



PRESS NOTICE

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Forget electoral reform, and focus on parliamentary reform

The upsurge of interest in constitutional reforms of all kinds has raised the standard once again of electoral reform. For many reformers it is the central reform required at Westminster, on which most other reforms depend. But electoral reform is not going to happen any time soon. Reformers would do better to channel their energies into supporting other parliamentary reforms which stand a much better chance of success.

All parties agree that electoral reform requires a referendum. Before electoral reform can take place, five things need to happen. First, there needs to be agreement on an alternative voting system. Second, legislation to authorise the referendum. Third, the referendum must be held, and carried. Fourth, legislation to implement the new voting system. And finally implementation, with nationwide boundary reviews.

Taking these step by step brings home the difficulties involved. First, there is no agreement amongst reformers about what alternative system to propose. The Lib Dems have long supported STV. The Jenkins Commission proposed a system called AV Plus, with constituency members elected by AV supplemented by 15 per cent of list members to provide greater proportionality. Many in the Labour party would support only AV, anathema to most reformers because it is no more proportional than first past the post. Most political science experts support MMP, the Mixed Member Proportional system used in Germany, New Zealand and Scotland.

Even if agreement were reached on an alternative voting system, there is no prospect of holding an early referendum. It requires legislation, which would be controversial and strongly contested. For a referendum to be held next year, as Alan Johnson and Unlock Democracy have proposed, legislation would have to be passed at the latest by this autumn. Even that impossible timetable allows very little time for public education before the referendum.

Without public education the referendum would almost certainly not be carried. Reformers tend to assume that because right is on their side voters must agree. Recent experience in Canada suggests this is not necessarily the case. In Ontario in 2007 voters rejected switching from first past the post to MMP. In British Columbia two referendums have been held, in 2005 and 2009, with STV as the proposed alternative. On both occasions the referendum failed to reach the required threshold.

If the referendum is carried, a second round of legislation is required to implement the new voting system. Implementation of any system other than straight AV would require boundary reviews across the whole UK. The last systematic boundary review in England took six years, from 2000 to 2006. To speed that up would require further legislation, to reform the structure and procedures of the parliamentary boundary commissions.

So electoral reform involves a long and difficult road. It may happen only if there are two hung parliaments in succession. Even then reform of the House of Lords is likely to happen first, and in its place. So given that electoral reform will take at least two parliaments, what should reformers ask for in the meantime? The answer is parliamentary reform, on which there are now to be all party talks.

There are four main things party leaders should focus on in their talks with Jack Straw. First, **giving MPs control of their own agenda**. There should be a period of time in the Commons every week when backbenchers set the agenda and can debate issues of their choice. The issues could be determined by a committee of senior backbenchers.

Second, **strengthening select committees.** Select Committees could be strengthened by being given more staff, more time to debate their reports in the chamber, and the power to initiate legislation. Many have called for changes to how their chairs and members are chosen, to give greater independence to select committees. Electing chairs in the chamber might help reduce control by the whips, as might widening the membership of the Committee of Selection that suggests members' names to the House.

Third, **better scrutiny of legislation.** Building on the success of the new public bill committees, which can take evidence on legislation, the next step would be the establishment of permanent, specialist, legislation committees. Linked to this would be giving the House control over who sits on these committees (which rests entirely with the whips).

Finally, **reducing the power of the whips.** This is not a power which is anywhere written down, so it is not easy to reduce it. The whips step in and fill a vacuum where MPs are unwilling or unable to organise themselves. This will only change if MPs are more willing to assert themselves, and encouraged by their party leaders to do so. The cross-party talks provide an extraordinary opportunity for the party leaders to decide those areas of House of Commons business where in future the whips should not intervene.

Notes for Editors

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