

THE LAST LABOUR GOVERNMENT

Why only a referendum
on electoral reform can save the party now

compass

A close-up photograph of several red rose petals scattered across a white surface. The petals are in various stages of being crushed or broken, with some showing the inner structure. The lighting is soft, creating gentle shadows and highlights on the petals' edges.

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Introduction

The Labour party is not just facing electoral annihilation in only eight months time; the people the party seeks to defend don't just face years of bleak Tory government: the very prospect of re-election, ever, now stands in jeopardy. This is not just because of the scale of the likely defeat and its nature. Much more worryingly three unprecedented factors could come into play if the Tories win:

- First, an incoming Conservative government has pledged to cut the number of parliamentary seats by 10%. This will hit Labour hard because the biggest reduction will be in Labour strongholds such as Wales and industrial and urban areas which have seen population flight. One electoral expert has predicted that of the 65 seats that will go, a conservative assessment would be that 45 of them are Labour.
- Second, the likelihood of the SNP winning a vote on Scottish independence increases considerably with the election of the Tories in Westminster. New polling conducted for Compass shows that 34% of the Scottish electorate will be more likely to vote for the SNP promise of an independence referendum by the end of 2010. This could be enough to see a Yes vote go through. There are currently 59 Westminster seats in Scotland and 41 of them are Labour. They would all be lost.
- Finally, an incoming Tory government is very likely to introduce new party funding rules, which will break the link between Labour and the unions and further destabilise a party heavily in debt and its declining membership base.

“Now, it looks like the Conservatives are planning to cut public services with a glint in their eye and once more roll back the frontiers of the state”

These three factors could then combine to ensure that an already intellectually and organisationally

weak party fails ever to recover. On current polling Electoral Calculus predicts the following: Conservatives to win 364 seats, Labour to win 200 seats and the Liberal Democrats to win 44 seats. Allowing for double counting, given Labour will have lost seats, it would be a cautious estimate to suggest that the party would lose a further 70 seats from the combined loss of Scottish representation and seat reduction, leaving it with as few as 130 MPs.

Compass has been highly critical of New Labour. Our problem was that it was never new enough or Labour enough. Although many good things have been done, the last 12 years have been a wasted opportunity to embed the values of social democracy.

While Compass was urging New Labour to modernise and radicalise we looked intriguingly at the early prospect of the Tories becoming more progressive. For a while it seemed that David Cameron was looking to tap in to more enlightened traditions of one nation Conservatism. But the recession seems soundly to have extinguished that tentative flame. Now, it looks like the Conservatives are planning to cut public services with a glint in their eye and once more roll back the frontiers of the state.

But the outcome of the next election may not just be another turn of the electoral wheel as the mood for change sweeps the nation, as it periodically does. All governments lose eventually and this may well be a government that is too tired to revive itself. We still hope not and believe that a Conservative government is far from inevitable. But this could be the last turn of the wheel for Labour, the last time it is in power. If it loses, the party will have to pick itself up and begin the process of renewal. That will be hard enough. But if the party is left with only a rump of MPs, the task might be made impossible through the triple onslaught of seat reduction, Scottish independence and funding. The reality is the party may not survive – at least not in a shape to ever seriously make a challenge for power again. So the tunnel we are going into not only looks incredibly bleak, but also might not have any light at the end of it. This could be the last Labour government.

At the moment Labour leaders seem to have their heads in the sand. They are in denial. They think they can defy the polls and secure a victory against Cameron on issues such as economic

competence and public spending when all the polls say this is virtually impossible. But no one is listening to them. The party needs a game changer, a policy that wakes up the electorate, creates a strong dividing line with the Tories, and which could propel the likely outcome of the next election from a comfortable Tory win into the terrain of a hung parliament. Only could we then be sure Labour would be able to live on and fight again.

The polling evidence is clear. A recent poll for the Electoral Reform Society showed that 30% of Liberal Democrat voters and 30% of Labour voters were more likely to vote Labour if the party backed electoral reform. Labour has lost 1.1 million votes to the Liberal Democrats. More will go without this policy shift.

Compass has always backed Proportional Representation (PR) for principled reasons. It is not just that it is fair but it more importantly opens up the political system to new voices and ends the tyranny of middle England, which concentrates every message on a few fickle voters

in a handful of swing seats. Why should the governance of the country reside with people who can't decide whether they are Tory or Labour? The first past the post (FPTP) system leaves Labour prime ministers open to the late night call from Rupert Murdoch with the threat or promise of rejection or support in the Sun. With PR none of this would happen as you have to build a consensus for lasting social democratic change. This principle has always guided us.

Now everyone who wants the Labour party to win, or at least to keep out the Tories, must be able to see the prize of backing a referendum; the danger of refusing to do so is potential political oblivion.

Labour promised a referendum on electoral reform in 1997. This week's YouGov survey for Compass shows that 66% of the public want a referendum and only 16% are against. The case now is not just strong – it is undeniable. Failure to act could well mean this is not just a defeated Labour government, but the last Labour government. It is time to change the game. Otherwise 'our turn' might never come round again.

Why could it be the last Labour government?

It already looks bleak for Labour. In the latest ICM poll for the *Guardian*, the Labour party is on 26%, some 17% behind the Tories. No government has ever made up such ground with an election at most nine months away. More worrying is that 60% of the electorate think there will be a clear or narrow Tory majority at that election, and the Conservative vote is firmer than the Labour vote. Finally, when the election happens Labour has few activists and very little money; the Tories are hungry for power and well funded.

Labour could face a wipe out. We are used to being in opposition and the party manages to revive itself – usually after a long haul – as happened after 1951 and 1979. But this time it might be very different. Not only will the party be intellectually and organisational weak, it could also be facing a triple squeeze on its ability ever to get back into power.

A reduction in seats

Earlier this month David Cameron reiterated the Conservative's policy of planning to reduce the number of MPs, promising a 10% cut in what will be a 650-strong membership of the House of Commons after the next election. What would the implications be of reducing the number of MPs to 585?

In factual terms, the average electorate per constituency would rise from a little under 70,000 to around 77,000. England's allocation would drop from 533 (currently 529, but with four new seats after the 2010 boundary changes) to 491. Scotland's would slip from 59 to 50, and Northern Ireland's from 18 to 15. Wales would take a tumble from 40 to 29 because its constituencies are currently smaller than the UK average. The policy would require a rapid boundary review during the next parliament – the previous boundary reviews have taken seven years (1976–83), four years (1991–95) and seven years (2000–07).

It is doubtful that cutting the number of MPs will make much of a saving in terms of public spending – after all, the same amount of constituency casework will just end up being done by fewer MPs, and each will have to take on a slightly greater share of the work, even leaving aside extra costs of the boundary review and registration. There is also the possibility that unless the number of ministerial jobs is sharply reduced, there will be more executive dominance of parliament than we have already and with fewer backbench MPs to hold them to account.

The policy is going to face a huge backlash. Equalising the size of each constituency will mean crossing county and ward boundaries and ripping up what remains of the traditional map of community representation. A bit of Cornwall would end up in a seat based in Devon or Plymouth, whatever its residents thought, and the same local anger would ring in dozens of local public inquiries.

Although apparently fair, 'reduce and equalise' is a flawed policy. The problem is that you cannot produce one size fits all single member seats while keeping natural communities together. Communities, as any Conservative should know, come in different sizes. It would be tragic, and ironic, if in the pursuit of arithmetic perfection and a chimerical public spending cut a Conservative government created electoral units that would make the Heath–Walker local government map look popular.

But the reduction in seats is likely to benefit the Tories directly. In part this is because the party with the most detailed demographic data and canvassing information and IT sophistication (money) will be in the best position to see that the case for its favoured boundary schemes is argued most convincingly at inquiries. In addition the party that controls most local authorities can use council resources to prepare partisan boundary plans and argue for them at the boundary inquiries. If population projections are admitted as evidence at inquiries (as they are in ward boundary reviews), boundary changes can be made with a view to party advantage.

It is likely that Labour seats will be lost as urban areas and Wales have a lower level of voters per seat. Seats will be abolished in areas of declining population (not so much the big cities, and not London, but the industrial areas of the

north and council estate seats) and created or preserved in counties with expanding population in the south and east of England. One electorate expert has estimated that of the 65 seats to go, up to 45 in the current parliament would be Labour.

Scottish independence

If that weren't worrying enough, Labour could lose all its Scottish seats. Currently there are 41 Scottish Labour MPs including the prime minister, the chancellor and the international development secretary, Douglas Alexander. Labour could lose many of its leading members.

This is because support for Scottish independence would get a huge boost as soon as David Cameron entered Downing Street. Scottish voters seem much happier sticking with a Scottish Parliament while Labour is in office in Westminster, but attitudes look set to shift dramatically if the Tories win. A YouGov poll carried out on 21–23 Sept 2009 shows that currently 31% would vote for independence and 53% would vote against it. If the Tories win the next election 34% would be more likely to vote for independence. The first beneficiaries would be the SNP and then the Conservatives if, as will be much more likely, a Yes vote ensues.

The SNP promised a referendum by the end of 2010 and is planning to introduce a referendum bill soon.

Party funding

The final nail in Labour's coffin could be party funding. The party is already heavily reliant on the unions and could be more so if in opposition. But the Tories with a healthy majority and a fresh mandate could easily introduce new funding rules to cut off union funds while allowing business and personal funding to flow, and these will be much harder to regulate. The evidence is that this is exactly what they will do.

In 2006 the Conservative MP Francis Maude complained that 'Labour is now almost entirely dependent on the unions for funding. In return, they're getting pet policies and bungs with taxpayers' money. This sort of cronyism undermines our entire democratic process.'

After the cross-party talks on reforming party funding, chaired by Sir Hayden Phillips, failed to reach agreement, Phillips published his suggestions for reforming party funding in March 2007. He proposed that there should be an annual limit of £50,000 for all organisations' donations, including unions, but funds raised by individual union members' political subscriptions would not be counted as part of their union's £50,000 limit. The Conservatives claimed that Labour's unwillingness to accept this led to the breakdown of the talks.

In November 2007 David Cameron told the Commons that 'there can be no justification for more state funding of political parties unless a tough cap on donations applies to individuals, businesses and trade unions' – indicating that he might accept state funding in place of union funding.

“The Tories with a healthy majority and a fresh mandate could easily introduce new funding rules to cut off union funds while allowing business and personal funding to flow”

In December 2007 the Conservatives complained to the Office of Fair Trading that unions were not making it clear to their members that they had the right to opt out of the political levy.

In June 2008 the Rt Hon Jack Straw MP and Francis Maude MP debated party funding in the Commons. Maude claimed that donations were not genuinely voluntary: 'Will he [Straw] not acknowledge that when trade unions routinely declare that 100 per cent of their members – and in two cases, more than 100 per cent – are paying the political levy, the idea that these are voluntary individual donations to Labour are laughable, especially when polling shows that fewer than half of union members even vote Labour, let alone want to support it financially?' In the same debate, Maude said that effective reform 'would require Labour to accept that dependence on a small number of union bosses has to end. Sadly, it is hard to see that happening when 92% of Labour's income comes from the unions.'

In June 2009 Conservative party chairman Eric Pickles said that union funding would 'clearly force the near-bankrupt Labour party into adopting policies even more out of tune with the wishes of the public' and called the current arrangements 'unhealthy'. In July 2009 shadow foreign secretary William Hague told supporters that Labour gets '£10 million funding a year guaranteed from the trade unions in return for the favours granted to them'.

The Conservative argument has been that a donation cap of £50,000 is necessary to restrict influence of companies, individuals and trade unions. Under current legislation trade union affiliation payments – the collective membership payment of ordinary members – are counted as

donations to the party. For the purposes of a donation cap, each trade union would be treated as a single individual within the cap. This could end the ability of trade unions to affiliate to the party, ending the relationship that has sustained social progress throughout the last century. Without a secure funding basis Labour would find it almost impossible to renew itself.

On its current poll ratings Labour is projected to return with only 200 MPs. The party will be in meltdown, but the loss of a further 65 seats and a funding crisis could tip it over the edge. Big political parties rarely die out in British politics, but this combination of factors could signal the death knell for Labour.

It couldn't happen at a worse time.

The worst Conservative government in living memory?

Labour MPs, party members and supporters need to understand what is coming down the track. David Cameron has been successful at decontaminating the Tory brand so few have fully realised just how bleak Conservative rule of the country could be. If we don't have a referendum for PR then the prospects for progressive politics could stay permanently bleak. Instead of sharing the proceeds of growth, the Tories look set to use the recession to return to their old game of rolling back the frontiers of the state, or at least those parts that the most vulnerable rely on. Of course they will never get to cut public spending in total because they would have to pay for the symptoms of growing inequality through benefits, prison places, policing and the other costs of a continuing social recession. The prospect of increasing taxes for the very rich, who helped to create the economic mess we are in, doesn't enter their heads. Here are just some of the policy changes and problems we will see if the Tories get back in.

Public spending

The big difference between a Cameron government, if we allow it to happen, and the Thatcher years is that there won't be any North Sea oil revenues to pay for economic and social decline. In paying the benefits of the unemployed and economically inactive, the Thatcher government was helped enormously by North Sea revenues from 1981 to 1986 of over £112 billion. High levels of unemployment are predicted for some time, but unlike the Thatcher era they will coincide not with rising North Sea oil and gas supplies, but instead with declining ones. It means the cuts will be long and deep.

Minimum wage

The minimum wage is unlikely to be safe in Tory hands. Low paid workers need a living wage, but

it is highly likely that although the Tories won't scrap the minimum wage they will fail to uprate it each year. In 2009 a significant group of Tory MPs gave their backing to Christopher Chope's 'Employment Opportunities Bill 2009', a Ten Minute Rule bill that would allow for individuals and, more importantly, employers to opt out of the minimum wage. A senior Tory is reported as saying that 'the minimum wage won't be scrapped but it will be allowed to wither on the vine.'¹ In contrast, Gordon Brown promised that a Labour government would 'continue to raise the minimum wage every year' at this year's TUC congress.

Sure Start

There is overwhelming international evidence that concentrating resources on children in the first few years of their life not only helps to ensure that young people thrive as adults but produces good value for money in the long term. There are now over 3,000 Sure Start centres; the government is on track to fulfil its manifesto pledge of having 3,500 centres open by next year. The Conservative party plans to cut £200 million each year from the Sure Start budget, which could see one in five Sure Start centres forced to close. Planned Tory measures to reduce the budget deficit have also put more pressure on the Sure Start budget; George Osborne has admitted that the Tories are not committed to protecting spending on schools or the Sure Start programme.² Furthermore, two high-profile rightwing think tanks, the Taxpayers' Alliance and the Institute of Directors, jointly published a report on how to cut public spending by £50 billion, and placed Sure Start close to the top of the hit list.

Privatisation

The Conservative party backed the part-privatisation of Royal Mail enthusiastically. It is highly likely that with a strong majority it will try to privatise Royal Mail again. During the 2001 general election the Conservative party proposed to sell Channel 4 and it is still the party's policy to end all public subsidies to the broadcaster.

¹ www.mirror.co.uk/news/top-stories/2008/10/05/david-cameron-would-allow-minimum-wage-to-die-out-115875-20775693/

² www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/nick-robinson/2009/06/what_would_tories_cut.html

Despite the huge failure of the private banks, George Osborne is eagerly putting plans together to privatise the part-nationalised banks. Conservative councils have a record in local government of privatisation and charging for core services. George Osborne has said, 'I want the Conservative party to learn from what local Conservative councils are doing right now.'³

Media

Jeremy Hunt, shadow secretary of state for culture, media and sport, has branded the annual BBC licence fee increase 'completely ridiculous'.⁴ David Cameron has called the BBC 'bloated'. Yet it is Conservative plans to scrap local and regional media ownership rules and allow newspaper groups to merge with rival companies that are the most worrying. The US pressure group Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) says, 'This concentration of ownership tends to reduce the diversity of media voices and puts great power in the hands of a few companies. As news outlets fall into the hands of large conglomerates with holdings in many industries, conflicts of interest inevitably interfere with newsgathering.' Proposed media reforms would inevitably lead to a lack of diversity and the rise of US-style media outlets such as Fox News, and the political bias they bring.

In Europe

The Conservative party's MEPs abandoned the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) grouping in the European Parliament, saying the EPP's policies of closer economic integration, as well as common immigration, defence and foreign policy, were at odds with Tory policy. The new European Conservatives and Reformists group includes some very reactionary allies including the ODS (Civic Democratic) party from the Czech Republic, which called climate change a 'false myth'. It also includes the LNNK party from Latvia (Latvian National Independence Movement), which sparked controversy after the press reported that some of its members celebrate the Latvian collaboration with the Waffen-SS against the Russians during

World War Two.⁵ The Polish Law and Justice party, another member of the group, has a reputation for homophobia and is quoted as saying that 'the affirmation of homosexuality will lead to the downfall of civilisation'.⁶

Further, it is increasingly clear that those at the top of the Conservative party are hostile to European employment rights legislation. For example, Alan Duncan enlightens us further when he stated that he supports the 'three Rs' for employment protections – review, repeal and redress – and that he wanted to challenge 'the regulatory creep from Europe', stop 'bonkers' employment tribunal rulings and impose fees on workers who bring unsuccessful tribunal cases.⁷ But what the Tories are referring to with this so called 'regulatory burden' from Europe includes paid holidays, parental leave, protection from discrimination and equal treatment rights for part-time workers and those on fixed-term contracts.

Trade unions

Previous Tory governments had made it a priority to destroy the power of the trade unions and, by extension, working people. David Cameron has openly warned the trade unions 'not to take me on', adding, 'My message to union leaders who think they can take me on is simple: don't do it'.⁸ Labour's achievements for trade unionists include the introduction of statutory trade union recognition, health and safety legislation, the right to fair representation at work, the right to paid maternity, paternity and adoptive leave, and the Working Time Directive. These have been opposed by the Conservatives and there is certainly no guarantee that these rights will be safe in their hands.

Environment

It is doubtful that David Cameron can deliver on his green rhetoric. Past Conservative governments led uninterrupted road building projects and expansions in aviation. The free-market ideology that the Conservative party is wedded to is a direct contradiction to the collective and state action which is needed to avoid runaway climate

3 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8247506.stm

4 http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/industry_sectors/media/article6829661.ece

5 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4665818.stm>

6 www.pinknews.co.uk/news/articles/2005-12920.html

7 www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23561509-details/Shake-up+to+stop+%27bonkers%27+tribunals/article.do

8 www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/politics/david-cameron/5890628/David-Cameron-warns-trade-unions-Dont-try-taking-me-on.html

change. The Conservative party's ideology of individualism will no doubt dump the responsibility onto individuals without providing any real help from the state. If Conservative councils are anything to go by, the outlook is bleak: local authorities in the UK run by the Conservatives are blocking three times as many wind farms as they approve. John Sauven, executive director of Greenpeace, has said: 'One of the reasons Britain's green industrial revolution is yet to take off is the lack of domestic demand for wind turbines and a key reason for that has been the attitude of many Conservative councils.'⁹ David Cameron has yet to match Ed Miliband's commitment to meet the target to generate 20% of our energy from renewables by 2020. There are also still many question marks over Cameron's enthusiasm for carbon capture technology, nuclear power and airport expansion of Gatwick and Stansted airports.¹⁰ It looks as though the Tories will stay a deep shade of blue.

Pensions

Under an incoming Conservative government the elderly will suffer. Those who currently influence Conservative policy like the think tank Reform are demanding harsh cuts across the board. Reform's pre-budget report *Back to Black* demands an end to winter fuel payments to the elderly. This is despite the evidence that winter fuel payments save lives and the fact that there are still 5 million people in fuel poverty. Furthermore, despite a previous commitment to stick to Labour spending plans the Conservative party has now reneged on the key policy of linking pensions to average earnings. Since Margaret Thatcher ended the link between the state pension and earnings in 1980, it has risen in line with inflation, which goes up more slowly than wages. Its value has fallen from 21% of average earnings in 1980 to under 15% today. The Labour government has promised to restore the link by 2012 – the Tories are happy for it to be whittled away.

Housing

While the Labour government is aiming to increase housing stock, and has set ambitious

targets for housing developers, the Tories are undermining these efforts. A leaked letter from Caroline Spelman, the shadow secretary of state for communities and local government, demonstrated this stating that an incoming Conservative administration would introduce new legislation scrapping Labour policies. Tory policy would 'revoke... in whole or in part' all of Labour's regional development targets. Spelman then advises all councils to put on hold any building projects or risk them being cancelled without compensation after the next election. This wreaks havoc with house builders in a recession and at a time when waiting lists for social housing are at an all-time high and people are in desperate need of homes.

Health

After the controversy over the summer, when Daniel Hannan MEP dismissed the NHS as a waste of money, it is unclear how committed to the NHS the Conservative party is. Cameron will promise everything but the majority of Conservative MPs would support measures to undermine the NHS and a scheme of private health insurance, much like the one that operates in the USA. A new survey of MPs by ComRes on behalf of BMI healthcare, part of General Healthcare Group, showed that two-thirds (66%) of Tory MPs supported the idea of imposing income tax relief on standard rate income tax for private medical insurance and 55% were in favour of tax relief on private healthcare fees.¹¹

Local government

In local government we are already getting a taste of things to come; Barnet, the easy council, takes inspiration from those pillars of public satisfaction – budget airlines. Barnet Council will adopt 'user charges', allowing individuals to purchase privileges from the council while whittling the standard service to the bare minimum. For example, in Barnet they will let those with money jump planning permission queues. This might be acceptable on a flight, but it is certainly not acceptable for a council that is meant to be

⁹ www.guardian.co.uk/business/2009/jul/27/wind-power-miliband-loans

¹⁰ www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jun/01/green-conservative-party

¹¹ www.tax-news.com/asp/story/UK_Tories_Back_Tax_Relief_For_Private_Healthcare_xxxx38743.html

responsible for services for the elderly, those requiring social care and the very young.

Benefits

The Tories have worrying proposals for those on Job Seeker's Allowance, including the 'three strikes and you're out' policy, which would mean that there will be escalating penalties for people who do not accept 'reasonable' job offers.¹² Under these proposals everyone who receives a reasonable job offer will be expected to accept it. If they do not, they will lose one month's unemployment benefit. If they refuse a second reasonable offer, they will lose three months' benefit. If they refuse a third reasonable offer, they will be excluded from further out-of-work benefits for up to three years. Yet the Tories offer no suggestions of where these jobs are going to come from or how they are going to supply the training and skills necessary for these people to get a job in the first place. Furthermore, vulnerable individuals who have now been switched from Incapacity Benefit to Job Seeker's Allowance will be put at risk, particularly those 40% who were previously on incapacity benefits who have mental health problems.

¹² www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/jan/07/conservatives.social
exclusion

¹³ www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/sep/02/conservatives.inheritance
tax

Tax

We may be coming out of a recession but many people are still feeling the pinch, particularly those without £1 million assets. David Cameron said there could not be 'one law for the rich and another for everyone else'. But despite this, the Tories are sticking to their inheritance tax pledge – they are going to raise the threshold for payment of inheritance tax to £1 million, helping out their friends, and damning those in desperate need. This was only made worse when they stated that this allowance would be transferable, thus in essence doubling the allowance to estates worth £2 million.¹³ Rather than drop this clearly unjust policy proposal they will cut essential services. Inheritance tax as it stands only affects the wealthiest 6% of the population and is an important way of challenging in-built and unearned privilege.

These are just some of the things we already know about an incoming Tory government. It could be a lot worse if they get their hands on the levers of power. But the prospect is not just of a gloomy few years or even two terms in the wilderness. The wilderness for Labour might go on forever. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Why a referendum on PR is Labour's life line

Being so far behind in the polls and with so little time left the party desperately, needs a game changer. The only one in the locker is to have a referendum on PR on the same day as the election. This is why:

- First, it puts Cameron on the defensive. As soon as Labour announces it backs a referendum Cameron is no longer the candidate of change but represents the status quo. He says he wants to move beyond the bureaucratic state but wants to stick with the electoral system that supports such old politics. The question he will have to answer again and again is why won't he let the people decide on their voting system? A question made worse by his support for a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. There is still a hunger in the country for democratic effort. Support in this week's YouGov poll conducted for Compass shows that 66% want a referendum and only 16% don't.
- Second, by holding a referendum Brown would start to rebuild a progressive coalition, which has fractured since 1997. Recent polling for the Electoral Reform Society shows that a referendum would help swing back 30% of Liberal Democratic voters to Labour and 30% of wavering Labour voters would be more likely to stick with the party.
- Third, with the Hansard Society reporting that only 53% are certain to vote, every vote will count and a referendum on a big issue like PR could get more voters to the polls. Voting experts believe that the more people who turn out, the more non-Tory voters there will be.

- Finally, Labour would at last be honouring its 1997 election manifesto commitment to hold a referendum. It would be a sudden and dramatic political moment – Brown's own Clause 4 moment. People would start listening to him again.

If Britain shifted to a system of PR, Labour would be liberated. No longer would it be tied to a few fickle swing voters or the business needs of Rupert Murdoch. Instead it would start to build, with others, a progressive consensus. Jonathan Hopkins at the LSE has explained how and why more proportional voting systems lead to more egalitarian societies.¹⁴ Labour has nothing to fear from PR but, literally, everything to lose.

How a referendum will work

The referendum would be held on election day. The necessary bill and the wording of the ballot paper should make it as difficult as possible for the Tories, if they win the election, to wriggle out of implementing changes to the electoral system required by the result of the referendum. If it is binding and successful then it would be the last general election under the FPTP system.

The choice should be between sticking with FPTP or moving to the system recommended by the government commission, led by Roy Jenkins, called Alternative Vote Plus. This keeps a constituency MP for everyone and adds a regional top up of MPs to ensure greater proportionality.

As this election will be under FPTP no one can say the rules are being gerrymandered. The new system will only be introduced at the election that follows the one in 2010. Ministers and MPs will be free to campaign on either side, just as they were for entry to the EEC in 1975.

¹⁴ <http://clients.squareeye.com/uploads/compass/documents/CTP58HopkinsElectoral.pdf>

Conclusion

For Compass, equality and democracy are two sides of the same coin. You can't have one without the other. We support PR in principle, not just because it is fair, but because it says that Labour trusts the people and wants them to author their own lives the best way they can; through collective and democratic action.

But the case for a referendum on giving British people a choice is now the only way for the party to avoid crushing defeat and the strong chance that they will never govern again. A referendum moves the party from zero chance of the Tories

not losing next May to within striking distance of a hung parliament and Labour being the biggest single party. The decision could decide Labour's future not just for one or two parliaments, nor even for a generation, but for ever.

Just after her third victory in 1987, Mrs Thatcher was asked by an inquisitive David Frost if it was time to give the other side, Labour, a go. Mrs T, in high handbag mode, replied: 'Never. If they got in, the first thing they would do is introduce PR and then the Tories would never govern again.' If only. There is now a window of change. It stays open only while the Tories are out of office. Everything that Labour stands for is under threat. We must seize that chance.

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