



Electoral Reform in Local Government

Report of the LCER fringe meeting held at Labour Connects 2020



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These are the notes of a fringe meeting organised by the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform to discuss, I think for the first time at Labour Conference, unless you know different, how local government and regional government have implemented in some part, and might implement across the UK, electoral reform and proportional representation. I think we all find this is quite a timely discussion.

The value of local government has really been proved during this period of Covid, certainly in my part of the world, but I'm pretty sure you will recognise that as well. It's also notable around the world that in countries which have strong public health and local government input, there seems to have been a much better response and far greater control of the Covid virus than in countries which are highly centralized.

And one of the things about the government's response, and I think not for the better, has been how centralised and therefore confusing their messaging has been and how ineffective things, for example, like Test and Trace in England have been, when they could have been more effective, if instead of big contracts being given to the Sercos of this world, central government trusted local government to do what it does well, and one of those things is public health, and one of those things would be Test and Trace. And there were already examples of councils up and down the country who stepped in and have anticipated and improved the response to Covid. Certainly, in terms of community activity and making sure that people are looking after

each other, it's been ultra local, in my experience as a councillor, which has been most effective.

I should introduce myself. I'm the leader of the Labour and Co-operative Group in West Oxfordshire. You'll know that as David Cameron's constituency and we have a very effective Labour Group on the District Council, which is Conservative led as the largest group. But we make significant input and during Covid, I have to say, some of those differences between the parties have melted away and it's been individual councillors and the leaders of the groups who've been making significant contributions to how the council responds. And our officers have been nothing short of magnificent in making things work locally.

I'd love to hear people's experiences across the country. One of the other things that's brought this into sharp relief is the impending (and should have been published by now) White Paper on local government reorganisation in England. And that again, of course, is to reflect on our role in local government and also the way that we elect people locally. First past the post is pretty punishing in large parts of the country because it excludes that very strong and cogent and effective Labour voice from being heard in local government. And in other areas it may be different. Again, I'd love to hear from you, but I would like to think that we would be even stronger had we some form of proportionality at work in electing our representatives at local government. But my experience is of NOT having proportional representation. We have a panel for you today who have a variety of experience, including the fact that in large swathes of our country, we DO elect our councillors proportionally, and that has an impact on both the effectiveness and the conduct of government, but also, I think, asks questions of our national government about their legitimacy in comparison to our more proportional chambers. It certainly allows that range of voices to be heard, I believe.

Let me introduce your panel. We have with us Paul Sweeney, who is the former Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland. And I'm hoping that Paul's going to be able to tell us about Scotland's experience of proportional representation at a national level and at a local level. And we have Mark Child who is the Lord Mayor of Swansea. I was the mayor of Witney last year. I feel very small compared to the Lord Mayor of Swansea. That's pretty impressive, isn't it? Mark will be able to tell us about the experience in Wales. And then we have Ruth Cadbury, who's just reminded me she's the MP for Brentford and Isleworth and she knows about proportional representation because, of course, London has a PR system for the assembly. And it will be very interesting to hear from Ruth on that, but also reflections from Westminster. And we also have Councillor Doina Cornell, and Doina is the leader of Stroud District Council, very pleased that she's almost a neighbour here in West Oxfordshire, certainly the neighbouring county. And she can talk too about what impact it might have on the English local government were we to

introduce some form of proportional representation in the way that we run things. What I'd like to do is to ask first for contributions and points of view from Scotland and Wales. I wonder if I could come to Paul first to talk about Scotland.



Paul Sweeney, former Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland

This is a really timely discussion because I think we can feel the constitutional tension that's permeating through everything at the moment, and particularly after the last election. I think there's a real feeling of revulsion, particularly in Scotland, at the current government and that seems to have tipped the balance of support for breaking away and creating a separate state towards getting a majority opinion, rather than being a minority pursuit, which it has been very much ever since I've been alive. I think a key to how Labour can actually get ahead of this problem and actually present something visionary is to consider electoral reform as a key plank of that, because actually a key source of the tension and the so-called democratic deficit is actually our first past the post electoral system, which produces these massive regional and geographic distortions, and which means that you have this notion that certain parts of the country always get governments imposed on them, that they don't elect to have relatively little support for, and it creates real difficulties.

I think there is a real need for electoral reform to be a key part of our proposals for the future and it's something that's been a normal feature of Scottish politics since 1999. It took quite a lot of effort for Donald Dewar, who was at the time Secretary of State for Scotland, to get it through the Labour Party Conference to adopt the additional member system for the new Scottish Parliament, which elects a combination of first past the post constituencies with additional members elected from regional lists using the D'Hondt system which is quite complicated. Basically, there are two different votes - you vote for your constituency, kind of like you would do in the U.K. election, and then you vote on a regional list for a party. And basically the way it works is there's roughly nine constituencies per region and the number of constituencies you win plus one is used as a divider for the total number of votes the party gets on the regional list and that's how you break down. So you get lots of seats on the constituencies, you don't get as many on the list because your vote is divided by the number of constituencies you get in each round that continues to be added up and then eventually you get to the seven regional seats being filled. It is slightly convoluted way of doing it. One of the problems it has seemed to produce in the Scottish Parliament is this notion of two classes of MSP. And that is quite a tricky situation because you have this idea that you weren't actually elected, you just got in on the regional list as a party fix and you get quite a lot more mockery around that.

The two different MSPs don't get the same expenses. Regional list MSPs actually aren't able to have their own offices, their own constituency or regional office, they have to all be in the one regional office and they get less staffing budget. There is not as much support for their offices and so on. The parliament's own rules entrench this idea that the regional list MSPs don't do as much work as the constituency MSPs; so it does create those problems, that kind of tension. And I think that is an issue that needs to be addressed. Certainly not perfect solution, and it was remarked at the time it was probably one of the most selfless political acts of the Labour Party had ever done in Scotland because essentially it voluntarily surrendered our political hegemony in Scotland to open it up to the SNP, to sort of build a bridgehead if you like, or a beachhead, from which we've suffered ever since really. Our vote has declined every election since the Scottish Parliament was created from around 56 MSPs in 1999 to around 23 in 2016. There has been a significant fall in support, throughout the Scottish Parliament. There have always been minorities or coalitions. It was a unique situation in 2011 when the SNP won a majority in that parliament, when the system is designed for minorities. And so when Labour was in power from 1999 to 2007, it was through a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, and it was a condition of the deal with the Liberal Democrats in 2003 to introduce the single transferable system into local government in Scotland from 2007, which basically creates large multimember wards in each council.

Thus, you have three, four, five member wards in some cases. And personally, I think that seems to work better. I see Stephen Curran's on the call who is a Glasgow Councillor who might want to offer his view on his personal experience and is better placed than me to discuss the practicalities of how it works. In Glasgow. You tend to have four member wards. There are generally two SNP councillors and Labour councillors because of the way the STV system works in Glasgow. So ironically, it gives us far more support, even though we don't have any MSPs, or any constituency MSPs or any constituency MPs in Glasgow at the moment, we still are fairly decently represented in the council, with a sizeable number of councillors because of the STV system. In that way it prevents that horrendous swing where just everything is destroyed. So ironically, Labour is flattered by the arrangements of a Scottish Parliament and STV councils because we have far more representation than we would have under first past the post - we would have been totally destroyed across all levels of government in Scotland if we didn't have it. So in that sense, it does produce less volatile swings except when you get big political upsets like we saw in the UK after the Brexit vote, where you've seen the Red Wall collapse - we wouldn't have had that massive collapse. Because actually what you've seen under the surface is there are still significant levels of Labour support, is just that we have been pipped at the post, if you like, by, I hope, temporary upsurges in Tory votes because of Brexit, this kind of culture war that's played out. So it does produce massive distortions that creates

large numbers of uncounted votes, if you like, and it doesn't reflect the true underlying support that parties might have in a given geography, which creates these tensions that lead them to the UK saying, oh, we need to get out of this country because the Tories keep winning on the minority share of the popular votes and so on.

I definitely think there is a case for moving towards a system - my personal preference is to move to the single transferable vote system and have multimember constituencies so maybe have about three or four MP in larger constituencies. And that is my personal preference. Certainly, in Glasgow, it would mean that we would have at least three Labour MPs at the moment rather than none! So that is from a personal point of view, I would like to have it in Scotland. But we are in a bizarre situation where we still won around half a million votes but have only one MP. Our votes to seat ratio is terrible in Scotland. Yeah, the SNP are able to get 85% of the seats on 45% of the votes. And so, they are actually grossly over-represented in Westminster. And there is the idea that they somehow speak for Scotland when they don't. They actually represent a minority view in Scotland, yet they sort of assume this role that they are the voice of the nation. And it is kind of played into by English narratives as well, that people look towards the SNP "so that's Scotland talking". It is actually a bunch of what they call partisans talking, that aren't actually necessarily representative of a majority view in Scotland. So that is a problem. And it further overexaggerates the tensions that exist politically, I think that is something that is an existential challenge to the UK that we really need to address.

There are also difficulties in each layer of government. I think I am probably preaching to the converted amongst councillors to say that, you know, I actually consider standing for Glasgow City Council. I didn't work in politics before I became an MP in 2017. My employer prevented me from standing for the council because, I wasn't able to basically go from earning a wage of like 35,000 pounds a year to earning 16,000 pounds a year if I became a councillor full time, they basically said, if you want to become a councillor you have to leave your job. And I think there's a real problem there, when we expect young people to try and get into local government, yet they're expected to earn far less than the average wage, and barely earning the minimum wage, when you actually count up the amount of casework they have to do and stuff. So, I think there is a real challenge there. I think we need to professionalize councillors and actually make it a proper, full time job and pay them an appropriate salary and give them appropriate support with regards to administration for casework and so on. And I think that we would actually have a far better vibrancy in local government and turn it into a proper local government where we are able to sit full time, and actually have committees that sit on a full-time basis. And the balance of power between council officers and councillors would be significantly improved. It would provide far more scrutiny in local government and we probably would take on a significantly larger amount of responsibilities. And so that's the experience I've seen in Scotland in the last 20

years of devolution, where the Scottish Parliament acted as a vacuum that not only brings power down from the House of Commons in Westminster, but it's sucking power up for local government. And you may have seen some reports in the papers about Shetland. They were asking for greater autonomy from Edinburgh because, I mean, you know, Shetland's as far away from Edinburgh as Manchester is. So, there is a huge centralisation agenda going on in Scotland as a result of devolution. There is a narcissism around the Scottish Parliament that's been unpleasant, I think, and it's played into nationalist sort of narcissism. I think we need to challenge that as well. We're looking at reforms to local government and actually moving towards a codified constitution that defines where powers should lie in the UK between the federal parliament at Westminster and regional parliaments around the UK or perhaps an English parliament or a network of home nation parliaments. And then you need to have another tier, which is restoring the old county councils, if you like, or regional councils in Scotland and actually have them codified with key responsibilities, which we've seen play out quite well with the city mayoralities.

But I think one of the challenges to the city mayoralities, is they are rather like princely states, you know, just these kind of "barons" they have created almost with huge amounts of power, with little scrutiny around them. But you want to actually return to a system where there's more scrutiny, almost having city parliaments, if you like. I think there's a big case for reform and codifying this and sorting it all out. And I think the vision that Labour can offer is to say, look at the chaos of the Internal Market Bill. Isn't it far better to have a constitutional convention? It is like saying, post Brexit, the entire constitutional architecture of the UK needs to be totally looked at again from a fundamental level and actually pieced together where this makes sense and build a asymmetrical structure that is codified in a written constitution and everybody knows where they stand. And, you know, this harmony is created rather than making the lopsided situation we've got just now. So that in a kind of rough ramble is my thinking on this. I think it is very urgent that we do it, though. I think it's critical, in fact, to our agenda. It is not good enough for us to simply brush it away, saying: "we don't want to entertain, you know, nationalist sentiments; we don't want to get embroiled in these things". We need to have more imagination about it. We need to have more vision about it and offer something that is more compelling and more, you know, when people look at it, they say "You know what? That would suit me. That seems like a sensible idea", rather than allowing them the extreme polarity of nationalism in Scotland and nationalism in England, in the form of the Tories, and their anti European attitudes, those sort of little Englander attitudes, prevail. And that's going to tear our country apart. And I think way we can tackle is to really adopt a much more exciting vision. And this could be outlining the architecture, and what that could look like. So that's kind of my thinking on it. And I wouldn't underplay the urgency of how quickly and imaginatively and boldly we need to

get going at this. We can't wait for the next election, really. We need to have this sorted out well before 2024.

***Duncan:** Thank you very much indeed, Paul, and thanks for broadening the debate as well. Too often I think we see electoral reform as about power in the House of Commons, but actually talking about something much broader here, constitutional renewal of the country. And I think that's timely and well thought through. Incidentally, because I'm leader of my group, I got slightly more allowance than my fellow councillors. I get six grand, whereas they get four and a half! If we are thinking about professionalising, I think we have a long way to go.*



Cllr Mark Child, Lord Mayor of Swansea

I might repeat a little bit of what Paul has said as we have a similar experience in Wales. By the way, Lord Mayor is an honorary title. You get it if you've been there long enough basically, for a year. I've been a councillor in Swansea since 1999. That's 20 odd years now, isn't it? And I have been, up until recently, cabinet member with Social Services portfolio. I thought I'd go through just a bit of terminology. If I say assembly, sometimes I will say Senedd which is the same thing. If I say assembly member or MS, it is just the same thing; we changed the name recently. What we have in Wales and it's rather similar, but not identical to what we have in Scotland, what the results have been, which had been vastly different, and what the current issues are and what the future challenges might be in Wales. And I think these may well reflect in Scotland and England and elsewhere.

We have had a form of PR, the same form or almost the same form as in Scotland since May 99, the first assembly elections. It is these 40 constituencies elected by first past the post. Then you have five regions with about eight constituencies each, which do a sort of balancing exercise. And I'm glad, Paul explained the maths because it is unfathomable to me, but it attempts to produce a proportional membership of the Senedd. And by and large, it has. One party has gained more than others by this, it is the Labour Party because we tend to win more of the constituency seats and however hard they try to balance it proportionately, we still end up with a greater proportion than our vote, although that's narrowed by the exercise. We have 60 AMs in total, 40 constituency and 20 regional. Local government has first past the post in the 22 local unitary authorities in Wales. We have no elected mayors. And every area is covered by a unitary authority.

The results have been we have been permanently in power since 1999, either with a slim majority or in a coalition with Liberal Democrats or Plaid or working in a minority government. But it has meant that we have had what we might call a progressive government the whole time, in which the Labour Party has been the lead member and had the premiership as well. So, on that basis, it has worked. Labour has always been strong, as Wales has always been very strongly Labour. There was fear, I guess, that in going into a PR system we might not be, but that has not proved to be the case. We've managed to adopt a system which is detrimental to us compared to the first past the post system, yet remained in power, because there is a natural coalition against having Tories in power. And we managed to exploit that, it has worked in our favour in Wales, in my view. Not that I want to share power with Liberal Democrats or Plaid, but it is better than letting the Tories have it.

The current issues are exactly the two types of assembly members. You have one first past the post, representing a constituency, who gets the vast majority of the work from that constituency. And then you have regional members who are able to pick and choose basically what they do. The way it works in Wales is that Labour wins a lot of constituencies. Most of the regional members are not Labour. And so we find that I'll talk about my example in Gower, where we had one Conservative regional assembly member who only did work in Gower constituency, which was the most marginal of the constituencies within their region, and they in fact won Gower for the first time ever, three elections ago. Luckily, we won it back, but it was obvious that they were only focusing on one thing and that was winning the parliamentary seat in Gower. So, it gives two different class of assembly members, the current system.

What it has done is preserve the Tories in the assembly, they would not have won a first past the post seat. They might have got one if we were just elected on that basis. There is a begrudging acceptance that it has allowed the Tory presence to remain, amongst Tories or some Tory activists anyway, that having a PR system has been to their benefit in the long term in Wales. Although they are trying to reflect what's happening in England, there is a respect for the system of PR of some kind amongst some Tories in Wales, which is heartening to see and something we can sort of put a wedge in and try to widen that gap. It has UKIP in at the last election. You can say that it is a bad thing, but that's what the people voted for. And to be quite honest, once they got in there, they are such a shambles, it has really exposed them as being useless, not producing anything for the people of Wales or their constituents or whatever. And I anticipate their vote will virtually disintegrate at the next assembly election, or Senedd election, I should say.

Because there are 22 local authorities in Wales, the Cabinet Member for health or education in the Welsh government will know by name, all of them, and there will be an immediate ability to

contact your government minister, should you want to. There's a large closeness there, and as a lot of the local authorities in Wales are also solidly Labour, and have been forever, there is a closeness which is a hindrance on challenging the way the local government works in Wales. There have been numerous attempts to reorganise in various ways, all of which have floundered on the block of Welsh local government saying "no, we're happy with the way things are", which is a first past the post system. And Labour is the biggest block to first past the post in local government in Wales, I have to say in my experience. We have toyed with different proposals, but they've always failed. They keep on arising because whenever the Welsh Government looks at constitutional issues, it comes up that there is a better voting system than first past the post.

So, what are the challenges facing us? Well, we're about to go from 40 parliamentary constituencies to 29 at some point in the future. The constituencies to the assembly will not map onto, in any sense, in any way, the constituencies for Parliament. So that throws up an issue. We got 60 MSs, but because of increased devolution, and the amount of MSs that are involved in the government, 60 isn't enough. We regularly say we need 80 to 90 to form a proper government and proper Senedd that properly scrutinizes ministers and laws and rules as they are being made. We recently had a report to Welsh government saying that we should go down to 20 constituencies and use a single transferable vote system to elect about 85 MSs across Wales. They also said that we should have votes at 16, which I think the assembly is going to agree. But it's also saying we should have PR for councils, but the councils should have the ability to choose whether or not they go to PR, which is basically allowing everybody to carry on doing what they're doing. It's a sop. It's not government with backbone. But that's where we are. I think that a majority of the other parties in Wales are for it, Lib Dems and Plaid want to change the system and want it changed in local government. But there is a block in local government in Wales, and unfortunately, it's us! There we go.

I would like to add one other thing. Constituencies! Constituencies we look at now were formed about the same time as we all thought that voting by every property-owning male, in a first past the post system, was a good idea. Because we think that's rubbish now, we shouldn't cling to the idea that constituencies designed around that reflect society or people when they're asked where they live, they don't give a constituency, they give their town or their city or county or something like that. A constituency needs to be where someone spends most of their time, their work, where they live, they shop and spend leisure. And that has expanded geographically very significantly from when the current constituencies were set up. So, I think we need to get away from being locked into this constituency relationship has got to be the same geographical size as it is now.

Duncan: That's very interesting. That's a fascinating thing. Yes, but not gerrymandering by the same token. With those two very interesting contributions, we now come to the Westminster perspective.



Ruth Cadbury, MP for Brentford and Isleworth

For those who don't know, I'm Ruth Cadbury, Labour MP for Brentford and Isleworth in West London, and I was elected five years ago. But before that I did twenty-five years on Hounslow Council, which is where I represent now, and the ward I represented is at the centre of my parliamentary constituency. And can I apologize to anyone who heard me at last night's LCR event? Because most of what I'm going to say will be quite familiar.

But for those who don't know, LCER is working with other key organisations and other parties to address electoral reform in its widest sense. Now, see, we think of electoral reform initially as proportional representation. And certainly, that's what LCER has been campaigning for, for many years, and continues to do so. And PR is a subset of electoral reform, and electoral reform is a subset of democratic reform. And you can't really talk about one without the other. And personally, I'm not here to advocate particular forms of PR. There are many and I know one could have a whole day talking about different forms of PR and not agree: AV, STV... I think we do all agree in the Labour Party, in fact 75% of party members support electoral reform. But I think there's a fairly strong consensus that whatever we have, the constituency link is important. There has to be an area linked to at least some of the elected representatives. I'm not just talking about Westminster elections anyway, but that detail is not for today, I don't think.

I hope I don't need to reprise the arguments for electoral reform. But just very briefly, 19 of the last 20 UK governments have been elected with a minority of the votes cast. And this is appalling. A third of registered voters, some 14.6 million voters, didn't vote in the last general election. And for many, they don't see any point: their vote didn't count. And when comparable countries have been studied, it is estimated about five million more people in the UK would have voted had there been in some sense that their vote mattered. And it's more likely that those who didn't vote would have voted Labour than Conservative. That's a very strong reason for Labour to make the change; and of course, very strong reasons for the Tories, in power at the moment in Westminster, not to make the change. Obviously, where there's a link between the constituency, and between constituents and its candidates, it means the local link is retained,

and it does give the voters the opportunity to vote their party allegiance as well as their preferred person, if that person is from a different party.

I've door knocked in New Zealand in the general election three years ago, where we were getting out the vote, the Labour voters, in a strongly Labour seat. The MP was going to get re-elected without any problem, but Labour needed all of those votes in order to help up the additional list voters elected. And I think, Mark, I think I'd rather be in an assembly, a council chamber or a parliament with a few Tories and be in power, than the situation we're facing in Parliament right now with this appalling Tory government, with an 80-vote majority and they can do whatever they like. I think I'd rather have fewer of them.

We had the BNP in the London assembly for a while. They were completely ineffectual. They disappeared without trace. I can't talk in detail about how the London assembly works, but I just know from being a councillor and being an MP, that on my patch, because of our Labour Authority being paired with two non Labour voting authorities, we effectively have got a permanent Tory constituency rep representing us on the assembly. But I've always got Labour people I can talk to. I think the issue is the London assembly is it's little more than a scrutiny body because frankly, the mayor has all the power and that's a different issue that we need to address in terms of democratic reform. So, we need to look at the wider issues beyond electoral reform, to democratic reform. We need to address the role and the remit of parliament and a democratically elected chamber; I think what we have to have, as has already been mentioned by Mark and Paul, is we need a constitutional settlement with the devolved administrations, which are being ridden roughshod over with the Internal Markets Bill at the moment, and also a constitutional settlement for local government. We need to absolutely look at the relationship between government, parliament, and the judiciary. Again, Johnson's government have been appalling. We need to look at privacy, freedom of information, control of the media, funding of political parties, and of course 16- and 17-year olds should be able to vote.

But even Democratic reform isn't the be all and end all of better democracy. Good democracies have other factors as well. Good leadership: again, back to New Zealand, excellent leader in Jacinda Ardern. Good democracies have local decision-making powers, which are coupled with local fiscal powers, to both make local spending decisions, but also local income generating powers as well. We need parties and politicians that engage, listen, and communicate effectively. But I think some form of PR ensures that anyway, because nobody is guaranteed a seat for life.

How do we get there? We need to obviously win the election, the next general election, but we need to build towards that with having a democratic convention. So, once we're elected, one of the first things we do is set up a full democratic convention. LCER is working with the other political parties (apart from the Tories and the DUP), Make Votes Matter, Open Labour, Compass, The Electoral Reform Society to generate this debate. We've got a meeting at 10 o'clock called Labour for a New Democracy, which is the launch of all that, to pull together what a democratic convention looks like, because I think it's a democratic convention that works out the detail of a lot of this. And I do think that some form of citizen assembly type process, so that we don't fall into the trap that the coalition government fell into, and frankly, the Liberal Democrats, who threw a referendum on AV, at a completely disinterested public. The few people who voted frankly didn't think it was a good idea. That's how not to make significant democratic change. We have that example and let's not go down that route again.

There is something we should be shouting about now as well, and that's the further imminent disjoint between local authority area boundaries and the parliamentary constituency boundaries. At the moment, some of my colleagues have the misfortune to have to represent constituents in two local authority areas. I don't yet, but myself and my fellow MP who between us cover the borough of Hounslow, our constituencies are too large, and Hounslow is now the size of two and a half parliamentary constituencies. But there's no doubt that I can represent far better all of my constituents and one local authority than have to also represent possibly the people in two wards in another local authority area. I'd have to get to know a whole second set of decision makers, officers, local community networks and so on. I think I'd be representing fewer people, less well than more people well, as I do at the moment. I've gone through this in the local government review as well, in Hounslow, where I was the lead on the Labour group for the re-warding; and the crazy way, we had to kind of work out a boundary down the middle of the town of Brentford and, you know, it was just split in two.

And again, I think, as Mark said, whether ward boundaries or constituency boundaries or whatever, they do have to reflect the local area and for those of us in parliament, we should be only representing people in one local authority area, wherever possible. And that's more important than this plus or minus 5% tolerance, which is far too small and makes for some crazy decisions.

Very briefly, what you can do if you're not already an LCER member, please join. Make sure your CLP has policy, and do encourage if you've got a Labour MP, or you're friends with a Labour MP, to encourage them to join LCER, because there's only a few of us who are actually paid up members of LCER in the PLP at the moment, though there is lots of support for reform

among MPs actually of all parties, apart from the Tories. So please encourage your MP to join us. Thanks very much.

***Duncan:** Interesting the point about the link between tiers of government. I am lucky enough to live in a constituency which is also a single district. We're unlucky in the fact that we have a Conservative MP and a large Conservative majority in that Westminster position, and also relatively poor links, even though he's a former district councillor. So, there are pluses and minuses, I guess.*



Cllr Doina Cornell, Leader of Stroud District Council

My name is Doina Cornell and I'm the Leader of Stroud District Council. I've been a district councillor for eight years representing the market town of Dursley in Gloucestershire and leader for the last two and a half years now. So, I thought I'd talk about the role of councillors in relation to this whole debate. I have three elements to what I'll say, and I'm conscious we want to leave some time of discussion as well. So, one: just generally speaking, about the role of councillors. Secondly, I'll explain a little bit more about the particular situation in our district as I think that's quite pertinent to the debate. And thirdly, I'll just touch on the whole thing that's happening around local government reorganization and potentially the white paper (or not) that is supposed to be coming from government at some point.

In a very broad sense, I would say, where councils can be significant in this, and I use our council as an example (we've passed a motion in support of votes at 16) is that we're always influencers and I think we're embedded in our local community. So if in this debate we are aiming to get by 2024, Labour councillors in the party very much on board, I think all councillors and candidates (we've got significant local elections coming up next year in many parts of the country, including our own) have an important role to play, in administration, but equally in opposition. So, I think I think that's where I would see a key role for councillors to use that platform that we have by being local elected representatives to put that case. So, I think that that's what I would say about that.

I wanted to just talk a little bit about Stroud District Council, particularly, because I think it's quite interesting. As I said, I've been a councillor for eight years, and Stroud District is politically an extremely diverse district. We are a very marginal constituency, which was Labour,

unfortunately, we lost, just, in 2019, and we now have a Conservative MP. But we have on our council of 51, we have quite a large Green group, we have Liberal Democrats, Conservatives are the largest party, Labour second. But for the last eight years, because that is a council, that's in no overall control, we've been running what we call a cooperative alliance, which is Labour, Lib Dems and Greens working together.

So I think what I wanted to talk about was: one of the things I get back is an argument often is this perception that working in an alliance, which is potentially the outcome when you have some form of proportional representation or that type of voting system, is generally speaking perceived as weak in this country. I think we haven't perhaps talked a bit about what the barriers might be to persuading more people. I know you said that most members of the party are supportive of reform, but what is the situation out there with the average voter from a Labour point of view?

So, I think we're quite an interesting experiment in what it looks like. I would say that it's very hard work to be the leader of administration like that. But one of the key things is I do think you tend to work out all the difficulties in advance. I think one thing you can see quite clearly with this government which tries to hold on to all the power, essentially what happens is it makes a decision and then it has to deal with all the flak. What happens tends to happen in our council if you work it all out and all the difficulties with your allies. And then hopefully when you get to make a decision, you've pretty much done all that hard work. It is difficult. I'm not saying it's a perfect system, but no system would exactly be perfect. But I think it's a good example that it can work.

And I just use the example of what happened when we saw that there was the major issue with Covid. We made a decision because we had no opportunity to meet or have any decision making powers, we worked with the four group leaders: myself, the Greens, the Lib Dems who are part the alliance, but also we brought the Conservative leader in. And so, we had several meetings a week with all the four group leaders and the chief executive of the council in those early days, when we needed to make decisions very rapidly. And I think that made for better outcomes. And there's much evidence, isn't there, to show the more diverse you have a body, better decisions are made. And I think there's a stark contrast between what we were doing with our council, and what we've seen shambolically [nationally] with the response to that. I think quite key to that is the inability to work with others. I think we mustn't just look at system reform, but also what sort of outcome do we want to see? And although it's hard work, I do think, generally speaking, and we can probably see other examples across the world, where that more inclusive way of working is actually in the end: what it's all about is do we get better outcomes? Is it better for people? And I think there's a lot to be made for that. And I think that's where the

case should be looked at. Look at those examples and understand them and sort of start to chip away at that idea that it's weak, as I said, to have an alliance, because that seems to be quite pervasive in this country. Unfortunately, we don't have very good examples: the coalition government wasn't a terribly positive example. But I think there are other examples where you can see that.

There are some downsides to it. I mean, I think the fact that there's very small parties, we've only got two Lib Dem councillors, they call themselves a group, it's not quite a group, I suppose! They can sometimes have an undue influence. I think as a Labour leader, if you want to put forward some quite strong policy, where having to get your allies on board is more challenging, there can be difficulties with that. But overall, I would say that's important because when you get really into the nuts and bolts of local government, of course, there are some very clear lines between different parties, but often there's a huge amount of common ground. I mean, again, the Covid would be a good example. It doesn't really divide us politically, does it? There's a great deal of unity there. And so often you can find that common ground that you can work through and get good decision making.

So that's something about what the Stroud District Council example is, so I think that it is important to look at that sort of thing. And then I think the third element I wanted to say was around, more generally speaking, what's happening in local government. And I think there's some really interesting work that's been done in the last few months because we've had on our radar, we've had a sort of feverish summer not just over Covid, but also there's a lot of discussion in the networks I tap into with council leaders across the country is what is the government proposing in this white paper called devolution and local government reorganization? Where the devolution element of it is really quite unclear because all the talk has been about reorganizing government, I say in England, into different units, but really I haven't seen in there any discussion around actually devolving powers down. As we understand it, the government is perhaps getting a little bit cold feet, I think largely because there's been a huge amount of internal opposition to it, because the proposals, if they went ahead, as we understood earlier on in the summer, what was being considered was, to basically unitarise the remaining parts of local government, which was still in a two-tier system of districts and county, to bring them all into huge county units, and the County Council Network was lobbying very hard for that. In some cases, you would be looking at one council representing over a million people. So really large units. So the District Council Network, which is actually led by Conservatives (because I'm quite a rare breed in the sense of being a Labour leader of a District Council, we don't have many of those!) has been really vehemently opposed to this.

Some really good studies have been done by the District Council Network, definitely worth looking at, around local government organization. And they've picked up on a couple of things, which I think there's a lot of evidence for. What they've done is they've got to look at other countries, and how local government is organized. And England is already a real outlier in the world on our existing system, that we have much larger units on average. And so, councillors represent much larger numbers of people. You could just look at Europe to see France and Germany and other places, even places like Luxembourg, very small population, but have lots of municipalities, lots of very small-scale councils. And what you also see related to that is much better democratic engagement. One of the things there's quite a bit of evidence for is that the larger the unit, the more people are disengaged from the democratic process. Voter turnout in elections is lower and obviously it's harder to engage with whoever your local representative is. There's a great deal of evidence to show the size does matter when it comes to democracy.

I think that when you talk about electoral reform, I think that's already been touched on by other speakers, we have got to be looking at it in the round. There tends to be a fixation on Westminster and how many MPs and what sort of MPs we're going to get back to the House of Commons. But I think really for it to be done properly, it needs to be all the way down to the bottom. That includes looking at the final layer of local government, which is town and parish councils, which comes to the other point I wanted to make about the representation. Really, what we should be aiming for is to see government wherever it happens to be, whether it's your local town council, whether it's at Westminster, reflecting the communities that it serves. I'm sure we'd all agree it currently does not do that at all. Just to give the example of being a woman leader of a council. We are a tiny group (I think we've just about crept into double figures) percentage wise, there are very few women that lead councils not to speak of, where is our representation from, for example, our black and ethnic minority communities. I think the things should be linked together to look at that representation. Looking at proportional representation or however we want to do it, there is a possibility to have that conversation alongside. That's why to sort of look at it from a local government point of view is quite important.

So really, just to sort of say how we could play our part in this, I think we've got these very important local elections coming up next year, which I think the Labour Party, generally speaking, is saying is a little bit of test of where we are, to test the waters in our planning forwards towards 2024. Although electoral reform doesn't necessarily automatically come into the manifesto of a local council going into district elections, I do think that's a conversation to be had there about how we tie all these elements together. How do we make it not just about Westminster? How do we make it about local government? The point I think Duncan made right at the beginning; I would absolutely echo. We've been living and breathing the Covid crisis for

the last few months. What I've seen is regardless of which party has been running local councils, how local councils have stepped up and have done every single thing that was demanded of them with really, really challenging circumstances has been quite incredible. And we should be celebrating that more - absolutely responsive. I know we tend to think local councils are horribly slow and take ages to respond, but most officers and councillors responded. You know, they turned on a pin basically to get everything running. They kept services running. They responded to the most vulnerable and supported the most vulnerable in their communities. They helped local businesses and they continue to do so. So, a really good example. And as I mentioned before, what Duncan was saying as well, we worked really inclusively, with all the political representation in their communities, an absolute stark contrast to what we've seen with central government. And I think if you want to drill down into one of the major issues of why they're failing it is the lack of ability to include the opposition and have a diverse decision-making body in there. It's interesting that they look to the Blitz, and Boris Johnson looks to Winston Churchill as a sort of exemplar. Well, they had a Labour deputy prime minister, didn't they? So Labour was at the heart of the response as well.

I'll probably stop there because I'm sure you want to have questions and things. But hopefully that just gives you a flavour of what it looks like from local government's point of view. I think these questions are immensely important. I think as local councillors, we're living on the front line of that all the time. And I would like to see more of a tying up of the two issues together, because I think, you know, we live in such difficult times. There was a survey done by the Local Government Association recently, in the last few months, showing trust in local government is actually really high. So, build on that resource. I think that's really valuable. Let's understand why that is, compared to trust in central government, which is constantly ebbing away. And the danger is that the less we have trust in our politicians, there's a huge amount of danger in where that ends up. So let's revisit what's going on in local government and use that to inform this debate, because I think there's some really valuable lessons to be learned there, which hopefully will result in a positive outcome, which is getting some form of reform in this country.

Duncan: *I'm thinking about other local leaders at district level who have been admirable in the last few months. And Susan Brown at Oxford is one who I think of, leading the Oxford City Council, which is threatened with closure if we go to unitary counties. Stevenage, with Sharon Taylor, has also been amazing. There is a Co-op council there, and they've done a terrific job. During the lockdown, large swathes of our country stopped altogether, but our bins never got missed! Our waste collection team were absolutely amazing and did a terrifically vital job. We couldn't allow the bins to just stack up, could we, just because there was a little thing like a pandemic. And they went above and beyond. They were just the front line of a whole swathe of council officers, many of whom had jumped into new jobs at a moment's notice, and did a*

brilliant, brilliant job. I know that local councillors, in my area at least, have been leading the volunteer efforts as well as encouraging the councils to step up.

I'm very impressed by this idea that we're broadening the debate to the whole of electoral reform and not just PR in particular elections. I'm also impressed, and Doina has mentioned this as well, by the way that the party at the moment is gearing up for the May 21 elections: they're important. That's not something that we've always done as a party, and I think that's a really useful thing to do. If we're absolutely honest, we haven't had a stellar few years in terms of our local government performance, and we haven't, as a party, really pulled together to fight these elections. It's really good to see that happening this time.



Sandy Martin, Chair of LCER, former MP for Ipswich

Can I just say that I think whether Westminster is capable of working with local government actually does partly depend on the electoral system that we use for Westminster? It is a point that Ruth was making but I think it can't be overemphasized that we have got members of parliament who represent three different local authorities, not three whole local authorities, but a third of one, a third of another and a third of a third one. And under these sorts of circumstances, it makes it virtually impossible for members of parliament to work with local authorities, which is one of the reasons why I believe the government in Westminster pays so little regard to local authorities, doesn't work closely with them, doesn't listen to what they've got to say, and isn't actually as effective as it could be otherwise.



Cllr Stephen Curran, Glasgow City Councillor

The thing that really strikes me when we're talking about this across the country is that there's often impression given that it's "Captain Oates going out", a hundred years ago, in terms of candidates who are facing electoral reform, and saying to our colleagues "I'm just going outside, I may be some time", and we're facing oblivion! The only reason we lose any seats is because we lose votes whatever the system is, and the vagaries of the first past the post system just make it really amplified. And I think the Red Wall experience down south is a really good example of that. There's a sense of entitlement a lot of us had in the party about able to hold onto seats. Particularly in Scotland, where we've never got over half the votes, and were assumed to have the strength in Scotland, we would never get more than 50% of the votes. And now really good MPs like Paul have lost out, largely because of voting systems totally slanted against us. I put a point in the chat which is really important in

terms of local government in Scotland. We only have a fifth of the councillors, but we're involved in more than two fifths of the administrations of the councils. We also have a Labour councillor who leads the LGA equivalent in Scotland, COSLA, who represents Aberdeenshire, which is a very rural community. So, with PR in Scotland in local government we're able to represent communities we never had people elected in before. And also, Glasgow is obviously a great example. Every single one of those 23 wards we now have in Glasgow were won by the SNP in the last council elections three years ago. Under first past the post would be NO Labour councillors in Glasgow, if it had been a first past the post system, which is a huge disparity when, go back before 2007, we had 71 out of 78 councillors Labour, again on less than half of the votes in the city. So, there's something about the fairness of voting. The fact, probably for me the important point is if it's a strong argument, people feel: if most people have elected the representative, is that a good thing? For me, it seems an obvious one, and that's what we get with a PR system.

Michael from Devon

I just try to emphasize the importance of local government. Where I live, we suffer from three tiers of local governments with county, district and town councils. And over the time I've been down here, down in Devon, watching how politicians, the elected representatives perform over a long, long time, I think that our major problem is one of representation. And I've heard over and over again people talking about local control, but to them it's a constituency or it's a district, not a town of just under 6000 people. And just for me, just to give you one example, at district level, we have two councillors we elect. Once they get into power as the ruling body, they may well get portfolio responsibilities and then cannot speak on behalf of our town on those matters. How are we represented? And a second point about representation is that I was on town council for a long time and I hope that I managed to put forward the positions of people I didn't agree with. You represent people, you have to represent ALL of those people. So if you have somebody that says, for example, to be extreme, "I don't believe we should have any more immigrants in the area" - you have to put forward that point of view, even if you don't agree with it. And with party political appointees, they find it virtually impossible to do this because the party and allegiance to that party seems to come first. I'm all for local being really local, power down to the town level rather than at somebody in County Hall.

Duncan Enright, Member of the National Executive of LCER, Labour & Coop Leader in West Oxfordshire

Thanks, Michael, I'm a former Labour Mayor on Witney Town Council. I've never found being Labour a restriction on being able to voice views, but also to stand up for Labour values. I like this idea of being able to take decisions as close as possible to the people they affect. And that's one of the principles that I think we all believe in, in electoral reform, as well as fairness of representation.

I'd like to invite you all to join the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform, thank you Ruth for reminding people of that. I would also like to flag up that we're thinking about creating a local government network within the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform. There's a very distinct agenda here, a series of ideas which feed into a broader discussion about the nature of our democracy. It would be really useful to be able to share your expertise and thoughts and ideas, to come up with a proper plan, or a series of proposals, which will take forward some of the things we've been discussing today. I found this a really refreshing meeting. There are ideas shared here that I've never heard before at a Labour Conference. And I think that it's definitely worth pursuing our contribution from local government into the kind of new constitutional settlement which our speakers today have all espoused so beautifully.

Thank you very much indeed, everybody, for coming. Thank you particularly to Paul, Mark, Ruth and Doina for your contributions, and to Sandy for running this. Please keep in touch.