

Labour's National Policy Forum Consultation 2019: LCER's submission to the Justice and Home Affairs Commission

Our history

The Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform has been working to change the voting system since the Thatcher Era in the 1980s. After the Plant Commission, including LCER Chair Jeff (now Lord) Rooker, LCER helped to hold the position on what was going to be the Jenkins Commission in 1997 and the promise to let the people decide in a referendum. At that time, we supported the production of the book, *Making Votes Count: Labour's Road to Electoral Reform*, which was our contribution to the Commission and had a preface from leading Labour reformer, Robin Cook.

2005 to 2015 – voting reform did not go away

After Robin Cook died we did a *Chartist* Magazine supplement which had several key Labour supporters giving their own take on voting reform, plus his last contribution to our LCER July 2015 AGM. In 2007, LCER Chair John Denham instigated a submission to the relevant Commission called *Reversing Labour Retreat*, drawing attention to the dangers inherent in over targeting, lack of registration work and boundary changes. We were active immediately after the 2010 general election in promoting an arrangement with the LibDems rather than letting them form the Conservative led Coalition. This led to the ill fated AV Referendum which was the wrong system, at the wrong time without the necessary support inside the Labour Party. We no longer support a referendum on this issue.

New interest in the Labour Party

When in 2015, the Conservatives formed an unexpected majority government, despite the *raison d'être* of the current system being to give majority government, this led to the European Referendum, there was an upsurge in support for electoral reform, significantly in the Labour Party. Independently one Manchester Labour member set up the twitter account, @Labour4PR, and then joined LCER when she found out about us. Since then we have worked to see a proper inclusive debate inside the Labour Party, with a new organisation Making Votes Matter. Since that time we have held fringe meetings, had stalls at conferences and spoken at many constituencies. We also worked with Prospective Parliamentary Candidates, particularly in target seats. In the 2017 General Election this was so successful that some twenty Labour MPs entered the House of Commons committed to changing the voting system.

Evidence of support

We believe that our experience shows the Labour membership has changed from opposing to supporting voting reform. We take indicative votes at meetings and the majority of those attending are pro reform. We have worked out that of the Labour MPs who are on the record with a position on voting reform there are twice as many who support rather than maintain their support for the current voting system.

'The Bootle Effect'

What is new in this new phase of our work, since 2017, is that our heartlands are waking up to the relevance of voting reform for them. They recognise that in policy terms they were taken for granted, in the effort to win over switch voters in marginal seats. They are interested in the concept of "vote mountains" which do not contribute to the eventual

result and some of them resent being told to go to nearby marginals rather than working in their own patch. We call the joining in of heartland constituencies, the Bootle effect, after Billy Hayes spoke at their meeting and people who did not even attend were talking about the arguments at the following North West Regional Conference.

The spectrum of support

We believe that we are one of the few Labour organisations where it is more a question of confidence in ones own arguments than a right/left issue. Key people support change, Mark Drakeford, Grahame Morris - and new MPs such as Laura Pidcock as well as MPs elected earlier such as Jonathan Reynolds, Clive Lewis, Stephen Kinnock, Jon Cruddas and Cat Smith, and our current Vice Chairs, Ruth Cadbury, Susan Elan Jones and Baroness Ruth Lister. Among the MEPs recently elected supporters include Richard Corbett, Seb Dance, Claude Moraes, Julie Ward have all spoken in support of voting reform in the past. Just a list of our Chairs and Vice Chairs proves that we have support throughout the Party.

Mistaken views of key people

There are key people who are barriers to the position which LCER believes Labour should agree to enter the next general election. This is only changing the default position to one of openness to change and putting voting reform as part of the Constitutional Convention agenda. Perhaps the onus is now on those who oppose change to prove that the current system favours Labour often enough to make up for the Conservative policies enacted in between such victories. We take much longer rebuilding our policies than it takes to destroy them. Children and people living in poverty do not get another chance at their lives and cannot wait for a Labour victory when Labour is out of power. And trade unions in other systems have influence all the time not just when social democrats win elections.

Check out the membership

The default position in support of the current voting system does not reflect the situation on the ground or the genuine interest of the Labour Party. The trade unions need to have influence whoever is in power at local as well as national level. Voters need to know their vote counts wherever they live. Voting reform is about the political culture, legitimacy, democracy and particularly the value of equality. It cannot be legitimate to depend on 40 per cent support and force policies through. It has never been successful for Labour although it seems to work for the Conservatives with the establishment behind them. We have had anti consensus politics by Conservatives with support of fewer than a third of the electorate. Reform means empowering our voters in our heartlands and in constituencies which we ignore or leave to other parties to beat the Conservatives.

Labour's choice or the people's choice

Arguably the voting system should not be Labour's choice but an openness to change would show Labour was willing to work across various divides to achieve its programme.

And some people believe it is necessary to get a second Labour government.

Lords reform may be more consensual but the last Labour government had a real problem finding a way forward with no majority for any particularly reform, or abolition, and it has been Labour policy since the 1990s. So going for Lords' reform is not as surprising or newsworthy, it may even be dull, as Labour coming out against the current voting system. Imagine what that says about our attitude to power, not with the few but the many.

21st century politics

Our attitude to voting reform indicates to many voters our willingness to win support for our policies, to work with others who support them, and to stop a blame game whereby we talk more about the past than the future. In 2017 there was a sea change, coupled with social media, whereby we went for every vote rather than concentrated on marginal seats. What we need until we have changed the voting system, probably to a top up system based on single member constituencies, is to do both. The only way politics will move to reflect the voters is if Labour stops its opposition and embraces change. It will be popular and cannot lose us votes. Let us face the future and put the symbolic voting system firmly at the heart of our view of democracy and into the constitutional convention.