The Left Case for Proportional Representation

A discussion paper
for the Labour
Representation
Committee

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This paper presents the case for the Labour Representation Committee to adopt as its policy support for the introduction of proportional representation for elections to the House of Commons, and for local councils in England and Wales.

It argues that the FPTP denies effective votes to many traditionally-Labour voting working class communities, limits the choice on offer to voters, and is an obstacle to the fair representation of political opinion on elected bodies.

The paper does not seek to evaluate the relative merits of the alternative voting systems or make any specific recommendations, although it does set out some of the considerations that would influence such a choice.

Which voters count? - Why FPTP distorts politics

Electoral Reform Society research suggests that – at its most extreme – Labour could lose its outright majority at the next General Election if it lost the support of just 8,000 voters in 25 key marginal seats. All the major parties now relentlessly concentrate their efforts on targeting marginals and identifying the specific fraction of the population that are critical in determining which way the seat goes.

In effect, General Election campaigning is overwhelmingly directed towards less than 100 parliamentary constituencies - the rest delivering fairly reliable majorities for one or other of the main parties. The result is an extremely distorted picture. The race to get a competitive advantage over their rivals in the battle for the swing voters is also leading to an 'arms-race' in party funding, where the parties concentrate huge levels of spending on 'precision' targeting of the key marginal seats.

However, for voters outside these target constituencies, the campaign barely even registers on a local level for people in safe seats. The complaint that "voting doesn't make a difference" is sadly often all too true. Over 19 million votes cast in the General Election of 2005 made no difference whatsoever to the outcome – 70% of all votes cast!

This situation distorts not just the *form* of campaigning but also the *content*. The logic of the system encourages parties to frame their policies and messages in order to appeal to this critical minority of voters – whilst the concerns of 'core' supporters (particularly where they are concentrated in safe heartland areas) do not carry equivalent weight. Working class voters form a greater part of the electorate in seats with safe Labour majorities, but with the party having little incentive to campaign in core areas, they are becoming effectively excluded from the political process. Even Hazel Blears has been forced to recognise that "the fall in turnouts among working-class voters in some British cities is now so marked that it amounts to a reversal by stealth of 19th-century reforms that spread the franchise".

But it is entirely understandable that voters feel taken for granted when they experience little in the way of active party campaigning. And the logic of winning over the swing voters has given a green light for Labour neglect its traditional supporters on the grounds that they have "nowhere else to go". With the parties assiduously focus-grouping and honing their appeal to swing voters, their messages begin to sound increasingly similar and there is a huge pressure to converge on the centre-ground. Is it any wonder that, as Blears notes, Westminster politics "speaks with a middle-class, middle-England accent"?

Voters increasingly complain that all the parties are the same and bemoan the lack of choice at elections. This year's May local election results demonstrate that such voters are either staying at home or voting for independents in frustration – resulting in council losses for Labour in once rock-solid places like the Rhondda Valley or Hartlepool. Councillors with safe majorities have been allowed to become far too complacent and in some areas have failed to play an active role in engaging with their constituents.

A similar effect can be seen at Westminster level. For example, over two-thirds of Labour voters in the North West are represented by a Labour MP with a majority of over 5,000 – whilst the overwhelming majority of campaigning activity will be targeted at defending the areas considered highly marginal. Party branches in once 'safe' Labour areas have become effectively moribund as voters in these communities have been taken for granted. This has resulted in anger and resentment that parties like the BNP is increasingly tapping into, and alarmingly, the performance of the far right has reached the point where they are increasingly likely to have candidates elected (see below).

The lack of choice is increasingly literal at local level since there has been quite a dramatic increase in uncontested wards, where even the pretence of a choice doesn't materialise. FPTP means that the thresholds needed to get a candidate are very high, and requires support to be strongly localised. It is entirely possible for a party to receive over a million votes in a General Election without getting a single MP elected if that support is spread fairly evenly. The desire not to cast a 'wasted' vote is understandable, and frequently leads people to cast their vote 'tactically' to keep their least preferred party out.

This is not just something that only discriminates against smaller parties in terms either of their fielding candidates or the share of the vote they receive, but also impacts on the vitality and longer-term viability of major parties in those areas where they are in a minority. Labour has retreated from whole swathes of Southern England where a vicious circle of council losses and disintegrating local branch infrastructures is leading to Labour candidates standing in fewer and fewer areas, leading to the 'normalisation' of tactical voting or abstention.

The chart below shows the total number of Labour councillors in the 'enlarged' south east, broken down by county, in several years since local government reorganisation in 1973. The first elections were relatively good for Labour, and the party had a respectable 1,287 councillors in the area. This eroded throughout the

next decade, and at Labour's nadir in 1983 there were only 785 councillors. The upswing in Labour support during the 1990s took Labour's presence in the south east's councils past the previous 1973 peak, and in 1997 it stood at 1,443 councillors. Then, inevitably, years in power nationally took their toll on the party's popularity and Labour lost seats, although until the 2003 elections the damage was pretty light – down to 1,020 councillors. Then the slump began, and after 2007 and 2008 Labour were collapsed down to only 441 councillors. This is much worse than Labour's standing in 1983.

Labour councillors in South East England 1973-2008
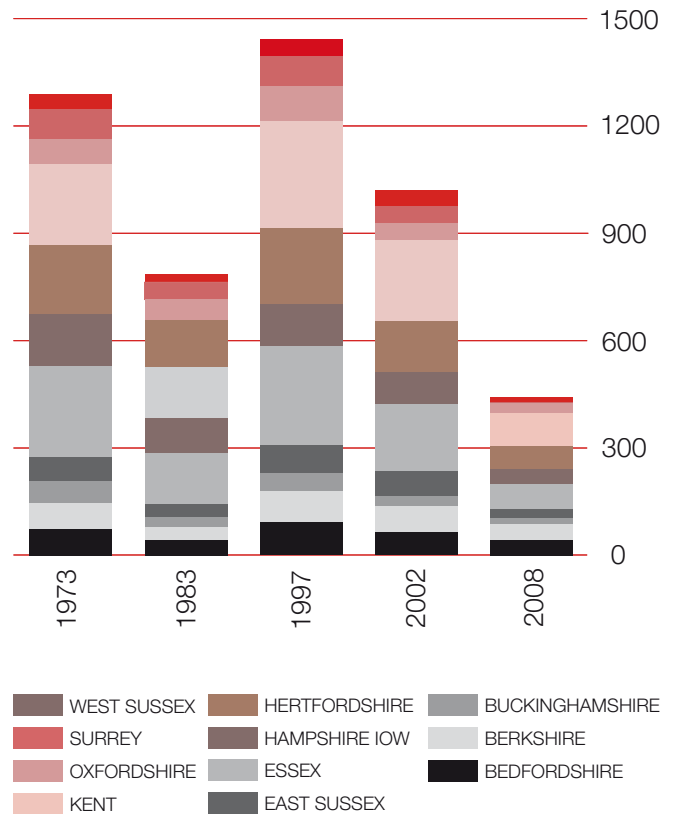
The decline in numbers in some counties (particularly Essex and Hertfordshire, areas rich in unexpected parliamentary gains in 1997, and Surrey where Labour has always been a minor force) has been horrific.

## Labour councillors in South East England 1973-2008 (table of data)

	1973	1983	1997	2002	2008
Bedfordshire	74	43	92	64	42
Berkshire	71	35	87	75	46
Buckinghamshire	63	30	51	26	15
East Sussex	65	36	76	71	26
Essex	255	142	277	187	70
Hampshire	137	97	116	82	40
Hertfordshire	192	143	213	145	63
Kent	226	132	299	224	94
Oxfordshire	71	57	96	50	27
Surrey	83	48	84	47	3
West Sussex	40	22	49	44	13

The decline in absolute numbers is bad enough, but what is worse is the number of councils in which Labour has been completely eliminated, or clings on by the fingertips (and often personal votes) with only one or two councillors. In 1983, there was no Labour voice in 15 of the 95 councils in the extended south east and a token presence in 20 more, with a group of three or more in the remaining 60 councils.

Even the zenith of New Labour did not see Labour regaining a foothold on all the councils where it had had a presence in 1973, but it did generate an expansion in Labour's reach in southern England which was sustained for six years.

However, the decline has been rapid and has taken the party well below where it reached in 1983. Now 38 out of 95 (40 per cent) of council chambers in the south east have no Labour voices, and another 17 only a token presence. Only a minority of local authorities (40 out of 95, 42 per cent) have a serious Labour group by the rather generous definition of three or more Labour councillors.

Labour representation on South East councils 1973-2008

Legend: MORE / ONE OR TWO / NONE
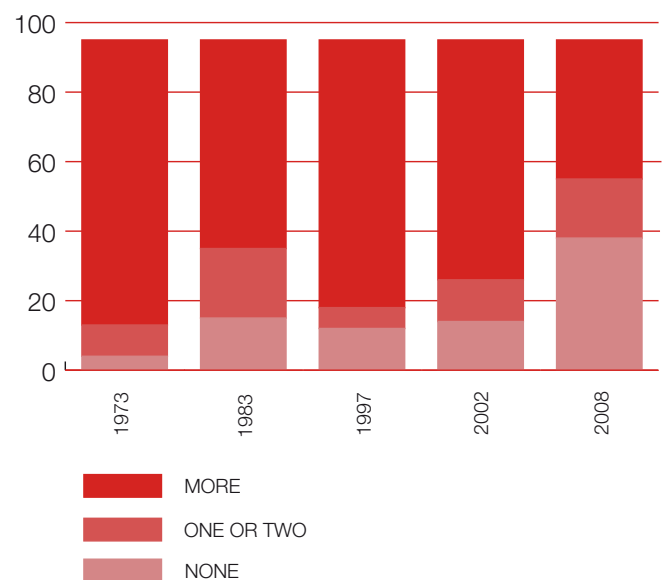
But if - as the figures seem to suggest – the increased emphasis on campaigning only in target seats is serving to disenfranchise the more left-wing minority in the affluent south (forced in many instances either vote Lib Dem to keep out the Tories or simply abstain), the same electoral logic has also served to marginalise and neglect its support in its traditional heartlands.

As competition intensifies over the key swing voters in target seats, the volume of advertising, promotional literature and other campaigning correspondingly increases. This generates enormous pressure for the parties to finance this expenditure. Labour has found itself increasingly dependent on rich individual backers (and has been encouraged into less than transparent agreements with potential donors) in order to compete with the millions poured into the marginals for the Conservaitves by Lord Ashcroft. Whilst it would not exhaust the reforms necessary for party funding, electoral reform would end the culture of the 'super-marginal' and alleviate the pressures which maintain the "arms race" between the parties.

Creating a Space: Politics under PR

Despite its large parliamentary majorities, Labour has overseen a continuing drift towards the marketisation of British society across the UK. But, ironically, Labour has been able to deliver more for its voters in coalition with other parties in the devolved assemblies than it has at purely under its own steam at Westminster. The first executive of the Scottish Parliament – formed from a coalition with the Scottish Lib Dems – managed to stop the introduction of top-up fees for university tuition, and to roll out a programme of free personal care for the elderly. Similarly in Wales, Labour went into coalition with Plaid Cymru and announced a moratorium on new PFI projects in the National Health Service.

All this is much better reflection of what Labour voters in Scotland and Wales than would have been the case if Labour could have forced through policies from centre because it enjoyed a monopoly. A political system that represents more fairly the electorate has in both cases delivered a politics that offers a more accurate reflection of the balance of popular opinion.

It is true that smaller parties of the left in Scotland and Wales have struggled to sustain an impact thus far. The Scottish Socialist Party had an encouraging breakthrough in 2003 when it had 6 MSPs elected - the biggest parliamentary breakthrough of any left wing socialist party in the UK in a generation. But at local level the FPTP system prevented an equivalent breakthrough – it had just one councillor elected in Glasgow, whereas had that set of elections taken place under the PR system used in 2007, they would have elected a group of six. In last year's elections to the Scottish Parliament and local authorities, the socialist vote suffered badly from the effect of internal strife and the emergence of the rival Solidarity list.

Even then, the PR system used for the Scottish local election saw both sides of the dispute manage to elect at least one councillor, but evidence suggests that the split in the socialist vote was very damaging:

" The chances of a seat in Pollok were, however, wrecked by the party split and the extreme reluctance of supporters of the SSP and Solidarity to give the other party their second preferences. When SSP councillor Keith Baldassara was eliminated in the Pollok count, only 28.4 per cent of his votes transferred to Alice Sheridan of Solidarity. Nor was this a freak result of local circumstances – transfer rates of around 25 per cent between the two parties were typical. The bitterness between the parties' leaders seems to be reflected among their voters. While a unified SSP would have been a significant force at least in Glasgow in the 2003 local elections, falling support and the split have relegated the far left to the fringes of Scottish politics. "

(ERS, Local Authority Elections in Scotland 2008)

Similarly, the Scottish Green Party put forward no candidates in the 2003 local elections, since they understood they preferred to prioritise the Parliamentary election where they had a much better chance of getting a candidate elected, than in local elections under FPTP. However, when the system was changed to the proportional STV system, they fielded a candidate in each of 100 wards across two-thirds of local authorities, and full slates of candidates in both Glasgow and Edinburgh. The 2007 elections saw the election of the first Green councillors in Scotland. Five Green candidates were successful in Glasgow and three in Edinburgh.

As the experience of the Greater London Assembly has started to demonstrate, the presence of even a small Green grouping in elected bodies has the capacity to become a rival pole of attraction in advancing a more progressive and environmentally conscious agenda. This has proved to the positive advantage of Labour politics in the capital, since it helped to reframe the range of voices in the debate and produced the scope for productive semi-formal working alliances. The electoral system is an important factor, not only in giving fair representation of the views of over 200,000 that voted Green, but also for the political campaigning incentives

the system gives to the Labour party. In Westminster elections, there is little incentive to campaign to raise turnout in the safest Labour districts, often with some of the highest proportions of working class and minority ethnic electorates, because those seats are already 'in the bag'. So Labour will be unlikely to focus as much effort in seats like Tottenham where they currently enjoy a majority of over 10,000 when in other parts of London their majorities are now down to double figures.

By contrast, under a system where every vote counts, there a strong incentive to mobilise voters to turn out in greater numbers in traditional Labour strongholds. So in 2007, for example, because the party understood it was worthwhile campaigning in safe wards, Labour managed to boost turnout amongst the ethnically diverse electorate of Brent and Harrow and - against the backdrop of a national swing against the party - managed to de-seat the sitting Conservative Assembly Member for the area.

Whether the future of labour representation lies in a revitalised Labour party capable of reconnecting with the supporters it has lost since 1997, or whether alternative new or existing party structures can begin fill the current political vacuum, it is clear that such a project requires institutional reform to allow a more healthy democratic culture to develop.

Myths (i) – PR helps the far right

" It is not a vibrant democratic culture that the BNP exploits, but the lack of one. "

The job of a voting system is not to sweep significant minority opinions under the carpet – to blame a fairer voting system for the election of BNP candidates is like a doctor blaming the thermometer for a patient's rise in temperature. It is true that if seats were distributed more in accordance with the votes each party actually receives, then the thresholds for parties to get representation on elected bodies be lower than

under FPTP. But if the BNP gets one or more members elected at the 2009 European Elections, it will be because the mainstream parties have been unable to motivate their own supporters to turn out.

The BNP thrives where formal party politics has failed because the traditional parties have taken the electorate for granted. Far from assisting the BNP, by re-incentivising Labour to fight for votes in safe seats and opening up wards to competitive elections, electoral reform could help to refill the vacuum that the BNP is currently starting to exploit.

More dangerous is the possibility that the BNP continues to grow under FPTP to the extent where the system can give them disproportionate representation in certain areas. We can already start to see this in individual wards in Burnley (Hapton-with-Park) and Stoke (Abbey Green) which are now exclusively represented by BNP councillors (ie. 100%), despite never halving got close to even half the votes cast at any election, and in the case of Abbey Green with less than a third of the vote on two occasions.

Thus voters who chose to oppose the BNP – a substantial majority on every occasion – have been left completely without representatives to undertake casework on their behalf. It is entirely conceivable that, if their growth were to continue, the BNP could take outright control of a council like Stoke-on-Trent on minority share of the vote – again, something impossible under PR.

Myths (ii) – PR gives too much power to party machines

FPTP in single member constituencies gives the electorate no choice whatsoever between candidates fielded by any particular party. A Blairite in Islington North would have to vote for Jeremy Corbyn if they wanted to vote Labour, whilst a left-winger in Stalybridge and Hyde would have to vote for James Purnell. There have also been a number of instances of favoured MPs being undemocratically "parachuted" into safe seats.

It is true that "closed list" systems of PR does not offer voters any greater choice within parties – candidates at the top of the list can effectively regard themselves as elected long before the voters get a say, whilst candidates towards the bottom might face an impossible task no matter how popular they might be with the wider electorate. Labour did use the introduction of Regional PR lists for the European Parliament elections in order to marginalise dissenting figures – however this was enabled by the party's own lack of democratic selection procedures. The order of the lists could have been ordered by a democratic vote of the party membership.

However, other PR systems offer voters a greater degree of choice, to a greater of lesser extent depending on the systems. "Semi-open" lists allow the vote to cast a vote in the party's recommended slate order or to vote for individual candidates within a party's slate, whilst "open" lists require the voter to make a positive choice between a party's candidates. In practice the predominance of voting by slate order makes it very difficult for voters to elect candidates lower down the list. More sophisticated electoral systems allow voters to vote for candidates not only within, but also across, party slates. Probably the most straightforward system to allow this is the Single Transferable Vote (STV), where voters rank candidates by numerical preference (1, 2, 3 etc) and the count proceeds round by round as surplus votes and/or votes from eliminated candidates are transferred to the candidates left in the contest.

Helping to Build a Broad Movement

It is understandable that some Labour party members are reluctant to give up a system that has rewarded their party with three consecutive majorities, out of all real proportion to levels of support in the country. The party has lost five million votes since 1997 – which under most voting systems would have made holding an exclusive grip on power for over a decade impossible – and four out of every five eligible voters did not support

the sole party of government. But this situation is neither democratic, nor has it led any closer to socialism. If politics is constrained by the need to 'triangulate' to the right on every area of policy, and where the party has no incentive to campaign and mobilise communities that have been the most reliable supporters of Labour's cause – voters are reasonably entitled to ask what the pursuit of power really been for?

For most voters FPTP gives them the worst of all worlds – campaigns that don't address them, a 'choice' between parties that sound the same and are equally reliant on big business, a system which means you probably have to vote for a party that wouldn't be your first choice if you don't want to "waste" it, and which regularly returns candidates who know they'll be re-elected without having to life a finger. There is therefore the potential to build broad support for electoral reform amongst current and disillusioned Labour voters, as well as amongst Greens and smaller parties on the left.

But even supporters who are broadly supportive of the political record of the government can see that current trends towards apathy and disengagement are not sustainable in the long term. Both from the perspective of democratic principle and longer-term self-interest of Labour as a political party, some senior figures in the party and the affiliated unions (albeit at present in the minority) are also supportive of reform. It is essential that we retain and build on this support we are to see any form of PR implemented, since it is difficult to see this happening without the involvement of the Labour party in government.

The challenge ahead is therefore to build a broad coalition of forces in favour of electoral reform – which will certainly need to include forces outside the Labour party – without "PR" being seen as the vehicle of sectarian attacks on Labour and the union link.

Pressure is already building outside the Labour party. The PCS passed a resolution (A152) at its 2008 annual conference in support of proportional representation [see Appendix I], whilst Bob Crow of the RMT has also been a long-standing supporter. This presents

an opportunity for the four non-affiliated unions that comprise the Trade Union Co-ordinating Group to make clear a joint position in favour, and appeal to their affiliated counterparts to follow suit in order that conditions for better political representation for trade unions are optimised.

Whilst the affiliated unions tend not to have adopted official policy positions, some leading individuals also influential in Labour's policy-making process (such as Billy Hayes of the CWU) are on record as supportive. Therefore, whilst support from the Green Party, the Campaign for a New Workers Party or from figures like Salma Yaqoob is welcome, it is important that the debate on PR in the unions is not regarded solely as position held by those wanting to break from Labour, but as a reform that can have support from a range of opinion on the broad political Left.

The emphasis should therefore be on the potential for empowering voters by "making votes count" and reaching out to presently disengaged sections of the electorate.

We would very much encourage the Labour Representation Committee to become part of such a broad Left movement for proportional representation, and would encourage you to adopt a policy resolution to this effect.

For further information or to discuss practical next steps please contact...

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APPENDIX I

PCS Resolution A152 - passed:
[…]Conference believes that politicians will be most responsive to our campaigning where all votes can affect the outcome of elections, not just those in marginal constituencies or those of particular types of voters as is the case under the First-Past-The- Post election system. Furthermore, fairer electoral systems open up a space for trade unionists and others to stand for the interests of their members and public service users.

Conference therefore believes that voting methods in council and Parliamentary elections should be more proportional, making all votes really count. Conference therefore instructs the NEC to:

1. continue to mount Make Your Vote Count campaigns, together with other unions wherever possible

2. continue to engage with Unite Against Fascism, Love Music Hate Racism and other local campaigns against the far right

3. campaign for fairer, more proportional voting systems in council and Parliamentary elections which would increase the effectiveness of MYVC by: making politicians more accountable; making political parties reflect a broader range of voter concerns; giving greater choice at the ballot box; marginalising the far right; making votes really count at elections.

4. investigate the various methods of proportional voting, together with bodies such as the Electoral Reform Society, and report to the 2009 ADC on which would best meet these aims.

The Electoral Reform Society campaigns for elections that are fairer and that make more votes count. Its work for a stronger democracy includes campaigns for a reduction in the voting age, for more opportunities for women in politics, and for a political culture in which politics belongs to the people.

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