

PLURALISM

LABOUR

PROGRESS

...fairness, choice, equality, pluralism, democracy, responsiveness, accountability, deliberation, renewal, modernity, empowerment, fairness, choice, equality, pluralism, democracy, accountability, representativeness, openness, deliberation, renewal, modernity, empowerment, pluralism, democracy, responsiveness, accountability, representativeness, openness, deliberation, empowerment, fairness, choice, equality, pluralism, democracy, responsiveness, accountability, representativeness, openness, deliberation, renewal, modernity, empowerment...

- Electoral
- Reform
- Society

Since its earliest days, the Labour movement has been resolutely committed to the struggle for a society in which every adult citizen enjoys an equal say in the election of political representatives

Organised action by ordinary working men and women has been integral to achieving the democratic rights that we enjoy today. But whilst very important gains have been made since then, we have yet to achieve a political system where every vote counts.

Labour won its 1997 landslide victory on a manifesto that promised an opportunity to reform our unfair voting system. Our First-Past-the-Post electoral system made it possible for the Thatcher government to push through highly unpopular measures, such as the aggressive confrontation with the coalminers, and the introduction of the poll tax, without the support of a majority of voters.

Many Labour supporters were determined this should never happen again. Under a proportional voting system, a party which does not command an outright majority would not be able to impose its agenda. Instead, parties would be encouraged to draw up proposals which enjoy the consent of the majority of voters.

The concern to reform the voting system was not something that arose with “New Labour”, but had long been a key part of the Labour movement’s fight for a democratic society.

LABOUR CLEARS THE WAY



The trade union movement took a lead in advocating the introduction of a more democratic voting system. In 1910, the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants in Scotland was among the first unions to use the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system of proportional representation for their internal elections, soon to be followed by the TUC as well as a number of its other affiliates. From direct experience, the unions were persuaded a year

later to call for voting reform for all public elections, including those at Westminster level.

Evidence shows that STV elections offer minority groups a fairer chance of representation. Many Trade Unions use STV for internal elections, as this helps to ensure that women and black and minority ethnic candidates are not disadvantaged by the voting system.

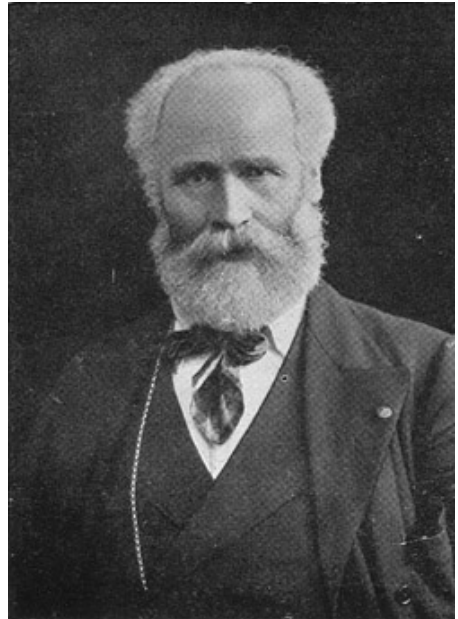
Keir Hardie, first Chair of the Parliamentary Labour Party in 1900 was a supporter of the Electoral Reform Society (then known as the Proportional Representation Society). Hardie, a founder member of the Independent Labour Party which would become an important component of the Labour Representation Committee. In 1913 they passed a motion “by a large majority” which stated that:

“no system of election can be satisfactory which does not give opportunity to all parties to obtain representation in proportion to their voting strength.”

Similarly, Will Thorne, trade union leader and member of the Social Democratic Federation was also a keen supporter of electoral reform, arguing it was:

“difficult to understand why a proposal so pronouncedly democratic should ever have been regarded with any coldness by members of the Labour and socialist movements”.

Many of the men and women who built Labour saw democratic reform as an essential part of creating a fairer society.



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Throughout the 1920s, however, Labour moved away from electoral reform under the leadership of Ramsay MacDonald and, in the eyes of many Party members, also moved away from its early principles.

In the 1931 General Election, when MacDonald pledged to go into a National Government coalition with the Conservatives and Liberals, the electoral system worked against those who stood out for Labour against the establishment.

First-Past-The-Post gave the independent Labour grouping just 52 seats. Proportional representation would have given them 189, reflecting more accurately the level of working class hostility to the policies of the national coalition.

The rest of the Twentieth Century tended to be dominated by majority Conservative governments, despite the fact the most voters opted to vote for broadly progressive parties.

Better for democracy, better for Labour

Whilst Labour has carried through some significant reforms, bringing devolution to Scotland and Wales, proposals for a truly democratic system of elections for Westminster are still awaited

Over the last decade Labour has enjoyed some significant electoral successes under the current First-Past-the-Post system. Labour has found itself obliged to gear its campaigns to the few thousand swing voters in marginal seats that currently determine the outcome of an election. This means that traditional Labour supporters in seats where the party can confidently expect to win find that their concerns are not seen to be as important.

This risks further opening up a vacuum which far-right extremists have begun to exploit. Equally, Labour activists in non-target seats that are deemed unlikely 'gains' find that they receive little, if any, support and encouragement, and constituency parties in such areas are effectively left to decay.

The longer-term health of the party stands to be made more secure under a reformed voting system. Labour would only benefit from a system under which it was obliged to contest elections meaningfully in every area. This would reward the party for making a truly national appeal and give Labour members in traditionally-hostile territory a reason to play an active role in the party. It would help to re-engage Labour with disaffected voters who presently feel ignored in 'safe' seats.

Building for the future

A fairer system is already enjoyed by Northern Irish voters in elections to the Assembly. Scottish voters were finally offered greater choice and fairer outcomes at local government level by a Scottish Executive led by Labour. However, elections to Westminster and local councils in England and Wales are still based on an unfair system which can give a party a majority wholly out of proportion to its share of the vote.

Today, the public have become wary of politicians breaking their promises. Millions of voters feel that their concerns are not being properly taken on board by political parties. Labour must grasp this historic opportunity to deliver on its promise and deliver an electoral system which would encourage a wholly new culture of political debate. Elections would once again reflect the views of the many, not just a few swing voters in marginal seats. It would encourage a mature, consensus-seeking political culture, rather than cynical party point-scoring and squabbling over the congested 'centre-ground'.

Labour must seize this opportunity to deliver on its promise and introduce proposals for a fair voting system under which every vote counts. To do so would offer a fresh start for politics and begin to rebuild confidence in our beleaguered democratic system.

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Keir Hardie,
Labour Representation
Committee 1913

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