless. It offends their sensibilities. It is the means by which the masses can gain power over a small but wealthy elite. It can and must be countered by the individualistic merit of the market. Hence we see the Coalition conservatism doing away with the influence of local education authorities. At its most profound we of course have Mrs Thatcher's declaration that 'economics are the method, but the objective is to change the soul'. She understood, better than her contemporaries on the left, that people are social beings and need each other. Democracy is the process through which social-ism, rather than

individual-ism, is successfully practised. Democracy is the means by which the powerful are kept in check to stop them becoming more powerful. It transfers power from the wallet to the ballot box.

Yet it is not just the way we do politics that must change but the very ends of left politics that has to be transformed. Indeed it is the notion of 'an end' that we must give up on; because there is no end. There is no perfect socialist society we can define that marks the end of history. There is no 'good society', only a better society. It is not the 'good society' that matters but the 'good journey'. As soon as there is a blueprint there is a problem of trying to force people into it. We go back to a politics of elites rather than a politics in which people determine their own fate through ongoing democratic participation. It is the rules of the democratic journey that matter. As such means and ends become unified, the empowerment of the people is the goal we seek.

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This primacy of means over ends dictates that you cannot cheat your way to the good society; means can never justify ends; there are no short cuts to socialism. One has to look no further than Soviet Union to confirm this. You cannot just trust some of the people, some of the time; only all of them, all of the time. All politics is based on instincts. The right's instinct is that markets work most efficiently for most of the people most of the time. The progressive left's instinct is that if given enough time and space people can be trusted to make the best decisions for themselves, their families and society through democratic processes.

In all this it is the activity of building not finishing that matters. To travel in expectation is always better than the disappointment of arrival. In a recent article in *Dissent*, Michael Walzer talks of socialism 'in the making' as opposed to 'socialism in the end'. For this is what socialism is: people themselves making and shaping their world through the only fair process there is –

² Quoted in Christopher Pierson (2001) *Hard Choices, Social Democracy in the 21st Century*

democracy. The liberation of the working class must be the work of the working class, as the old saying goes.

Democracy, not the sham we put up with today, has the most incredible potential to transform our lives, to lift our horizons and bring out remarkable talents and abilities we never knew we had. It is worth quoting at length the words of Walzer on the transformative effect of people when they realise the power of democracy:

Men and women who had been passive, disengaged, perhaps afraid of any public activity; men and women who were narrowly focused on their families, struggling to get by – these same people show up at meetings, stand up and argue, agree to serve on committees, and turn out to have talents and capacities that they never used before. Resigned to the conditions of their subordination, they looked inarticulate, even unintelligent. In the movement, speaking in front of others, organizing demonstrations, negotiating with the police, raising money, designing placards and posters, arguing about the ‘message’ of the next leaflet, reaching out to friends who hold back, they look like highly competent men and women. The relationships that develop among them and the decision-making procedures that they work out for themselves prefigure the society we (socialists and social democrats) hope to create.³

It is not just that democracy, as the form of social-ism, has a moral superiority over markets, the form of individual-ism – in many instances it is in practice more effective. The great claim of neo-liberalists is not just moral superiority but practical application. Markets, they argue, work better than governments, states and therefore democracy. Indeed markets do so, they claim, precisely because they are profoundly anti-democratic. The efficiency of markets is derived because the gap between producers and consumers is closed down as tightly as possible so easy and quick transactions can be transferred between buyers and sellers. This is the great claim of capitalism – it is more efficient. By stripping out mediating organisations, like unions and other collectives that distort signals through negotiation and compromise, fast and direct signals determine a price in the most effective way. This logic of the market, when left uncon-

tested, is then extended into the state, public services and every nook and cranny of social life. Such a definition of efficiency cannot be argued with, especially when there is a profit to be made. And if we don't make the profit this way then someone else will. Utility triumphs over justice as markets distribute rewards on the basis not of need but of ability to pay. Thus the bureaucratic state of the immediate post-war years gave way to the market state of the neo-liberal era as the searing logic of privatisation took its grip on the policy-makers' psyche.

But what has all this got to do with the way in which we mark our political preferences on the ballot paper? Surely, if we can win under FPTP and have the right leaders with the right policies then we can roll back the frontiers of the market and usher in our socialist nirvana. Why risk a leap into the unknown of electoral reform?

The short answer is that Labour has no choice. FPTP is the electoral system of a bygone age for socialists. It is only of any value in the future for Conservatives and that is why they cling to it so tightly. FPTP works, as it did for Labour in 1945, in an era of mass production, centralism, Fordism, command and control, deference. A world in which two distinct classes went to war and there was much less social complexity. That world has gone. We are left with an electoral system that distorts and disfigures any radical intent. In the absence of an organised and clear class interest all the electoral emphasis is placed on those fickle swing voters in the diminishing number of marginal seats, people who are so confused they cannot decide from one election to the next whether they are Tory or Labour. Far from allowing a class politics to thrive, FPTP engrains an unbreakable middle England hegemony, a tyranny of the swing voter. It means that elections are only about low tax rates and paying homage to the gatekeepers of the swingers' ever changing moods: Murdoch and the *Mail*.

It leads to a politics of consumers over citizens, of City finance over balanced manufacturing, of tax cuts over public investment, of low wages and low skills over high pay and good quality jobs. Yes, New Labour fashioned huge majorities from this world, but only at the cost of such shallow intent that the prospects for socialists are now weaker than they have ever been. They failed to

³ Michael Walzer (2010) "Which Socialism?" *Dissent* Volume 57, Number 3, Summer 2010, pp. 37-43

nurture democratic organisations that could sustain the journey, like trade unions, local government, civil society and the Labour Party itself. This is why those majorities evaporated.

Reality can be ignored no more. Myths are powerful and necessary features of any hopeful and optimistic political movement, but myths cannot be so totally exposed as meaningless if they are to retain any motivating force. The 1945 Labour myth is dead, it is time for a new understanding and description of what it means to be

Labour – and electoral reform is central to that new meaning.

All of the above is conjecture. It is subjective. My argument, my interpretation. But what about facts? Do the facts suggest that the era of FPTP must be laid to rest if the left wants a future as glorious as its past? There are two key areas where the facts are changing and suggest that the left should radically reconsider its purpose. The first relates to the left's shibboleth of equality. The second to how the left can and will win power.

3 The equality case for reform

The left wants a more equal society because through greater equality we can better realise our own unique potential. We are not born the same. Our bodies, minds, family and social context are different. But, as socialists, we profoundly believe that we are born with an equal right to make the most of the talents and abilities we have and that the brute luck of birth should not stand in the way of providing us with opportunity and the right to lead a good life. In short, there is a moral imperative for society to intervene throughout our lives to ensure we participate in the good journey to our fullest extent. Such freedom is not free. We need a more equal distribution of resources to ensure that everyone can have a reasonable share.

‘Labour needs to look at the multi-party politics of electoral reform to create a more stable base for intra-class consensus to develop’

There is an important and growing body of evidence that argues that PR systems lead to more equal societies than those governed under FPTP. David Soskice and Torben Iversen, writing in the *American Political Science Review* in 2006,⁴ demonstrate that PR systems correlate with political and economic systems, with greater social spending and lower economic inequality than FPTP. It is impossible to determine whether fairer societies go for PR systems or whether PR leads to more equal outcomes, but the link is very real. In their analysis Soskice and Iversen control for other factors – it is a comparison of like for like electoral systems and their relationship with equality. They say that the link between PR and equality is substantial and statistically significant.

In part this is because PR systems create the conditions for longer periods of left government than FPTP. Sweden is perhaps the best example. The country has always operated under a system of PR and through it built a consensus for social democratic reform that lasted from the

1930s through to the end of the century, in which time the country was transformed into a more equal society in which taxes were high but people enjoyed social and welfare benefits. The Swedish socialists rarely governed alone, holding office with other parties, yet it remained a distinctly centre-left government.

Consensus does not necessarily mean compromising or, worse still, selling out. It means negotiating with others to establish a widely held and enduring view of the future. The consensus can be the middle ground; equally it can reflect the politics of the right, as it did under Thatcher, or those of the left, as it did under Labour after 1945. Increasingly though FPTP favours a consensus of the right. It is no coincidence that Reagan in the US, Thatcher in the UK and equally hard-nosed neo-liberal governments in New Zealand and Canada were all elected under voting systems like FPTP and subsequently created huge inequalities. On the continent of Europe the social market economy was tested by the neo-liberal model but largely endured. Inequality did not grow to anywhere like the same extent. In most of these countries PR is the norm.

There is a rational explanation for this. Jonathan Hopkins, an academic at the LSE, has looked at the dynamics of class interest and how they are mediated through different electoral systems. His conclusion is that a consensus of middle and lower class interests is harder to build and sustain under FPTP than under PR. This is the logic: middle and lower classes have a mutual interest in redistribution from the richest higher class, but the nature of this redistribution has to be bargained for between the two classes. FPTP, though, tends towards having just two monolithic party forms. Negotiation within one party, especially one created by and for the labour movement, is problematic for the middle class. So against their direct interest they will, more often than not, form an alliance with the higher class, leaving the lower class and its party isolated. This tells the story of Labour in the 1980s as its influence, under FPTP, was marginalised. New Labour responded by jettisoning many of the principles and people the party stood for. New Labour naively thought they would have nowhere else to go. But instead of continuing to vote Labour they found other political homes or just stayed at home. Instead of this wrong turn Labour

⁴ D. Soskice and T. Iversen, ‘Electoral systems and the politics of coalitions: why some democracies redistribute more than others’, *American Political Science Review*, 100 (2), 2006, pp 165–181.

needs to look at the multi-party politics of electoral reform to create a more stable base for intra-class consensus to develop. Like Sweden, a long-term centre-left coalition can form that does not pander to the interest of the extremely wealthy.

There is a further associated feature of PR systems that works to encourage greater equality. FPTP, because its outcomes rely on the votes of a few swing voters in a few swing seats, tends to concentrate political power in the hands of the already powerful. Everything is about the precision targeting of messages for people who occupy the comfortable

middle of the road, at the exclusion of those at the periphery of society. PR, on the other hand, precisely because it makes every vote count, disperses power. The academic Arend Lijphart argues that consensus democracy produces 'kindlier, gentler policy outcomes including greater redistribution from the wealthy to the poor'.⁵

So the evidence and logic is beginning to stack up that a shift to PR is not some cop-out in which we give up on our historic mission to create a more equal society. Instead, PR can be seen as the electoral system that is more likely to deliver greater equality than FPTP.

5 Arend Lijphart (1999) *Patterns of democracy*

4 The electoral case for reform

There is a working assumption in British politics that single party, majority governments are the norm and will remain so. The minority government of 1974–79 and indeed the coalition formed in 2010 are viewed as aberrations. It is time to think again.

John Curtice from Strathclyde University disturbs this comforting theory rather effectively. In a paper for *Parliamentary Brief* he sets out the case for why coalitions and not majoritarian governments are likely to become the norm.⁶ Curtice identifies two long-term trends that are significantly changing the electoral map of Britain. First, majoritarian systems require a low vote for third parties, because they are seen as largely a repository of wasted votes – they can never win. A low vote for third place and small parties means more votes for the big two, and a greater likelihood of strong single party government. Second, they require plenty of marginal seats between the two main parties so that a large number of seats can change hands when the national mood changes. A small lead in votes then leads to a big lead in changed seats and hence strong government.

Curtice argues that none of these conditions now hold with ‘sufficient force to ensure that a hung parliament could not become a regular feature in Britain even if FPTP were to be retained’.⁷

Here is Curtice’s evidence. First, the number voting for the two main parties has declined from around 97% in 1951 to 65% today. In 2010 the Lib Dems got 23% of the vote, and almost 10% went to other smaller parties. So a third of the electorate did not vote for the two main parties. The likelihood of securing big majorities and strong single party governments is being reduced by this decisive trend.

Second, there has been an equally dramatic decline in the numbers of marginal seats. Until

1970 around 180 seats could be defined as marginal – it would take up to a 10% swing to win the seat. Today only 86 seats can be called marginal. This is because the country has become more politically polarised with Scotland and the North predominantly Labour, and the South and Midlands predominantly Conservative. Therefore there are fewer seats that are likely to change hands and it is less likely that a party can secure a large majority.

Today, the segment of the electoral wheel that results in no party having overall control has expanded dramatically. It stretches from a 3% poll lead for Labour to an 11% poll lead for the Tories. What happened in 2010 is likely to go on happening with greater frequency. The country ends up in the bizarre situation of having all the political downsides for the left of FPTP, but with a coalition government in which deals are done, behind those mythical closed doors – after the election in secret, rather than before the election in the open – as they would have to be under PR. But the coalition formed in 2010 proves one thing: coalitions themselves do not necessarily lead to weak government. Like it or not, the Con Dem Coalition has a radical programme and is likely to last the course of a full parliament. We are witnessing what many in Labour thought impossible – a strong and enduring coalition government. If it can happen on the right, why can’t it happen on the left?

As a result of these two emerging factors – the evidence that countries with PR systems are more likely to lead to greater economic equality and the fact that coalitions may well be a regular feature of future governments – Labour has to think hard about its attitude to electoral reform. The future will be about working with the Liberal Democrats and other parties; such a coalition is better for guaranteeing a more equal society than being lost in the political wilderness and opposition. Despite the inbuilt bias against them the Tories stick to FPTP because they know electoral reform benefits the left, not the right.

⁶ John Curtice (2010) “The Last Post” *Parliamentary Brief*

⁷ John Curtice (2010) “The Last Post” *Parliamentary Brief*

5 The consequences of electoral reform

The fear of reform by some in Labour's ranks is irrational. The evidence is that Labour will benefit from changing the system and therefore of the support for reform grows strongly. But let's be clear and honest. The change is necessary and inevitable if Labour wants to have a decisive influence, but it is profound. It means giving up on the myth of 1945.

The three main parties might all split. They are after all themselves coalitions of interests. Anti-Europeans in the Tory ranks might join UKIP. Socially modern neoliberals in the Tory party might join forces with Orange Bookers in the Lib Dems and even some Blairites. Social Liberals might join forces with liberal socialists in Labour's ranks.

But Labour, based on the evidence, has nothing to fear or lose from this – quite the opposite. It has everything to gain. Instead of the slim and diminishing chance of strong single party rule, centre-

left politics would become more akin to a campsite of many parties and movements. There would be shared ideological boundaries based on the values of equality, sustainability and democracy, but parties big and small would retain their identity while at the same time creating a sum that is greater than its parts. Like the advances now being made in France and Sweden on the basis of Red–Green coalitions, and the developing relationship in Germany between the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany; SPD) and the Linkspartei (Left Party), coalitions are the way of securing victory and entrenching left values. It would mean doing politics in a different way, but there is nothing to be frightened of. The days of big bang change like those that followed the election in 1945 have probably gone for good. Instead we need steady and pragmatic progress that builds individual and organisational support for a more equal and sustainable world.

The referendum on AV is a step in the right direction. It would be a reasonable and important improvement on FPTP for a number of reasons.

6 Why AV is better than FPTP

AV is a preferential system of voting in which voters mark candidates with a rating from first to last (if they want to rank all the candidates). The winner has to get 50%+1 of the votes, either through the first round of counting or when second preferences are distributed after the candidates with the fewest votes fall out. The process of redistribution continues until one candidate gets 50%+1 of the votes. This is only a minor development of FPTP but it has some important implications.

‘Having more marginals will reduce the influence of the media in campaigns and the power of people like Michael Ashcroft in their attempts to buy election victories.’

AV requires every MP to have the support of at least 50% of voters. It doesn't seem like a big leap until you look at the numbers. The 2010 general election gave most of our MPs power without a real mandate. Admittedly FPTP sets the bar pretty low. To win you need only secure one more vote than the next candidate. And that often means that MPs speak for constituencies where most people didn't want them. Over two-thirds (66.77%) of MPs are in this boat, itself a historic low. The 2010 general election saw the lowest proportion ever of MPs elected with the support of a majority of voters in their constituency (furthermore in 2001, 2005 and 2010 not a single MP had the support of a majority of their electorate).

But why should it matter? Well, the sheer number of MPs with minority support, and the upward trend in recent years, is – at least from the voters' point of view – straining the connection between MP and constituency. In all respects other than the provision of casework, the constituency link is as weak as it has ever been. A majority of MPs speak for their constituents, despite the fact that a majority of those who cast

a vote did not do so for the incumbent. While before 1974 this was relatively peripheral, it has become an ever more important feature of the political landscape since then.

MPs who cling to FPTP because of the 'hallowed' constituency link are again basing their views on a myth. For the left the constituency link did not stop New Labour drifting to the right; rather, the dynamics of FPTP forced the shift towards a politics of triangulation, the tyranny of middle England and the stranglehold on our body politic of Murdoch and the *Mail*.

AV requires that an MP will have at least a qualified majority of local voters; there will be times that the final vote for the winner will not be half of the ballots cast because of votes that do not transfer, but most MPs will have a proper majority under AV. A majority of voters will get some degree of support, and therefore have some degree of ownership, over their MP – the constituency link should not be a one-way relationship. AV will enhance the constituency authority of the MP, not weaken it as anti-reformers claim.

Preferential voting would also increase the number of marginal seats, which as we have seen have been in dramatic decline. Having more marginals will reduce the influence of the media in campaigns and the power of people like Michael Ashcroft in their attempts to buy election victories.

By introducing a preference-based voting system it is not just the maths that changes but the culture of our politics. By making second and third preferences count, politics stops being hopelessly black and white and enters the real world in which parties and candidates, just like voters, have to weigh up who they prefer second. Tactical alliances of organisations, ideas and eventually voters can and must be formed. Instead of shouting at or ignoring each other, some parties will be forced to cooperate or risk being no one's second preference. The more progressive act of cooperation will take precedent over the more regressive act of fierce and unswerving competition.

There are two further important reasons why an AV referendum needs to be won. First, if the case for FPTP wins the day then it is going to be hard to reintroduce the debate for a more proportional system in the near future. The debate will be deemed to have been lost and closed. Second, once

the electoral system is changed for Westminster, and the sky doesn't fall in which, which it won't, it will show that voting systems are not permanent and fixed for all time but ours to determine, to be changed as the world changes. Thus a referendum win for AV does not mean the end of the debate on electoral reform; rather it is a necessary start in the process of moving towards a proportional system.

The No Campaign will be themed as anti-politics and ironically as anti-establishment, as

the forces of conservatism will finance and organise it. They want FPTP because they know it is the means by which their neo-liberal hegemony can be maintained.

AV versus FPTP is not the choice many of us wanted but it is a case of not allowing the perfect to become the enemy of the good (or at least the enemy of the better).

7 Conclusions

Those who back FPTP believe that political systems can be controlled from the centre by single party majority governments. There are three problems with this gamble. First, control from the centre, as New Labour has just found out, and as the Soviets did before, is always problematic. The targets are met, but always at an unacceptable cost. Second, as we have seen, instances of single party majority rule are in decline and will continue to be so. And last, but far from least, why do socialists even want to control from the centre through single party rule if socialism is about people managing their own worlds?

‘Instead of clinging on to an inaccurate myth of 1945, Labour needs to secure AV as a stepping stone to proportionality on the road to a more equal, sustainable and democratic world’

Electoral reform is about trusting the people through the belief that they can and will make their world in a progressive fashion. It is the difference between doing something to someone, as opposed to with someone. FPTP is the politics of done to. PR is the politics of done with. Ultimately the question is, can we only trust elites or can we trust the people? The case for voting for AV in the referendum is not just that it is a better voting system than FPTP, it clearly is, but also that defeat would enshrine FPTP for a generation.

There is no perfect voting system. All demand compromises. But members of the Labour party are recognising in ever greater numbers that economic equality goes hand in hand with political equality. That the answer to the crisis of democracy is always more democracy. That to transform our society we have to transform the

way we do politics. And that to change power relationships we have to change the way we engage and constrain the powerful.

That is why the Tories fear electoral reform. They fear change; they fear the power of the people; they fear an effective and popular state; and they fear a voting system based on the principles of equity. In 1987 David Frost asked Mrs Thatcher whether it was time to give Labour a go: ‘Never,’ she replied. ‘If they got in the first thing they would do is introduce PR and then the Tories will never govern again.’

The traditional Labour case against electoral reform is based on the politics of betrayal. It is all about people who want to sell the working class short and turn Labour into an SDP Mark 2, cutting the link with the unions along the way. It would only lead to greater inequality and the supremacy of business over the people. But New Labour has long since passed the SPD in its shift to the right, precisely because FPTP demands appeasement not just to middle England but to its gatekeepers in the form of the *Daily Mail* and Rupert Murdoch.

There are two truths about the 1945 government Labour needs to remember. First, that it wasn’t just about one party winning and making fundamental change happen. Back then there was a Labour movement made up of trade unions, cooperatives, friendly societies and myriad cultural and social forces that created the post-war settlement. Second, the ideas on which the reforms were based were far from Labour’s alone. Critically, the new political economy of demand management came from Keynes, and the programme for the welfare state came from Beveridge – both Liberals. This was the kind of progressive coalition Labour must look to in the future.

Instead of clinging on to an inaccurate myth of 1945, Labour needs to secure AV as a stepping stone to proportionality on the road to a more equal, sustainable and democratic world. Finally, we must break out of the vicious cycle through which FPTP forces us to promise little and deliver even less, and return to a politics of hope based on a belief in the people we claim to represent.

About Compass

Compass is the democratic left pressure group whose goal is both to debate and develop the ideas for a more equal and democratic society, then campaign and organise to help ensure they become reality. We organise regular events and conferences that provide real space to discuss policy, we produce thought-provoking pamphlets, and we encourage debate through online discussions on our website. We campaign, take positions and lead the debate on key issues facing the democratic left. We're developing a coherent and strong voice for those that believe in greater equality and democracy as the means to achieve radical social change.

We are:

- An umbrella grouping of the progressive left whose sum is greater than its parts.
- A strategic political voice – unlike thinktanks and single-issue pressure groups Compass can develop a politically coherent position based on the values of equality and democracy.
- An organising force – Compass recognises that ideas need to be organised for, and will seek to recruit, mobilise and encourage to be active a membership across the UK to work in pursuit of greater equality and democracy.
- A pressure group focused on changing Labour – but Compass recognises that energy and ideas can come from outside the party, not least from the 200,000 who have left since 1997.
- The central belief of Compass is that things will only change when people believe they can and must make a difference themselves. In the words of Gandhi, 'Be the change you wish to see in the world'.

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Join today and you can help change the world of tomorrow

Please contribute generously. Compass is funded solely by organisations and individuals that support our aim of greater equality and democracy. We rely heavily on individual members for funding. Minimum joining rates are suggested below. To join, simply complete and return this form to Compass, **FREEPOST LON15823, London, E9 5BR**. Paying by Standing Order or Paypal means we have a regular income to count on, consequently we are offering new members a discount for paying their membership in this way. To join by Paypal you will need to go to the Join Us section of the Compass website at www.compassonline.org.uk/join.asp.

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