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# Whatever happened to electoral reform?

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Various new methods have been introduced for elections for different levels of government in the UK, but not for elections to the House of Commons. David Denver examines the reasons, and finds that there are bleak prospects for those who want reform in the way MPs are elected.

At first sight, asking the question: 'Whatever happened to electoral reform?' appears odd. During the past 5 years, after all, various new electoral systems have been introduced for different levels of government in the UK, and all voters have had at least one chance to vote in a PR (proportional representation) election, the European Parliament election in 1999.

As the list in Box 1 illustrates, the UK is now a veritable laboratory for anyone interested in electoral systems, and further changes are on the cards. In both Scotland and Wales proposals to use the single transferable vote (STV) method for local elections are under active consideration and, if regional assemblies are established in England, they, too, would be elected, using a proportional system. Electoral reform, it would appear, is alive, well and progressing very nicely.

There is one glaring exception to this trend, however: elections to the House of Commons. It was discontent over the operation of the first-past-the-post

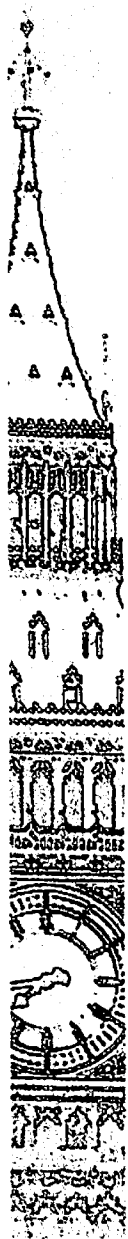
(FPTP) system in general elections that provided the original impetus for a new willingness by government to consider alternative electoral systems and yet a change in the method of electing MPs now appears almost as far away as ever. How has this happened?

## Labour's 1997 manifesto commitment

In the 1997 election, Labour's manifesto contained an explicit commitment to hold a referendum (at an unspecified date) on whether to change the system and also promised to set up an independent commission to recommend an alternative to FPTP (see Box 2). These pledges were something of a surprise since Labour, as a whole, had never shown any real interest in electoral reform. The party, after all, had benefited in the past from the distortions produced by FPTP, winning most seats in the February 1974 election while coming second in votes, for example.

It would be wrong to suppose, however, that the new departure represented a sudden change of heart among Labour Party members and backbenchers. Rather, it was a particular manifestation of the 'New' Labour Party being created by Tony Blair and other key 'modernisers' in the Labour leadership. Part of Labour's new agenda was constitutional reform (itself part of the process of modernising Britain), and, to gain support for change, Blair was happy to cooperate, publicly as well as privately, with the Liberal Democrats.

In addition, with a pessimism that was to prove unfounded, Labour leaders feared that the outcome of the 1997 election might be close and that they might have to rely on the support of (or even form a coalition with) the Liberal Democrats. The price of Liberal Democrat support and cooperation over broader constitutional change was a commitment to electoral



Box 1 Current electoral systems in the UK

System	Body elected
Single member simple plurality (First-past-the-post)	House of Commons; some English/Welsh and all Scottish local authorities
Multi-member simple plurality (First-past-the-post)	Some English/Welsh local authorities
Additional member system (AMS)	Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and London Assembly
Single transferable vote (STV)	Northern Ireland Assembly, European Parliament and district councils in Northern Ireland
Regional (closed) party lists	European Parliament
Supplementary vote (SV)	Directly elected mayors in England



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### Box 2 Labour manifestos on electoral reform for Westminster

#### 1997

'We are committed to a referendum on the voting system for the House of Commons. An independent commission on voting systems will be appointed early to recommend a proportional alternative to the first-past-the-post system.'

*Labour Party (1997) New Labour: Because Britain Deserves Better, Labour Party*

#### 2001

'The government has introduced major innovations in the electoral systems used in the UK – for the devolved administrations, the European Parliament and the London Assembly. The (Jenkins) Commission on the Voting System made proposals for electoral reform at Westminster. We will review the experience of the new systems and the Jenkins Report to assess whether changes might be made to the electoral system for the House of Commons. A referendum remains the right way to agree any change for Westminster.'

*Labour Party (2001) Ambitions for Britain, Labour Party*

reform. So Labour's manifesto commitment had the advantages of fitting with the party's revamped image as new, radical and modern and also securing Liberal Democrat support for key aspects of its programme.

### The Jenkins Commission

In the event, of course, Labour won in a landslide at the 1997 election and there was no need for the new government to rely on the Liberal Democrats for anything. None the less, Blair was true to his word and in December 1997 established the Independent Commission on the Voting System under the late Lord (Roy) Jenkins. The Jenkins Commission reported in October 1998 and recommended as an alternative to FPTP a system which became known as 'AV plus' or 'AV top-up'. The bulk of MPs would continue to be elected from single-member constituencies — but using the alternative vote method rather than FPTP. These MPs would then be 'topped up' with separately elected regional members to make the overall distribution of seats more proportional to the votes cast.

Despite the wide publicity when it was published and being generally welcomed by the government, little more was heard of the Jenkins Report. Although the government claimed that this was due to lack of time to organise and hold a referendum, the real reason was that Labour opponents of change became more vocal and active. Many 'old' Labour people —

on the back benches, in the country and within the government (including major figures such as John Prescott, Jack Straw and Margaret Beckett) — had never been convinced of the need for electoral reform, or of the wisdom of cooperating with the Liberal Democrats. They now argued that 1997 had shown that Labour could win handsomely under FPTP (conveniently forgetting the four successive defeats from 1979 to 1992) and that the support of the Liberal Democrats was irrelevant.

In addition, experience of PR elections suggested that they did not suit Labour's interests. Turnout in the European Parliament elections of June 1999 was very poor and Labour's performance was disastrous (although even fewer seats would have been won under FPTP). Similarly, the conclusion that PR opponents drew from the elections for the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly in May 1999 was that the system robbed Labour of outright power in the two bodies. In both cases, the party won a large majority of the constituency contests but was in a minority after the addition of list seats and had to negotiate a coalition to share power with the Liberal Democrats (immediately in Scotland; 18 months later in Wales).

### Party advantage

In the face of growing dissension on the issue within his party, Blair announced in June 1999 that there would be no referendum on PR before the next general election. A consultation exercise within the party was launched and, as a result, the question of electoral reform for Westminster was effectively shelved for the foreseeable future (and suggestions that PR should be introduced for local elections in England were abandoned). It is hard to avoid the conclusion that simple party advantage — winning a monopoly of power on minorities of votes — had come to outweigh considerations of fairness or conceptions of a new sort of politics in Labour's thinking.

The effect of these developments on cooperation between Labour and the Liberal Democrats was profound. It is arguable that Paddy Ashdown resigned as Liberal Democrat leader in 1999 because he realised that, after all his 'cosying up' to Tony Blair (which had caused some strains within his own party), electoral reform for Westminster, the key Liberal Democrat demand, was going nowhere. When Charles Kennedy became leader he suggested that relations with Labour were in crisis due to the Blair's reluctance to pursue reform and by March 2000 he argued that without a firm Labour manifesto commitment to a referendum on the issue there was not much basis for further





## Whatever happened to electoral reform?

### Key terms

#### Proportional representation (PR)

Electoral systems where the percentage share of the votes won by a political party in elections to the legislature is reflected in that party's resulting share of seats in the legislature.

#### First-past-the-post (FPTP)

The electoral system used in the UK for elections to the Westminster Parliament, in which the winning candidate requires a simple plurality of votes, i.e. more than any other individual candidate.

#### Additional member system (AMS)

A hybrid system in which members of the legislature are elected in one of two ways: some by simple plurality in single-member constituencies and others through regional party lists to ensure a degree of proportionality.

#### Single transferable vote (STV)

A PR system in which voters rank candidates in order of preference and candidates are elected by reaching a quota. Uses multi-member constituencies.

#### Party list system

A system in which voters choose between political parties, each of which publishes a list containing the same number of candidates as representatives to be elected in a particular area. There are open-list and closed-list systems.

#### Supplementary vote (SV)

A system that elects candidates in single-member constituencies and requires voters to make a first and second preference choice on the ballot paper. To be elected, a candidate must win more than 50% of first preference votes or a combination of first and second preference votes.

Definitions from A. J. Turner (2002) *UK Government and Politics*, Essential Word Dictionary, Philip Allan Updates

Constitution Unit at University College London is doing so), far less assessing whether changes might be made to the system of electing MPs. Prospects for change are bleak. Opposition from 'old' Labour remains as strong as ever; other more urgent issues demand government attention. Moreover, although research suggests that the electorate in Scotland and Wales generally approves of the PR systems in use there, electoral reform is not an issue that is going to attract a million people on to the streets of London to protest at the iniquities of FPTP.

Meanwhile, the Conservatives, despite being in danger of suffering an unprecedented third successive general election defeat and being massively handicapped by the current system, show no interest at all in changing the system.

### Electoral arithmetic

As has been the case for some time, the best chance for progress probably lies in electoral arithmetic. If the kind of situation apparently feared by Tony Blair before 1997 — a very narrow Labour majority (or even minority) in the House of Commons so that the Liberal Democrats held the balance of power — actually arose, it would clearly be to Labour's advantage to do a deal. Since party advantage weighs heavily with politicians, this might be enough to persuade them to ditch any scruples that they might have about instituting PR. Since the Liberal Democrats see themselves as having been betrayed on the issue between 1997 and 2001, they would surely not make the mistake of sustaining Labour in office in these circumstances without something very much more than a vague promise that something would be done about changing the Westminster election system.

cooperation between the two parties. In January 2001, Kennedy announced that 'the project' — a realignment of the left on the basis of Labour–Liberal Democrat cooperation — was in a coma.

### Bleak prospects for reformers

The issue now was whether Labour would make any mention at all of electoral reform in its manifesto for the 2001 election. What emerged in the event was a weak promise to 'review the experience of the new systems and...assess whether changes might be made to the electoral system for the House of Commons.' Although it was agreed that any change would be submitted to a referendum, there was no clear commitment to holding one (Box 2).

Over 2 years into the current Parliament, there is no evidence of the government actively reviewing the experience of the new electoral systems (although a private independent commission established by the

### References and further reading

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