

Electoral Reform: Labour's Litmus Test (a speech to the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform)

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Forgive me for stating the obvious, but Labour has just experienced a catastrophic defeat. And yet, despite the rhetoric of some of our leadership candidates and commentators, I don't feel the party is yet anywhere near getting to grips as to why.

Yes, it is about Brexit, it's about leadership, it's about policy, it's about presentation and yes, it's about certain places – the Red Wall, and all that phrase is now shorthand for.

But ultimately the crisis is one of culture. Is Labour culturally fit for the 21st century?

After every Labour election defeat, the same things tend to happen. Hands are wrung, blame is apportioned, a new leader usually gets anointed and support for PR enjoys an upsurge.

Labour Conference fringe meetings on PR are packed after every election – Robin Cook brilliantly addressed 500 delegates/activists at the 1992 Labour Conference.

The narrative goes something like this: 'Labour can't win under first-past-the-post, so we have to change the system'. This blip usually lasts as long as it takes to get to the incumbent government's mid-term doldrums and the race to the next electoral finishing line comes in to view. At which point you have to pretend you can win alone – even when it's obvious you can't. Support for PR then sinks – until Labour loses again. Play and repeat, ad-infinitem.

But I think something different is happening now.

And so, it's Labour's relationship to the electoral system I want to explore, unpack and reposition in this speech tonight.

But before I do that, I want to pay a real and deep tribute to the [Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform](#) (LCER). As we will see, it's tough confronting the party with a reality it would rather not have to face up to. But LCER does it year in and year out – developing your networks and arguments. Doing the hard yards, and as we will see, it's starting to pay-off.

As such, it's impossible not to pick out the determination of Mary Southcott to see this through. Samuel Johnson said 'great deeds are not done by brute strength but through perseverance'. Mary and LCER have persevered. They have kept the flame of electoral reform alight through the dark nights, but a new democratic dawn is emerging and because of you, we are ready to grasp the moment.

I want to play my part in what happens next and in particular how we convert the Labour Party to PR – not at some distant date, but at the party conference this year.

What I want to set out here is the rationale for that shift. To help us I've got an alliterative triptych of PR, which is - maths, morality and modernity. So let's start with the math.

The Maths of PR

Firstly, we simply can't argue for PR on the basis that it benefits Labour. Instead we have to argue that PR is worth fighting for on principle alone.

For Labour, it takes an average 50,000 votes for every MP to get elected. That's compared to 38,000 for every Tory MP. But that is dwarfed by the injustice to the Liberal Democrats who need 336,000 per MP and the Greens who require a monstrous 865,000 to get my friend Caroline Lucas elected. Here an honourable mention must also go to the SNP - who only need 25,000 votes per MP and benefit hugely from FPTP, but still advocate PR for Westminster.

And yet, for the biggest injustice we have to go back to the 2015 general election, where UKIP got 3.9 million votes, 13 per cent of the total, and got only one MP. Little more than a year later the people of the UK voted for the UKIP policy of Brexit. Now, we can't say PR would have stopped Brexit, but the lack of exposure of UKIP candidates in Westminster combined with the rightful sense of grievance of being cheated out of representation, fuelled the Brexit victory.

Meanwhile Labour's pay-off from FPTP is bad and getting worse. The distorting benefits from FPTP accrue not just from a party's quantity of votes but their spread. Labour is now piling up votes in city seats and winning huge majorities, but the Tories enjoy a broader spread of votes - their support is more evenly dispersed. As such, geography and demographics ultimately trump democracy, at least under FPTP.

Labour - a party of justice, equality and fairness has so far resisted the call for just, equal and fair votes for a number of reasons. Mostly the desire for so called 'strong government' combines with a deep sense of tribalism that sees anyone outside of Labour's ranks, and indeed many people within Labour, as the enemy.

This is why the issue is cultural and therefore so hard to change. Deep in Labour's psyche is the goal to recreate the 1945 moment, when a Labour government delivered socialism for the people from above. As a result, all that's ever needed is a working majority and the 'right' leadership and hey presto, socialism.

But this misreads both 1945 and these new times. 1945 was possible for a whole host of social and cultural reasons. But the politics were much more complex than a simple reading of Labour's victory. Not least because the Labour programme was based, in part, on the ideas of Liberals as well as Socialists.

It was Keynes and Beveridge that supplied the core of the project. The same Liberals who had stood aside for Labour at the turn of the 19th century and gave us our electoral foothold. But Labour has told itself it's only about us. A monopoly socialism view dominates, in which the party would rather be out of power than share it, as we saw in 2010 and 2015.

And FPTP acts as a massive artificial stimulant to Labour. Labour finds it hard to win – with no majority for what will be 20 years by the next election – but under FPTP it ends up as the main party of opposition and the trappings of power that brings with it. A system designed for two parties forces the electorate to make a two-party choice.

So, why on earth would we want to give that up? It's like being guaranteed gold or silver.

I'll tell you why – firstly, because it's wrong. And secondly, because in a winner takes all electoral system, however much we try to delude ourselves, silver is failure. Not just for us but more importantly for the people we came into politics to represent.

The Morality of PR

So here we get to the morality of PR. We back electoral reform not because it might be good for us but because it's good for all of us. We back it because we believe in the equal and powerful voice of all. We hate wasted votes just as we hate wasted lives. We back it because we are democrats – unlocking all the voices. And we back it because we are progressives. Our gamble is that given the right system, resources and time, people will make good and progressive decisions. We back PR because ultimately, we trust the people.

Finally, we back PR because we know the means always shape the ends. How we achieve socialism will determine what sort of socialism we get. Power based on an electoral fix will result in an undemocratic society. We have to be the change we want to see in the world.

Ultimately, democracy is the means by which different visions of the good society are contested – Labour's vision of the good society is profoundly democratic.

PR and Modernity

So, if the maths and morality make the case for PR, then why now? What's different about this moment that suggests Labour should fundamentally change its approach to political strategy and opt for a politics of pluralism?

I think the evidence is all around us. Facilitated by the technology of networks but driven by the need to fill the gaps of austerity and the

fear of climate change, people are now collaborating as never before.

The very complexity of the challenges and opportunities we face demand solutions that are not imposed but are negotiated. It is almost laughable that we think that climate change, our aging society, the rise of the robots, the epidemic of loneliness and so much more, can be outsourced to a government that wins power on the basis of 25 per cent of eligible voters. That's not a mandate – it's a shackle.

Today, through technology, people have a voice and a say. They can know what they want and talk to anyone across the globe. They have power and information at their fingertips as never before. As voters they have never been more volatile. And yet they are subjected to an electoral system that either ignores them or forces them into a least worst option choice.

Our electoral system is out of sync with the culture and people it's supposed to serve and represent.

What I am asking Labour to do is to give up on the myth of 1945 and accept the reality of 2020. That in a culture of networks, platforms and engaged citizens, Labour can't impose its singular future, it can only negotiate a more plural one. Labour has to welcome a socialism built not on power over people, but power with them and for them.

A Campaign to win Labour to PR

So today – with the support of LCER, but also the [Electoral Reform Society](#) and [Make Votes Matter](#) and wider democracy campaigners such as Compass and many more – we are launching a campaign to persuade Labour that the time is right to switch to PR and take the issue and put it on the floor of Labour's September Conference.

We know this will be a tough fight. Old vested interests want to hold on to the command and control power bases. Letting go and trusting others is hard. But it is the only way we will build deep alliances for transformative change.

Because this isn't just about converting Labour to a plural future, rather we have to learn from other constitutional change campaigns, such as the Scottish Constitutional Convention which cleared the path to the Scottish Parliament as a deep civil society movement of faith, trade unions and communities.

Big change has to be owned by the whole country.

Now, just a word here about Labour's leadership race. I'm listening really hard to hear a candidate who really gets this, who doesn't just back PR when pushed to, but wants to make it a central issue to their leadership and really champion it. A candidate who gets the cultural

challenge to Labour.

Some have said 'they are not yet convinced', which I fear is code for 'I don't back it'. Others say they want to keep the constituency link – and either don't know or want to ignore the fact that systems like AMS (Additional Member System) do that exceptionally well.

So, if candidates can argue for greater democratisation of the commanding heights of our economy in the form of public ownership then why not greater democratisation of the very state itself?

Look I get it – better than most. It's hard to argue in a campaign to lead a party, that it can't or shouldn't rule alone. But the party nor the planet can wait for another loss. Why is it that Labour leaders like Kinnock and Miliband back PR but only when they've lost the leadership? We have to do this now.

Winning is not about securing office on the back of the vote of only a quarter of the possible electorate, but about securing a deep and enduring alliance for real power and therefore real change.

That's why I back Keir – no not Starmer – but Hardy, Labour's first leader who was a staunch supporter of PR.

And as ever, people and our members are ahead of us. In a recent YouGov poll 76 per cent of Labour members said they backed PR. A tide not a blip is now rising.

To get there we have to convince the party that PR is both right and doable. If we can't win alone then we have to work out how to work with others. PR can be part of the underpinnings of a progressive alliance that could transform our democracy and our country. We change the system so that we can change society.

Conclusions

But look - and let's be really clear here - PR is not a silver bullet for all our woes. Other countries have PR and they still have problems. But what it is for Labour is a litmus test of our cultural ability to join the collaborative 21st century.

And it's no quick fix – the party still has to do the hard yards of re-imagining its purpose and its vision, its policies, presentation and organisation. But it can only do so now in a plural spirit – tolerant and open, inside the party, as well as outside of it.

People are desperate for a new politics – pluralism and PR are at the centre of that. They know the free market has its limitations, as does the remote state. We all need to be engaged in the rebuilding of our country. But you can't do that on the basis of FPTP.

Last Friday we left the EU – and the abiding spirit behind that decision was of course to 'take back control'. As we face the challenge of remaking our nation, it is my view – and it must become the view of our party – that only a new system of politics and democracy will deliver a new society. PR is part of that. But we will need other forms of democracy too.

Because isn't it interesting that Extinction Rebellion have decided that if you want to tackle the climate crisis you need citizens' assemblies to do so. Because when we start to make the link between democracy and our everyday lives then we start to win. Virtually everything we want of meaning, demands a new democracy first.

It is madness in a world that explodes with diversity and choice, that we live in a political duopoly – it's as if you could only watch either the BBC1 test-card with that girl and her clown or ITV and some fat bloke playing darts. Not only that, they also have a veto over whether you can watch any other channels. It's simply unsustainable.

The fabled leader of the German SPD Willy Brandt claimed in 1969 there was only one way to achieve the goal of the good society – it was to 'dare more democracy'. So, I tell my party this: It is time to dare, or it will be time to die.

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