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Hain attacks first-past-the-post system

By Marie Woolf, Chief Political Correspondent

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A shake-up in the way MPs are elected is to be proposed today by the Leader of the House of Commons, Peter Hain, who wants a form of proportional representation.

He will tell Labour MPs that unless the voting system is changed tactical voting against the Government could cost it seats and let in Tory candidates. Mr Hain, who is considered a Labour moderniser, believes that the change could increase turnout at the next election and "in the long-term enhance the quality of our electoral process and political representation".

He will propose that the current first-past-the-post system, under which the candidate who wins the most votes gets elected, be replaced with Alternative Vote (AV), under which voters are able to cast first and second preferences for candidates. Candidates would have to gain 50 per cent of the vote to get elected, or second preferences would then be counted.

He says: "A new system like AV will, I believe, improve the incentives to vote and remove many of the barriers that are inherent in our current system. Crucially, AV will give voters a greater sense of influence and ownership over the political process. This is the key: a politics that is owned by the people, not by politicians."

The cabinet minister's intervention in the debate will be seen as preparing the ground for Labour's election manifesto. The Government has already agreed to review the voting system after the European elections in June. Reform of the voting system is expected to be opposed by many Labour MPs and trades unions, who fear that changing it could damage Labour's chances of being elected with an absolute majority and lead to coalition with the Liberal Democrats.

Ministers are afraid that many traditional Labour voters will vote Liberal Democrat at the next general election in protest at Tony Blair's stance on the war in Iraq, which in some seats could let in the Tories. They fear that many of the marginal former Tory seats that Labour won in 1997 could switch back.

"At the next election, tactical voting by the progressive vote may actually hand seats to the Tories," Mr Hain will say today. "The consequences of being prepared to vote Lib Dem, for example, just to give us a bloody nose, will not be the re-election of a Labour government but the letting in of Tories into scores of marginal seats."

He will argue that there is very little incentive under the current system for many people to cast their votes. At the last election just 21 MPs lost their seats, 3 per cent of the Westminster constituencies.

"The vast majority of voters are in seats where a change of MP is unlikely and are increasingly realising that their vote will make very little difference to the

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outcome of a general election. So they are simply not bothering."

Mr Hain says that in 2001 the turnout in the 100 most marginal seats was 64 per cent, compared with 54 per cent in the 100 safest seats. "That missing 10 per cent is reason enough to support a change in the system if it means more people will feel their votes matter."

Mr Hain will add that there are large parts of the country where voters do not contribute to the outcome of an election, citing Surrey, where there are no Labour seats despite more than 20 per cent of its citizens voting for its candidates.

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