

The Labour Party and the Westminster electoral system

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Abstract

Jasper Miles – ‘The Labour Party and the Westminster electoral system’

A study of the Labour Party and the Westminster electoral system is valuable at a time when interest in proportional representation (PR) is on the rise within the Labour Party. Recent publications on the topic have tended to lack either a thorough theoretical or historical basis. Therefore, a dual examination of the underpinning rationale for supporting different electoral systems, based on theoretical frameworks identifiable in the Labour Party and an examination of the pressures and environment in which Labour politicians have operated is required. In addition, the causes of the rising interest in electoral reform and PR within Labour from the 1980s onwards requires documentation. Many studies on the subject have been works of advocacy, overwhelmingly making the case for a movement away from FPTP towards a form of PR, hence lacking objectivity. Five main chapters constitute the study. The first two chapters explore the theoretical aspects and historical context, followed by more detailed chapters on the Plant Report, Jenkins Commission and the Alternative Vote Referendum. Elite level interviews with Labour politicians has been the primary research method, illuminating the issues, arguments and nature of the debate. The conclusion will stress that Labour considers itself to have a unique socio-economic agenda, unshared with other political parties and therefore remains sceptical of PR and coalition, threatening the Party's ability to implement policies for the betterment of the working class. Whilst the pluralists in the Party have challenged the dominant democratic elitist discourse, the prevalent view is that a general election is concerned with the election of a single-party government. Therefore, the division is best viewed as a matter of principle between competing views on governance.

Introduction

A study of 'The Labour Party and the Westminster electoral system' is valuable at a time when there is increasing interest in proportional representation (PR) within the Labour Party. The considerable margin of defeat for the Alternative Vote (AV) in the referendum in May 2011 has, at least for some within the Labour Party and wider Labour movement, failed to settle the question of electoral reform at Westminster. Immediately prior to the May 2015 general election, reports emerged of senior trade union leaders urging Ed Miliband to offer the Liberal Democrats electoral reform in return for supporting a Labour government.¹ Post May 2015, Jonathan Reynolds and Chuka Umunna argued under First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) "too many people feel remote and unrepresented... It forces the major parties to overwhelmingly devote their resources on just a handful of constituencies, because they believe these are the ones that might change hands. It therefore fails to treat voters equally... Most of all, it creates false electoral deserts where whole regions of the country are dominated by one party despite their opponents recording substantial numbers of votes."² John McDonnell MP wrote "The stark reality is that most voters explicitly rejected the Conservative manifesto last year, and yet we all must suffer a majority government as it tries to force these extreme measures upon an unwilling country."³ Elsewhere a cross-party group of MPs and pressure groups has formed to build a consensus in favour of PR with the objective of introducing PR by 2021⁴, and the Green MP Caroline Lucas brought forward a PR Bill and, although voted down, it did receive support from Labour MPs.

¹ <https://www.politicshome.com/news/uk/social-affairs/politics/news/69720/union-bosses-tell-ed-miliband-give-lib-dems-election> (Accessed 15th December 2016)

² *Independent*, 'Let's reboot democracy and replace our broken electoral system', 14th December 2015

³ *Independent*, 'John McDonnell calls on Labour to back proportional representation', 7th May 2016

⁴ PR Alliance Building Conference, St James the Less Centre, London, Monday 8th February 2016

An enquiry of how Labour has approached the topic of electoral reform at Westminster – specifically whether it should stick with FPTP or adopt a different electoral system whether it be majoritarian or proportional – offers the reader an in-depth study of how and why the issue has divided the Party since its inception in 1900. Moreover, 'The Labour Party and the Westminster electoral system' is of interest not just because of the flurry of recent attention to the topic, but due to the longer historical view and theoretical aspects that are under researched. The role the Labour Party has played in maintaining FPTP for British general elections warrants researching. Labour, it could be argued, has accepted an electoral system that is not in the electoral and political interests of the Party. Labour lost the 1951 general election despite polling more votes, a defeat that led to thirteen years in opposition. Indeed, the twentieth century reveals the electoral success of the Conservative Party, enjoying prolonged periods in office. In the latter half of the twentieth century, FPTP facilitated eighteen years of Thatcherism, undermining the planks of social-democracy, achieved even at the height of Conservative popularity on a vote share in the low to mid 40s. Despite the host of tracts critiquing the British constitution that emerged during the Thatcher and Major governments, many of which are explored throughout the thesis, the Labour Party has maintained FPTP.

The issue of electoral reform has on occasion been prominent within Labour – the early years of the Party, the 1920s, the second minority Labour government, the 1980s and 1990s and the Brown government – but only briefly has Labour collectively been committed to electoral reform at Westminster. However, since the inception of the Party, the issue has prompted a diverse range of arguments, based on competing beliefs. Once Labour had replaced the Liberals as the main opposition to the Conservative Party, vying to form a single party government,

constitutional issues were at best of secondary importance to the far more important social and economic issues facing the country and therefore the Party. Consequently, Labour was often accused of ‘constitutional conservatism’ displaying a general satisfaction with the workings of the British constitution and the Westminster Model.⁵ Hanson went as far to say in 1956 “We appear, then, to be at the end of an epoch in the history of British Socialist controversy about parliamentary procedure.”⁶ It is important to note how lack of action on the constitution does not entail a lack of discussion on the constitution.

Prior to New Labour’s constitutional reform agenda, the accusation of ‘constitutional conservatism’ appeared sound. The Attlee government displayed little interest in the constitution. The notable exception was the reduction in the House of Lords delaying powers, designed to ease the passage of nationalisation through the Lords. Therefore, it was politics that motivated the reform with the objective of defeating a political opponent rather than a deep-seated commitment to constitutional reform. The Wilson and Callaghan governments displayed more interest in the British constitution: Wilson primarily over House of Lords reform, but also other aspects including the House of Commons and the Civil Service with the intention of ‘institutional streamlining’. Callaghan brought forward legislation on devolution to counteract the rise of Scottish nationalism, an attempt to defeat the political and electoral threat of the nationalists. Wilson and Callaghan’s key constitutional reform failed to materialise and the Westminster Model remained intact.⁷

⁵ A. Wright, ‘British Socialists and the British Constitution’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 43, (1990) pp. 323-345

⁶ A. H. Hanson, ‘The Labour Party and House of Commons Reform – I’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 10: 4, (1956) p. 456

⁷ See J. Miles, ‘Harold Wilson and the British Constitution’, in A. Crines, & K. Hickson, (eds.) *Harold Wilson, An Unprincipled Prime Minister?*, (Biteback Publishing, London, 2016)

The Labour Party abandoned its constitutional orthodoxy with the election of 'New Labour', 'modernising' the British constitution: devolution to Scotland, Wales, London and power-sharing to Northern Ireland; House of Lords reform; House of Commons reform; Freedom of Information; Independence for the Bank of England; and the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into British law. There was however one vital omission from the list of reforms – the Westminster electoral system – and although an alternative electoral system was drawn up by the Jenkins Commission, the Labour Party manifesto pledge to hold a referendum remained unfulfilled. However, whilst FPTP remained untouched by 'New Labour', the devolved institutions adopted systems other than FPTP; the Additional Member System (AMS) in Scotland and Wales and the Single Transferable Vote (STV) in Northern Ireland. Whilst the devolved institutions are significant and warrant an investigation, the thesis as the title suggests, focuses primarily on the House of Commons as this is where the government of the United Kingdom is formed, therefore having primacy over the devolved institutions and retaining its unique position in the British constitution.

Literature Review

Peter Dorey's *The Labour Party and Constitutional Reform, A History of Constitutional Conservatism* contains a chapter on electoral reform and outlines five main reasons for Labour's support of FPTP: the mandate and the manifesto, the likelihood of coalition under PR, the consequence of PR on Labour's economic agenda, importance of policy in reviving electoral fortunes and the electoral benefits that FPTP offers.⁸ "The main reason why the Labour Party has only sporadically intimated any interest in electoral reform has been the lack of

⁸ P. Dorey, *The Labour Party and Constitutional Reform, A History of Constitutional Conservatism*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire, 2008) pp. 14-17

enthusiasm emanating from the Party's leadership, for whom general elections should be concerned with ensuring that one political party is able to win by virtue of attaining a majority of seats in the House of Commons... rather than a majority of votes cast nationally."⁹ In addition, Dorey wrote a journal article titled *Between Ambivalence and Antipathy: The Labour Party and Electoral Reform*.¹⁰

Mark Evans has two chapters on electoral reform, firstly in *Charter 88: Successful Challenge to the British Political Tradition?* and secondly *Constitution Making and the Labour Party*. Labour's constitutional doctrine was termed by Evans the 'Hattersley Rule' due to Roy Hattersley's reasoned opposition to constitutional reform. Hattersley mockingly dismissed Charter 88, the pressure group committed to constitutional reform, as "the Charter of despair."¹¹ For Evans, Hattersley's objection was threefold. Firstly, British exceptionalism and the sovereignty of parliament, entailing majority government, allowing a Labour government to enact redistributive policies. Secondly, the impracticality of the liberal rights agenda, the power afforded to the judiciary and a belief that democracy is best fulfilled through 'good government'. Finally, individual rights have no meaning unless they can be actualised.¹² Evans concluded in *Constitution Making and the Labour Party* that "Labour's position on electoral reform has always reflected its leadership's perception of the party's immediate electoral prospects."¹³

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 357

¹⁰ P. Dorey, 'Between Ambivalence and Antipathy: The Labour Party and Electoral Reform', *Representation*, Vol 40: 1, (2003)

¹¹ *Guardian*, 'The Charter of Despair', 12th December 1988

¹² M. Evans, *Charter 88: A Successful Challenge to the British Political Tradition*, (Dartmouth Publishing Company, Hampshire, 1995) pp. 205-212

¹³ M. Evans, *Constitution-Making and the Labour Party*, (Palgrave MacMillan, Hampshire, 2003) pp.26-30, 130

Martin Linton and Mary Georghiou explored the topic from a Labour perspective in *Labour's Road to Electoral Reform, What's wrong with first-past-the-post?*¹⁴ A short history was offered, including a brief outline of the 'Plant Process', before seven chapters on the failings of FPTP assessing distortion, disillusion, tacticalisation, polarisation, demoralisation, domination and dichotomy. The final chapter considers pluralism. Linton repeated his efforts with Mary Southcott in *Making Votes Count: The Case for Electoral Reform*¹⁵ and followed much the same pattern as the earlier text, repeating the same seven criticisms of FPTP, although in more detail, as to the historical chapters. The latter edition contains a chapter titled 'The System for the Future', a reference to the Jenkins Commission. Both texts are works of advocacy, attempting to convert Labour people and supporters to the cause of PR for Westminster, emphasising the failings of FPTP, whilst providing a basic historiography of the debate. A more thorough Labour historiography is offered in a PhD thesis titled *The Labour Party and Electoral Reform; 1900-1997*¹⁶.

Barry Jones and Michael Keating's *Labour and the British State*, studied Labour's relationship with the institutions of the British State. Throughout, the text examines how the theories of the state found within the Labour Party affect the practice and attitude of Labour in government and opposition. Book chapters address the emergence and integration of Labour, and its attitude towards industry, territory, the machinery of government and sovereignty. Whilst *Labour and the British State* is a formative text, discussion about FPTP is limited. The conclusion advocates a move towards a "fair and democratic electoral system" as

¹⁴ M. Linton, & M. Georghiou, *Labour's Road to Electoral Reform, What's wrong with first-past-the-post?*, (Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform, Guildford, 1993)

¹⁵ M. Linton, & M. Southcott, *Making Votes Count: The Case for Electoral Reform*, (Profile Books, London, 1998)

¹⁶ A. Morris, *The Labour Party and Electoral Reform; 1900-1997*, Ph.D, (University of Essex, 2005)

FPTP masked Labour electoral decline, the implications for Labour's standing as a national party and focussing on the 'winnable' constituencies.¹⁷ Jones and Keating wrote on the Labour left it is assumed that:

"a majority of seats... will provide democratic legitimation for change and mobilise the 'working class' to overcome obstacles in its way... It is the implicit admission that a fundamentalist programme will command at best a plurality of support which underlies the insistence on the present electoral system."¹⁸

General, rather than party specific texts tackling the electoral reform debate in British politics can be sourced. Vernon Bogdanor's *The People and the Party System: the referendum and electoral reform in British politics* contains two historical chapters analysing the periods 1831-1931 and 1974-1979. Subsequent chapters set out the case for reform; the operation of FPTP and its political consequences; alternative electoral systems, before ending by arguing in favour of STV.¹⁹ Bogdanor remarks on how Labour's attitude towards the constitution changed in *The New British Constitution*: "It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Labour's espousal of constitutional reform is in some measure a response to the vacuum created by a decline in the belief in socialism and social democracy." Constitutional reform therefore was "in part the outcome of frustration at domestic political failure and exclusion from office, but it arose also from a loss of confidence in the ultimate aims of the Labour movement."²⁰ However, Bogdanor acknowledges how the constitutional reform agenda has links to Labour's pluralist and decentralist tradition.²¹

¹⁷ B. Jones, & M. Keating, *Labour and the British State*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1985) p. 205

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 158

¹⁹ V. Bogdanor, *The People & The Party System*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981) pp. 95-207

²⁰ V. Bogdanor, *The New British Constitution*, (Oxford and Oregon, Portland, 2009) p. 47

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48

David Butler published two editions of *The Electoral System in Britain*: firstly for the period 1918-1951²² and secondly since 1918²³. Jennifer Hart wrote *Proportional Representation: Critics of the British Electoral System, 1820-1945*²⁴. As the emergence of Labour coincide with the time frames analysed, Butler and Hart provide useful historical accounts of the role Labour has played in the twentieth century debate on electoral reform. The final chapter in Robert Blackburn *The Electoral System in Britain* addresses the arguments surrounding PR, the principles of PR, methods of elections, the rhetoric surrounding the debate outlining the arguments in favour and against PR, ending the chapter by making the case for the Additional Member System (AMS). A brief section analyses the 'diverse' reasons behind Labour's increased interest in PR in the 1980s: a younger generation of MPs viewing PR as a wider modernisation of Britain, favourable opinion polling, crushing electoral defeats and the fragmentation of the Left allowing the Conservatives to remain in government.²⁵

Texts in favour of a realignment of the British left between the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats are explored in the thesis, as the issue overlaps with the electoral reform debate. David Marquand's *The Unprincipled Society*²⁶ and *Progressive Dilemma*²⁷ were two books that appeared during the Thatcher government arguing for realignment, constitutional reform and a movement away from the two-party politics of the Westminster Model. Other texts written along

²² D. Butler, *The Electoral System in Britain: 1918-1951*, (Oxford University Press, London, 1953)

²³ D. Butler, *The Electoral System since 1918*, (Oxford University Press, London, 1963)

²⁴ J. Hart, *Proportional Representation: Critics of the British Electoral System, 1820-1945*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992)

²⁵ R. Blackburn, *The Electoral System in Britain*, (St. Martin's Press, Hampshire, 1995) p. 388

²⁶ D. Marquand, *The Unprincipled Society*, (Jonathan Cape, London, 1988)

²⁷ D. Marquand, *The Progressive Dilemma*, second edition, (Orion Books Ltd., London, 1999)

similar lines include Paul Hirst's *After Thatcher*²⁸, Will Hutton's *The State We're In*²⁹ and Tony Wright's *Citizens and Subjects*³⁰.

Important conclusions can be drawn from the texts outlined in the literature review: Labour's shared attitude with the Conservatives towards the electoral system, the significance of the mandate theory (specifically for Jones and Keating for the 'Labour Left'), a plurality of votes is sufficient for democratic legitimacy, the position of the 'working class', the role of the Party leadership, a fear of the consequences of PR and the acceptance of FPTP is based on acceptance that only a plurality can be achieved.

'The Labour Party and the Westminster electoral system' differs from the current literature. Firstly, it is not a work of advocacy attempting to convert the reader to one electoral system. The issue at stake is the Labour Party's attitude towards FPTP and electoral reform, not to say one system is preferable to another.

Therefore, the thesis written as far as possible from a detached point of view and therefore aims at objectivity in examining the motivations and rationale of defenders of FPTP and supporters of reform. Secondly, the thesis adds to the historiography and knowledge found in other accounts, by exploring in greater depth commissions enacted by Labour – the 'Plant Report: A Working Party on Electoral Reform' and the 'Independent Commission on the Voting System' – reanalysing and reappraising the ideas put forward. Thirdly, there has been very little written about the Alternative Vote Referendum. The leading text on the matter *Don't Take No For An Answer*³¹ was in the main, a work of advocacy,

²⁸ P. Hirst, *After Thatcher*, (Collins, London, 1989)

²⁹ W. Hutton, *The State We're In*, (Jonathan Cape, London, 1995)

³⁰ T. Wright, *Citizens and Subjects: An Essay on British Politics*, (Routledge, London, 1994)

³¹ L. Baston, & K. Ritchie, *Don't Take No For An Answer: The 2011 referendum and the future of electoral reform*, (Biteback Publishing, London, 2011)

exploring the failings of the Yes campaign and what can be done to win, should another referendum on the electoral system take place. Therefore, the AV Referendum has been under-researched, considering it was only the second UK-wide referendum, and specifically the role played by the Labour Party in the referendum. Fourthly, accounts of what happened on Plant, Jenkins and in the AV Referendum, the role of committee members and the Labour leadership require further exploration as they were significant events and the arguments contained warrant exposure. Finally, whilst Dorey, Evans and others deal with the arguments proposed by defenders of FPTP and supporters of PR, there is a lack of analysis of how the electoral system ties in with different theories of the state found within the Labour Party.

Three theories of the state can be identified within the Labour Party, all impacting on the electoral reform debate: pluralism, democratic elitism and Marxism. Pluralism advocates the dispersal of power, whether it be through political institutions or localised organisations, and is a strand of thinking on the British left that can be associated with cooperatives, trade unions, friendly societies and popular uprising. Most recently, it found expression in Maurice Glasman's *Blue Labour*. The work of Marquand, Hirst, Hutton and Wright is associated with advocating constitutional reform on the British left and a movement away from two-party politics of the Westminster Model of government.³² Democratic Elitism is identified with Joseph Schumpeter, notably in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, stating "we now take the view that the role of the people is to produce a government, or else an intermediary body which in turn will produce a national executive or government."³³ The thoughts of Karl Popper and Harold

³² See Marquand, *The Unprincipled Society*; Marquand, *The Progressive Dilemma*; Hirst, *After Thatcher*; Hutton, *The State We're In*; Wright, *Citizens and Subjects*

³³ J. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, (George Allen & Unwin, London, 1976) p. 295

Laski will also be explored, along with the Fabian Society's notions of planning and centralised reform, emanating from a reforming Labour government at Westminster. Marxism sets out Labour's relationship with capitalism, the British State and how the Party has been committed to the parliamentary system, through the works of individuals such as Ralph Miliband. Labour strategy for power has been based on the ballot box – an electoral strategy rather than a popular strategy – and gaining representation has diverted attention away from class and socialism.

The importance of pluralism, democratic elitism and Marxism to the research is such that they are fleshed out in detail in the 'Theoretical Chapter'. Thus, a theoretical basis on which the arguments for or against electoral reform can be built upon is offered, allowing the electoral reform debate to be located within a theoretical context. Consequently, a discussion on the supporting framework to which FPTP supporters and electoral reformers can be attributed is vital in establishing the dominant strand of thinking within the Party. The twofold nature of the electoral reform debate and its importance was recognised by Hanham, who acknowledged the position of both the theoretical and historical, writing:

“It is impossible to carry on a debate about electoral reform without raising a number of theoretical issues. As a result, the history of electoral reform has always had a dual character, since it consists both of the history of certain measures and the history of certain ideas.”³⁴

Combining the historical and theoretical elements of the debate offers the reader a full explanation of the cause of the division and how it has played out. The

³⁴ H. J. Hanham, *The Reformed Electoral System in Great Britain, 1832-1914*, (The Historical Association, London, 1968) p.7

electoral system influences a country's political system, impacting on political parties, ideology and policy. Therefore, the electoral reform debate is of fundamental importance, generally for British politics, and explicitly for the Labour Party; its place within the British political system, its unique objective of bringing about through parliament a social democratic Great Britain and how it relates and behaves towards other political parties. An alternative electoral system is likely to impact on how Labour operates within the political system, and has consequences for its desire to form single party governments, transform society and defeat its political opponents.

Research questions

The three key research questions are:

1. What have been the main theoretical approaches to electoral reform in the Labour Party?
2. What have been the main historical approaches to electoral reform in the Labour Party?
3. Why has interest in electoral reform at Westminster in the Labour Party grown since the 1980s and with what consequences?

Methodology

The thesis is concerned with an elite level attitude found within the Labour Party towards an aspect of the constitution – the Westminster electoral system. Ideas are vital to the research, and the detailed narrative is placed within the broader

context of the influence of different political theories. Therefore, a hermeneutical method has been adopted as the purpose of the research is to understand and explicate certain *beliefs*. Alvesson and Skoldberg write hermeneutics “is useful for the very extended sphere of research that consists in the interpretation of texts in the literal sense of the word: interviews, documents, notes from participant observation, as well as other researchers theories, conceptualisations and so on – in short, the working field of *discourse*.”³⁵ Hickson noted the appropriateness for a historical study, a method he adopted for his study of the 1976 IMF Crisis. “Hermeneutics is concerned with the recovery of the meaning and understanding of the historical actors own beliefs and interpretations and the understanding of the context in which they operated.”³⁶ It is assumed texts have definite meaning as the research is focused on the ‘recovery’ of ‘beliefs’, and we can – or can attempt to – understand and expound on such beliefs.

A full understanding of an individual’s actions can only be gained by referencing an individual’s beliefs and how they shape behaviour, along with the self-interpretation of his or her behaviour. Hence a correct interpretation of human behaviour requires an understanding of beliefs. Yet beliefs do not operate in a vacuum and an important aspect of hermeneutics is the importance placed on considering context. Freedden explains that “understanding can be manipulated, mistaken, and misguided.” Therefore, “hermeneutic theories of understanding take into account the social, cultural, and political contexts, past and present, in which understanding and misunderstanding take shape.”³⁷ Context is provided throughout the thesis by archives, newspaper articles by those involved in the

³⁵ M. Alvesson, & K. Skoldberg, *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, (London, 2010) p. 106 (emphasis in original)

³⁶ K. Hickson, *The IMF Crisis of 1976 and British Politics*, (Tauris Academic Studies, London, 2005) p. 6

³⁷ M. Freedden, ‘Hermeneutics’, in L. M. Given, *The SAGE Encyclopaedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, (New York, 2008) p. 386

commissions as well as journal articles. In addition, parliamentary papers, statements made in the House of Commons, speeches and debates at conferences and meetings, television and radio interviews, diaries, autobiographies, biographies and any relevant historical and political literature, are used.

To gain information on the elite-level attitude, interviews were the most suitable and appropriate way to gather new data. As Devine noted, the advantages of qualitative research are “Clear where the goal of a piece of research is to explore people’s experiences, practices, values and attitudes in depth and to establish their meaning for those concerned.”³⁸ Therefore, of importance are ‘values’ and ‘attitudes’ with interviews placing “an interviewee’s attitude and behaviour in the context of their individual biography and the wider social setting.”³⁹ Qualitative methods are good at capturing “meaning, process and context”⁴⁰ and offer a ‘holistic approach’. Seldon writes: “Interviews can be particularly helpful in fleshing out documents when it comes to reconstructing the roles and methods of personalities, and their relations with others” with such relationships “not only complex, but may also be veiled from contemporaries.” In addition “Interviews can also assist by revealing the assumptions and motives lying behind documents... Underlying philosophies and approaches may have been so taken for granted by participants that no need was felt to elucidate them in the written record.”⁴¹

³⁸ F. Devine, ‘Qualitative Methods’, in D. Marsh, & G. Stoker, (eds.) *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, (Palgrave MacMillan, Hampshire, 2002) 2nd edition, p. 207

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 199

⁴⁰ A. Bryman, *Quantity and Quality in Social Research*, (Routledge, London, 1988) p. 62

⁴¹ A. Seldon, ‘Elite interviews’, in B. Brivati et al (eds.) *Contemporary History Handbook*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1996) pp. 354-355

The new data enhances the analysis and reappraisal of the different arguments and attitudes advocated by Labour politicians. Moreover, the data provides an insight into the Plant Report, Jenkins Commission and AV Referendum which otherwise would remain unknown. The interviewees provided first-hand accounts of the disagreements, the context and importantly the underlying rationale of disagreements, and as the interviews were from across the Party and incorporated the range of views on the matter, the thesis offers the reader a considerable depth and range of argument. The extensive range of interviews⁴² with leading participants has provided the thesis with a wider range than previous studies and therefore adds to the existing knowledge through the gathering of unrecorded information. Interview transcripts were produced, returned to the interviewee to be amended or clarified, before being analysed, interpreted and utilised within the research. As will become clear throughout the thesis, interview material is used extensively, and provides the backbone to the answering of the research questions.

Interviewees were contacted on the basis that they had been directly involved with one or more of the three case studies, had a knowledge or specialism in Labour and electoral reform or their known views: against reform, keen reformer, or ambivalent. In short, they had a stake in the electoral reform debate within the Labour Party. Their contribution to the Plant Report, Jenkins Commission and Alternative Vote Referendum and knowledge of the wider attitude of the Labour Party towards electoral reform meant they could make a significant contribution to the content and originality of the thesis. The interview began by asking broadly the same questions – what position do you hold? Why? How was this opinion formed? – before moving on to more tailored questions depending on their

⁴² See Appendix 1 for list of interviewees

contribution to each event, knowledge of how issues were decided and resolved, or potentially unresolved, or comments they had made for example in a speech or book. As such, the questions allowed the interviewee to talk at length on the topic, more like a 'semi-structured' conversation in which the pre-written questions were a "checklist of topics to be covered."⁴³

Archival research supplemented the interviews, including at the Labour Party History Museum and the London School of Economics, by providing the opportunity to enter the thinking of the historical actor. Unfortunately, it was not possible to access Roy Jenkins' private papers as they are subject to the thirty-year rule. The ideas and arguments explored in the Plant Report and Jenkins Commission were expanded upon elsewhere, including journal articles and newspapers. Indeed, newspaper articles from the twentieth and twenty-first century have been utilised, affording as Kaul mentions, a sense of the 'contemporary', "a window on to the past, a witness of the times, conveying something of the intangible 'atmosphere' which surrounds events... In seeking to understand the past behaviour of men and women, it is necessary to remember that they were reacting to events which were unique, unprecedented – often unexpected."⁴⁴ Secondly, newspaper articles are useful in examining the thinking surrounding the events, offering analysis from leading commentators. "Journalists are much closer to the leading actors and thus often have a shrewder understanding of the game being played than can be acquired from a distance... Their writings not only reflect the on-going process of policy formation but capture some of the controversies and tensions within the party."⁴⁵ There are limitations of using the press, namely bias, the lack of reflection and hindsight, yet this is no

⁴³ Bryman, *Quantity and Quality in Social Research*, p. 66

⁴⁴ C. Kaul, 'The Press', in Brivati, *Contemporary History Handbook*, p. 299

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 302

reason to avoid using the press, as all articles can be qualified and placed within the wider narrative.

Structure

The thesis is divided into five main chapters, plus the introduction and conclusion. 'For and Against the Westminster Model: Labour's theories of the British constitution' outlines pluralism, democratic elitism and Marxism, the thinkers associated with each theory, key ideas, their meaning, and relationship to the electoral reform debate within the Labour Party. 'Making their minds up? Labour and the Westminster electoral system in historical perspective' charts the debate from the inception of the Labour Party, through the pre-World War One debates, the displacing of the Liberals in the 1920s as the main opposition to the Conservatives and minority government, the lack of interest both pre and post-World War Two, and the increasing interest in the 1970s. Following on from the historical chapter are three 'case studies', spanning a 25-year period.

'The slow rise and quick fall of the Plant Report' explores the Working Party that met from 1990-1993. During the 1980s there was a burgeoning interest in constitutional reform within the Labour Party and wider society. The inability of Labour to counter Conservative statecraft led the Party to consider different methods and ideas to broaden its appeal, and through the 'Plant Report', such ideas on constitutional reform, were fleshed out in detail. 'Realigning the British left and the Jenkins Commission' investigates the committee that met for eight months in 1998, putting forward an alternative to FPTP that would be placed in front of the electorate in the form of a referendum. The commission was tied up with 'the project', an elite level attempt by a handful of individuals within the Labour Party and Liberal Democrats to realign the 'progressive' forces in British

politics. Lastly, 'The end of New Labour and the AV Referendum 2011' differs from Plant and Jenkins insofar as it was not a commission but an election. Yet it remains important, as the referendum occurred as the Labour Party attempted to move on from 'New Labour' in opposition, having been defeated in May 2010 and forced from office through the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, exposing the split within the Party.

Each case study has been chosen due to its explicit connection with Labour's attitude towards electoral reform at Westminster, revealing something of the division, its depth and significance within the Party. Moreover, each event is important, individually and collectively as they all form the wider narrative found within the Labour Party, with the arguments professed, the processes and decisions made all impacting on Labour's place within the British political system. The arguments surrounding electoral reform and the theories found within the Labour Party have continuing relevance in the face of the political and electoral challenges facing the Party, and therefore deserve to be brought back to the fore, to survey the road travelled and the direction it should take in the future.

Chapter 1 – For and Against the Westminster Model: Labour’s theories of the British constitution

Jones and Keating wrote “In Britain, it is usually the Labour Party which is cast as the party of state power given its programmes of nationalisation, planning, and public welfare.” However, “it has rarely given any sustained attention to the form of the state whose power and role it is pledged to extend” in part an “intellectual failure on the part of Labour leaders and policy makers.”⁴⁶ Whilst Jones and Keating are critical of the lack of a coherent theory of the State within the Labour Party, three theories can be put forward, with a direct impact on electoral systems, electoral reform and how a political party behaves towards other parties once within Parliament: pluralism, democratic elitism and Marxism. Each theory will be discussed along with the implications for the electoral reform debate, as they offer an analysis and a theoretical foundation as to why the Labour Party has and continues to be, divided on the issue.

Pluralism

The centralised state has been the object of much debate and criticism amongst British pluralists and has consequently influenced and found favour amongst academics and politicians who subscribe to a range of political ideologies. Drawing on the distinction between civic pluralism found at a ‘grassroots’ level and institutional pluralism found within political bodies, this section will outline the pluralist critique and vision of British politics, specifically the pluralist strand in the Labour Party and the role that a reformed electoral system could play in bring about such a vision. Robin Cook declared: “The appalling insight supplied by the

⁴⁶ Jones & Keating, *Labour and the British State*, p. 2

Thatcher experience is that there are no real checks and balances in the British Constitution. The doctrine of the sovereignty of Parliament means that the tyranny of parliamentary majority is absolute. Yes, the first-past-the-post system has given us strong government and I for one have had strong government up to the back teeth."⁴⁷

Civic Pluralism

Much like the economic market place, pluralists accept there are a wide range of views and dispositions located within society, and individuals desire to belong to groups and organisations that represent such views. The ability to freely associate in groups is a way of maximising liberty, democracy and influencing, through pressure, the policy process. Therefore, an all-encompassing State – the Leviathan envisaged by Hobbes – fails to represent the rich complexity of group life which constitutes society. For once sovereignty is accepted as the ‘supreme power over citizens and subjects unrestrained by law’; Parliament can consider itself to be the dominant force within society, encircling all groups, as nothing would be exempt from the absolute, perpetual, indivisible and inalienable state. G.D.H. Cole maintained “There is no universal sovereign in the community, because the individuals who compose that community cannot be fully represented by any form of association. For different purposes, they fall into different groups, and only in the action and interaction of these groups does sovereignty exist.”⁴⁸ The life blood of society therefore is not the Houses of Parliament but the self-organising groups within communities - the local cricket club, the Women’s Fellowship – groups in which individuals have freely chosen to participate.

⁴⁷ *Guardian*, 9th January 1989

⁴⁸ G.D.H. Cole, *Self-Government and Industry*, (G. Bell, London, 1917) p. 82

In addition to offering protection against the state, freely associating groups provide a defence against the destructive force of capitalism that has no regard for communities and tradition. The best protection against both the state and capitalism is not a 'socialist' government at Westminster where the class war is contained but in society. Therefore, voluntary groups located where the grievance exists, are better placed to introduce socialism; Mutual Organisations, Co-Operatives, Worker's Boards, Guilds, empowering socialists in industries and specific geographical areas, fostering a better understanding of the needs, and desires, and, therefore, furthering the cause of the working class. Thus, Douglas Jay's comment 'the man in Whitehall knows best'⁴⁹ does not ring true as an individual's allegiance is not to some distant, abstract and impersonal notion of the 'State'. Rather it is to groups in which individuals participate voluntarily, as these organisations offer the best defence of rights and freedoms, for it is here that true collective action is realised through the free association of citizens.

More recently, Maurice Glasman sought to return the Labour Party to its pre-1945 pluralist disposition, in part a response to Cameron's 'Big Society'. 'Blue Labour' was articulated in *The Labour tradition and the politics of paradox*. "Only democratic association can resist the power of capital and that the distinctive practices of the Labour movement are built upon reciprocity, mutuality and solidarity."⁵⁰ Consequently, to view 1945 as the high-water mark of British Labourism, delivering socialism for the working class from the top-down, would be flawed. Instead, Glasman affirms the 1889 London Dockworkers Strike is the leading example of successful bottom-up political activism. Politics should be

⁴⁹ D. Jay, *The Socialist Case*, (Faber and Faber, London, 1937) p. 317

⁵⁰ *Guardian*, 'My Blue Labour vision can defeat the Coalition', 24th April 2011. See *The Labour Tradition and the politics of paradox*, (The Oxford London Seminars 2010-2011)

localised and the role of the labour movement should be to foster localism and social activity, for example London Citizens who have campaigned for the living wage. Consequently, the centralised British State restricts civic society from flourishing.

The increasing role of the state in the twentieth century, particularly post-World War Two, taking up functions which were previously fulfilled by voluntary organisations, marginalised and reduced the role of charitable organisations in society. Tony Wright, the former Labour MP and academic wrote “We desperately need some new little platoons, just as we need some new forms of civic collectivism. A world in which the individual stands alone in the face of the big state and the big corporation, at the mercy of bureaucrats and markets, is not a world in which the civic virtues will flourish.”⁵¹ Hirst contests “more power to the state and less to socialists” has drained “socialism of creative energy as a *social* movement and diverts it from constructive enterprise in civil society.”⁵² The energy and drive for the introduction of socialism must come from the within society, not from the political elite. Accordingly, rather than power moving inwards towards the state, it should be dispersed, moving downwards towards civic society, allowing communities the freedom to endorse and promote policies, catering for needs specific to a given area.

Institutional pluralism and the Westminster Model

Institutional pluralism – the belief that political institutions should be more reflective of society as a whole – had support in the early twentieth century. Cole

⁵¹ T. Wright, ‘Reinventing Democracy’ in Hirst, & Khilnani, (eds.) *Reinventing Democracy*, (Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1996) p. 15

⁵² P. Hirst, *From Statism to Pluralism*, (UCL Press Ltd., London, 1997) p. 63

considered in *The Social Theory* “Misrepresentation is seen at its worst today in that professedly omnicompetent ‘representative’ body – Parliament – and in the Cabinet which is supposed to depend upon it. Parliament professes to represent all the citizens in all things, and therefore as a rule represents none of them in anything.”⁵³ However, the positive perception of the reforming Attlee government gave credence to the belief that all is required to enact social reforms is a Labour majority at Westminster, aided through FPTP, considered to be the best electoral system at delivering strong, effective and single party governments. Yet by the 1980s this appeared uncertain. Jones and Keating wrote that whilst the Party’s disparate interests had been able to unite behind an electoral strategy, accepting constitutional norms, “the strategy’s acceptability was dependent upon success measured in terms of winning control of Parliament and upon the state’s ability to deliver the economic goods. By the 1980’s neither expectation appeared well-founded.”⁵⁴

The celebrated British constitution of ‘good government’ consisting of a stable, two-party politics, delivering what ‘people wanted’, requiring the occasional modification began to come under a wide-ranging critique. One such contribution was *Adversary Politics and Electoral Reform*, written from the Right as a critique of the centralising impact of Labour governments in the 1970s. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s a number of key texts emerged⁵⁵ criticising the centralising impact of the Conservative government’s New Right economic and social policies. Lord Norton notes how the intellectual climate in this period and the prominence of groups such as Charter 88 meant “few (appeared) willing to challenge publicly and in print the views expressed” despite the case for a new

⁵³ G. D. H. Cole, *Social Theory*, (Frederick A. Stokes, New York, 1920)

⁵⁴ Jones & Keating, *Labour and the British State*, p. 195

⁵⁵ P. Hirst, & S. Khilnani, *Reinventing Democracy*, (Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1996); Marquand, *The Unprincipled Society*; Hutton, *The State We’re In*; Wright, *Citizens and Subjects*

constitutional settlement being “in substance flawed... Dangerous, then, and pretentious.”⁵⁶ For Norton, constitutional reformers had misunderstood political developments in the 1980s: exaggerating claims of the erosion of civil liberties and the emergence of a coercive state; underappreciated the persistence of pluralism in British politics; and proposed remedies which will be unable to solve the ailments they claim to diagnose. Instead, the legislative process was the appropriate method to redress grievances.⁵⁷

Hirst and Khilnani considered “In the name of greater economic efficiency and respect for individual rights Conservative governments since 1979 have accumulated unprecedented powers for the central government.” This has been achieved by two means: the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty and the freedom of an unwritten constitution.⁵⁸ Thus, new governing foundations were required, for whether government was too weak or too strong, both lacked political endorsement. The case for accepting the traditional orthodoxy of British political science that the existing electoral system contributes to good government, considered Steed, had always underestimated the accidental nature of the relationship contingent as it is upon the social and political divisions in the country and the way they translate into political parties.⁵⁹

The key characteristics of including parliamentary sovereignty, ministerial accountability, unitary state, executive dominance, civil service neutrality, a general election once every four or five years conducted under FPTP generally delivering single party governments, the mandate and the manifesto, has,

⁵⁶ P. Norton, *New Direction in British Politics?*, (Edward Elgar, Aldershot, 1991) pp. 148, 168

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 149-170

⁵⁸ Hirst & Khilnani, ‘Introduction’, in Hirst & Khilnani, *Reinventing Democracy*, p. 2

⁵⁹ M. Steed, ‘The Electoral System and Functioning of Parliament’, in J. P. Mackintosh, *People and Parliament*, (Saxon House, Hampshire, 1978) p. 45

according to pluralists, a tendency to hoard power at the centre. The ruling party could enjoy the crown in Parliament, a legacy of the Glorious Revolution with the former power and privileges of the Monarch placed in the hands of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Britain's 'unwritten' constitution, with no formal 'Bill of Rights', the inability of Parliament to 'bind its successor', the executive being drawn from the legislature and a judiciary interpreting the laws passed by the legislature, enabled a party to govern with strong and decisive leadership. Norton writes that the Labour Party comprises of a range of attitudes towards the constitution – socialist, liberal with its emphasis on decentralisation and Marxist – but the dominant attitude within the Party is the "Traditionalist" approach accepting the Westminster Model. Traditionalists appeal to different strands of thought from British history, the continuity and durability of British political institutions and the maintenance of a party majority in the House of Commons, through the existence of two dominant parties, facilitated by FPTP. Government is afforded the freedom to respond to changing circumstances, offering leadership through Party loyalty, with the manifesto serving as a guide to the intentions if returned to office.⁶⁰

Wright considered "Left and right might do so for different reasons, and for different purposes, but the effect was the same. A Tory governing tradition and socialist collective tradition found common ground in applauding the merits of the top-down and flexible constitution and in resisting proposals which would imperil its unity, discipline and cohesion."⁶¹ Elections were no longer about representing individual interests but creating governing majorities, meaning representatives were tied to parties. Competition was limited and given the winner-takes-all system, the imperative is to become the winner. Through mandates and

⁶⁰ P. Norton, *The Constitution in Flux*, (Martin Robertson, Oxford, 1982) pp. 289, 279-287

⁶¹ Wright, *Citizens and Subjects*, pp. 71-72

manifestos “Citizens are reduced to voters, multiple arenas of citizenship narrowed to the periodic visit to the polling booth, professional party machines substituting for the authentic activity of democratic politics, a politics of observation rather than of engagement.”⁶² A single party dominating the legislature and forming the executive has the ability, due to the lack of ‘checks and balances’, to make and pass laws of its own choosing: an ‘elective dictatorship’ to borrow Lord Hailsham’s phrase. Consequently, the winning party allegedly only governs in the interest of those it represents. Wright considered “A winner-takes-all electoral system goes hand in hand with a winner-takes-all system if government”⁶³, an attitude that permeates the Westminster Model. Those who fall outside the winning party’s electoral base are excluded from the decision-making process, as are the other political parties who have invariably lost. The governing party therefore lacks an imperative to seek compromise and coalition with other groups.

The post-World War Two Labour revisionists, notably finding expression in Tony Crosland’s *The Future of Socialism*, had little interest in the political and administrative machinery through which redistribution and public expenditure would be achieved. In the 1950s and 1960s Labour politicians were concerned about the political implications of an increasingly affluent working class.⁶⁴ As such the policies would be implemented through the existing parliamentary machinery, including Cabinet and Whitehall. John P. Mackintosh accused the parliamentary reformers in the 1960s of naiveté and foolishness for thinking reform was possible without diminishing the power of the executive.⁶⁵ Mackintosh was critical

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 75

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 26

⁶⁴ C. A. R. Crosland, *Can Labour Win?*, (Fabian Tract 324, London, 1960) p. 22

⁶⁵ J. P. Mackintosh, ‘Introduction’, in J. P. Mackintosh, *People and Parliament*, (Saxon House, Hampshire, 1978) p. 177

of the workings of Parliament in an era when the Labour Party was satisfied with the constitutional setup. He considered that the Executive had become too powerful and this needed to be checked by a stronger Parliament. Moreover, “The old, straightforward parliamentary system of democracy has been added to and been confused by other concepts of legitimacy and other methods of obtaining and demonstrating support.”⁶⁶ No longer did a parliamentary majority confer ‘moral authority’ on to laws.

Prior to the Conservative Party election victory in 1979, and considering the governing difficulties of the 1970s, Roy Jenkins had voiced his concerns about the two-major parties moving away from the centre ground. Only a ‘new’ kind of politics could resolve these problems. Jenkins, the former Labour Home Secretary gave a speech titled ‘Home Thoughts From Abroad’ in which he criticised the “constricting rigidity – almost the tyranny – of the present party system” and believed “The case for proportional representation (to be) overwhelming.” Instead of coalition government being feared, it should be embraced, as it was “essential for democratic leadership.” Furthermore, “The test is whether those within the coalition are closer to each other, and to the mood of the nation they seek to govern, than they are to those outside their ranks.” In his closing remarks, Jenkins, advocated for “A strengthening of the radical centre”⁶⁷, suggesting that the formation of the Social Democratic Party, of which he would go on to be a founding member, was already in his thoughts.

⁶⁶ J. P. Mackintosh, ‘What is wrong with British parliamentary democracy?’ and ‘The declining respect for the law’, in D. Marquand, *John P. Mackintosh on Parliament and Social Democracy*, (Longmans, London, 1982) pp. 77- 90, 143-144

⁶⁷ ‘Home Thoughts From Abroad’, Roy Jenkins, Dimpleby Lecture, Royal Society of Arts, London, 22nd November 1979

Implications for Governance

The actions of the Thatcher government and the policies introduced are, as the opening quotation from Cook suggests, a reference point for pluralists on the Left. The Thatcher government stands accused of ramrodding through controversial legislation on less than half the popular vote. The introduction of New Right economics and social policies – individualism, consumerism and personal responsibility – undermined the planks of social democracy, shifting the debate away from collectivism and ending the ‘post-war consensus’. Although the Conservative Party won four successive general elections – two of which were landslide victories in 1983 and 1987 – on no occasion was a majority of the popular vote achieved. Indeed, not since the National Government of 1931 – and the unique political circumstances of that year with the temporary end of the party system – has the winning party achieved over 50% of the popular vote. Consequently, this raises issues for the mandate received by the winning party to introduce its manifesto, particularly for a government desiring to introduce a new socio-economic agenda.

Birch questioned the theory of the ‘mandate and the manifesto’ deeming it “rather misleading picture of how the system actually works”: the unspecific nature of party programmes; the influence of a range of factors on voters; and governments, due to events outside their control and the pursuing of policies, not included in their manifestos. Moreover, since 1974 the vote share for the two major parties has declined, at times the successful winning party gaining less than forty per cent of the vote, bringing into question whether the electorate have given the winning Party a mandate. “Elections of this kind constitute a mandate for compromise or coalition, not a mandate for ideological policies of either a left-wing or right-wing kind.” Furthermore, “a feeling of democratic legitimacy should

lead the governing party to drop the more extreme and controversial parts of its programme and to pursue only those policies for which it could reasonably claim the support of at least half the nation.”⁶⁸ A proportional electoral system would have in all likelihood, resulted in the Conservative Party sharing office with another political party, acting as a brake, diluting or preventing controversial New Right policies.

However, in practice the idea that the government of the day can make and implement laws as they please, free from restraint, is not as straightforward. Independent minded backbench MPs can be the fiercest critics of their governments and British parliamentary history is littered with MPs who critique their own Party - the adage that the ‘opposition are in front of you and the enemy are behind you’. Furthermore, although MPs can be whipped to ensure the government can pass its legislative programme, it has always been the case that on ‘Matters of Conscience’ MPs can vote as their morals dictate. Indeed, there is a growing body of evidence compiled by Cowley and Stuart, suggesting MPs are becoming more rebellious, refuting the accusation that MPs simply follow the instruction of the parliamentary whips.⁶⁹ Rose cites four constraints upon party government: firstly from within, which is greater for Labour than the Conservatives due to how policy is formulated within the Party, including the influence of the membership, the NEC, and the implications of breaking manifesto commitments for the leadership; secondly, party competition and the prospect of electoral defeat; thirdly entry into government and the ‘trappings of power’; and lastly global politics, global economics and British membership of supranational bodies.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ A. H. Birch, ‘The Theory of Representation and Practice’, in S. Finer, *Adversary Politics and Electoral Reform*, (Anthony Wigram, 1975) pp. 62-63

⁶⁹ <http://revolts.co.uk/?p=711> (Accessed 30th September 2016)

⁷⁰ R. Rose, *Do Parties Make A Difference?*, (Macmillan Press Ltd., London, 1980) pp. 146-151

The parliamentary majority enjoyed by the government impacts on its ability to enact legislation. A slim majority is always in danger of being whittled down through by-election defeats and defections across the floor of the House. For example, the 1974-1979 Labour Government, was reliant upon the parliamentary support of the Liberal Party in 1977-78. In addition, the final six months of the Major Government was reliant on the parliamentary support of Ulster Unionists. Parliamentary arithmetic under FPTP can result in a situation whereby Coalition and 'Supply and Confidence' are required, thus bringing other political parties into the decision-making process. Indeed, there is nothing intrinsic within FPTP that guarantees single party government, especially with the decline of the two-party system in Britain, as shown by the events of 2010 and the proceeding parliament in which the Conservative Party and Liberal Democrats formed a fully-fledged coalition. FPTP fosters rather than solely delivers single party government and, given the multi-national nature of the United Kingdom, FPTP can deliver a pluralist vision of democracy leading to deliberation and power sharing.

The fracturing of the electorate and the two-party system

Walkland, writing in 1977, claimed "It is the final disservice of the governing parties that as they become less relevant they grow ever more self-protective, whatever the cost to the nation." Furthermore, they decline into "Sectarian minorities, blocking institutional reform and failing to take account of new realities."⁷¹ The 'natural' party affiliations of the manual working class and propertied middle class do not apply as they once did, with the reducing appropriateness of referring to British politics as 'tribal'. The Labour Party is not exempt from the changing nature of society with the traditional bonds of social

⁷¹ S. A. Walkland, 'Whither the Commons?', in S. A. Walkland & M. Ryle (eds.) *The Commons in the Seventies*, (Fontana, Glasgow, 1977) p.255-256

class, party and nationality wearing thin. In turn, this raises the prospect of the erosion of Labour Party's traditional electoral base, furthering the imperative to reach out into all groups within society. Jones and Keating noted in the mid-1980s Labour's "electoral strongholds, traditionally the basis of its electoral success, are now its greatest weakness. Located in declining industrial areas, they are unrepresentative of modern British society and help to insulate the party from the reality of its popular decline." Furthermore, "the territorial distribution of the Labour vote now raises serious doubts about its credibility as a 'national' party."⁷²

Socialists, argues Hirst, have "treated the working class as if it was both homogenous and the overwhelming majority of society, whereas neither of these claims is the case."⁷³ The working class is diverse: skilled and unskilled, urban and rural, regionally different, propertied and social tenants, unionised and non-unionised and ethnically diverse. Indeed, a significant proportion of the working class have always voted Conservative, for reasons that are still contested. David Marquand affirms "Labour's class appeal has always been fundamental to it. But class is subjective, not objective... At the heart of Labour's class appeal lay the assumption that the class dimension must, by definition, have primacy over all other dimensions." This entailed "assumptions that working class interests had a special legitimacy denied to other class interests." Whilst appealing to millions of working class voters it could only rise so far as it did, but could not appeal beyond that base. Many "refused to give primacy to the class dimension of their lives" whereas others "could not see why the working class, as a class, had any moral claim on anyone else."⁷⁴

⁷² Jones & Keating, *Labour and the British State*, p. 201

⁷³ Hirst, *After Thatcher*, p. 65

⁷⁴ Marquand, *The Progressive Dilemma*, p. 25. See chapter 1 'The Paradox of British Democracy'

The unexpected Labour loss in 1992 led Marquand to affirm the aforementioned were at odds with the requirements of coalition building, coalition membership and the Party was ill-equipped to win over the other constituencies which a “new progressive coalition” would have to embrace. Labour had been unable to build the broad electoral alliances required to win as they had done in 1945 or 1966, or that which the pre-1914 Liberal government enjoyed. The winner-takes-all assumptions of the Labour leadership “made it impossible for it to provide more than transitory shelter for the diverse and heterogeneous constituencies which a new progressive coalition would have to embrace.” A wide-range of anti-Conservative could be included: Liberal Democrats, Welsh and Scottish nationalists, feminists, ethnic minorities, Greens and the anti-system constituency of Charter 88. For this to materialise Labour had to “abandon tribalism, to give up the dream of single-party hegemony and to practice a politics of pluralism, negotiation and mutual education, based on respect for identities and aspirations that differ from its own.”⁷⁵

The failings of FPTP

Hirst stated “It would not be exaggerating to say that the two-party system is the most important unwritten annexe to our unwritten constitution.” However, “The two-party system has now broken down irrecoverably, but no new stable system of party competition in election has come to replace it.”⁷⁶ Similarly, Wright stated the political system is living off its capital. “Whereas it was once possible to argue that the electoral system reflected the essential character of British politics, for the last two decades it would be more accurate to say that it is only the electoral

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 231-232

⁷⁶ Hirst, *After Thatcher*, p. 42

system which propped up British politics in its traditional form.”⁷⁷ In the Post-World War Two era at the height of the two-party system only a handful of Liberal MPs were returned to Westminster and the combined vote share of the Conservatives and Labour regularly achieved over 90%. Wright continues; “It was then plausible to argue (notwithstanding a lack of precise mathematical fairness) that there was a broad ‘fit’ between a majoritarian and adversarial two-party political system and the disposition of issues, ideologies and classes.”⁷⁸

Such a fit, according to electoral reformers no longer occurs and the system is only kept in place by those who benefit from the present arrangement. Since 1974 the Liberal Party, in all its various guises, has continued to poll well but failed to gain the representation on the proportional basis it warrants. Whether it is desirable to have an electoral system biased towards sectional interests and against parties, including the Liberal Democrats who enjoy a broad nationwide appeal, is debateable. In Scotland and Wales the nationalist parties have grown, so much so that in the 2015 general election the Scottish National Party (SNP) won fifty-six out of fifty-nine constituencies. Moreover, the workings of FPTP entail the winning candidate requires only one more vote than the candidate in second to win the constituency. Accusations of ‘wasted’ votes follow, as the votes above and below the ‘winning post’ figure – namely the runner-up’s total plus one or votes cast for losing candidates – are considered not to impact the outcome of the result. A proportional electoral system, in which an electors vote is redistributed, would solve the alleged problem of ‘wasted’ votes. Martin Linton considered that in the pluralistic society “many more voices want to be heard”

⁷⁷ Wright, *Citizens and Subjects*, p. 39

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39

and individuals are “consumers” who demand a “wider choice” and “influence on decisions that affect their lives,” above all wanting “their votes to count.”⁷⁹

PR has the potential to allow parliament to become representative of the wider society: women, ethnic minorities, nationalists, unionists, europhile and eurosceptic, socialist and capitalist. The cleavages within a pluralistic society would find new voices in Parliament rather than being contained or excluded as present in the ‘two-party’ system. The ability of FPTP to encourage unity would be weakened, potentially breaking up the major political parties, who consist of a collection of individuals who, in some circumstances have widely differing views. However, a political party whilst containing a wide spectrum of opinions is a coalition in itself, sharing common aims that are not shared by other political parties. Thus, the question raised is whether the Labour Party should seek to form a broad electoral coalition in order to win a general election through compiling votes from across society, or seek to increase Labour’s electoral coalition through inter-party deals and coalition deals.

Curtice argues that with the decline of marginal constituencies, there is an increased likelihood of coalitions at Westminster, meaning that the formation of the Conservative-Liberal coalition in 2010 was not an aberration and is likely to become the norm.⁸⁰ The increased vote for the Liberal Democrats and the Nationalists, resulting in a decline of votes won by Labour and the Conservatives, meaning fewer seats being held by the two main parties, increases the chances of a hung parliament. Hunter questions this line of reasoning, highlighting the number of marginal constituencies was lower in 1983 than 2010, and yet that

⁷⁹ Linton & Georghiou, *Labour’s Road to Electoral Reform?* p. 69

⁸⁰ See J. Curtice, ‘So What Went Wrong With The Electoral System? The 2010 Election Result and the Debate About Electoral Reform’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 63: 4 (2010) pp. 623-638

election resulted in a 144-seat majority for the Conservatives. Bar the 2010 general election result, the declining number of marginal constituencies has not impacted on FPTP's ability to deliver majority governments. Hunter questions as to whether those analysing marginal constituencies are asking the correct question: "Whether these seats are won on a fair basis is a completely different question to whether first past the post can produce majorities."⁸¹

Consequently, it does not necessarily follow that a small number of marginal constituencies will lead to a hung parliament. The number of marginal constituencies has no bearing on whether FPTP has worked correctly, fulfilling its oft mentioned benefits of delivering strong and stable government. On occasions when FPTP fails to yield a clear winner, especially in times of political flux and fluidity such as the 1920s, 1970s and 2010, history suggests that the party system returns to delivering single party government. Moreover, Hunter challenges the Diamond and Radice *Southern Discomfort* thesis, writing "Labour has traditionally fared far worse in southern England than elsewhere and to base a strategy on winning back the South (which was never won) would be comparable to a Conservative strategy based on winning Wales and Scotland." The importance of having support from all social groups is therefore emphasised along with having policies that are attractive to voters in places which are not traditionally Labour.⁸²

⁸¹ P. Hunter, 'Winning back the 5 Million – Understanding the fragmentation of Labour's Vote', *The Smith Institute*, (2011), p. 28

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 28

Realignment of the Left and Coalition Government

Traditionally the Labour Party has been averse to coalition and electoral pacts. However, there are notable exceptions in the twentieth century, including Ramsay MacDonald and 'the Great Betrayal', which led to the National Government. Ralph Miliband, commenting in *Parliamentary Socialism* affirmed "There was the fear of anything resembling alliance with non-Labour and anti-Labour elements...Whatever the Labour leaders had not learnt from 1931, they had learnt that never again must any Labour leader propose any kind of collaboration with Labour's opponents"⁸³ thus ruling out coalition with the parties of capital. Eatwell and Wright, assert in *Labour and the Lessons of 1931*, "One of the most frequently drawn lessons...was that Labour should never again form a minority government...this lesson made sense in so far as a socialist party could hardly hope to implement socialist measures when dependent on non-socialist support."⁸⁴ MacDonald's actions convinced the Labour movement that such arrangements should be avoided, for it is the Labour Party which is the guardian of workers. The Lab-Lib Pact 1977-78 differed, borne out of political necessity, ensuring the survival of the government, rather than a belief in the merits of power-sharing and coalition government.

Regardless of the predominant thinking within the Party, a 're-alignment of the Left' between Labour and the Liberal Democrats has found supporters. Mackintosh outlined the benefits of the Lab-Lib Pact in the *Scotsman*: a "counter-weight to the Left and puts Labour in touch with five million voters who, in 1974, rejected both the traditional main parties"; politicians having to consider the impact of policies on people not the manifesto or party; and lastly the

⁸³ R. Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, (Merlin Press, London, 1961) p. 234

⁸⁴ R. Eatwell, & A. Wright, 'Labour and the Lessons of 1931', *History*, Vol. 63:1 (1978) p. 40

Government's survival rests on its relationship with the Commons. The objective of a realignment would be to "produce a major left-of-centre party which would be tied neither to Marxist dogma nor the trade unions." Debates over the mixed economy would cease and those who wished for state ownership "would have to make their case to the electorate." Lastly, a realigned party could "shed the desperate constitutional orthodoxy of the left and accept the development of democratic controls over government, from Parliament downwards."⁸⁵ Adonis, who joined the Labour Party in the mid-1990s from the Liberal Democrats after Blair had become leader, was originally in favour of a coalition between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, influenced by the work of Roy Jenkins who advised: "The only real difference is that Labour is now the larger party of social democrats, the Lib Dems are the smaller; and in our political system, it is generally wise to support the larger party if they are on the same page."⁸⁶

Adonis stated in *5 Days in May* "Believers in a social market economy and an open, liberal society are spread across all three major parties...having more in common with progressives in other parties than with the extremes of their own party. Coalitions might therefore promote consensus behind mainstream social market policies, and make governments stronger and better." However, considering the 2010 Conservative-Liberal coalition his opinion had changed. "I hope coalition is not necessary after the next election. I believe Britain would do best with a One Nation Labour majority government." Adonis lists four lessons he has learnt about coalition, of which two are of specific interest: "It is possible to make coalitions work in modern Britain, and for them to be as stable as single-party governments" but qualifies this point, affirming "coalition is not a superior

⁸⁵ *Scotsman*, 'Liberals and Social Democrats', 28th March 1977; *The Times*, 'The case for a realignment of the Left', 22nd July 1977

⁸⁶ *Independent*, 'Andrew Adonis: It's madness to split the centre-left vote', 9th April 2010

form of government to single-party majority government... Labour must seek to win on its own, and to do so as an effective progressive coalition within itself.”⁸⁷

As Labour struggled against the dominant statecraft of the Conservative Party during the 1980s and 1990s, its position encouraged thoughts of coalition and electoral pacts, gaining favour with journalists, politicians and academics. It was perceived by some that coalition with the Liberal Democrats was the only viable route back into government for the Labour Party. Marquand argued that a successful anti-Thatcherite coalition – once the myth, tradition and deception of opposition parties working together had been dropped – would have to include “conservative interests and tendencies as well as radical ones... It is how to assemble an anti-Thatcher coalition capable of offering a convincing radical alternative to the radicalism of the Right, while at the same time appealing to non-radical interests and opinion. Seventy years of British history suggest that neither the Labour Party nor the SLD can do this all by itself.” The pre-World War One Liberal coalition fell apart and the Labour Party was unable to construct an equivalent. Importantly, PR was an “indispensable first step towards a citizen democracy. If such an agreement proved electorally successful” wrote Marquand, “It would be a temporary arrangement, leading hopefully to a situation where future elections were held on the basis of PR” thereby giving new meaning to parts of Southern England “where, under the present system, Labour is on a hiding to nothing.” To succeed, the electoral pact would have to be based on a political policy, a shared policy agenda. “People are increasingly prepared to listen to each other” and “party frontiers are simply too restrictive for creative political and intellectual debate.”⁸⁸

⁸⁷ A. Adonis, *5 Days in May The Coalition and Beyond*, (Biteback Publishing Ltd., London, 2013) pp. 160, 139, 157-159

⁸⁸ D. Marquand, ‘Spot the Radical’, *Marxism Today*, July 1988

Hirst wrote that PR would change our political system, and that whilst Labour has shared the Conservative myths about FPTP, they must accept 1945 was an “exception and unrepeatable event”. Furthermore, “Coalition government need not mean weak government” and in a “collaborative political culture” governments are “most effective” when they work through “large sections of the public through informed consent and dialogue”, which can only tackle the social and economic problems facing Britain. Moreover, a broad social pact, not a narrow electoral pact is required, with the Labour Party accepting policy derived from a process of “inter-party and interest group bargaining, not from party manifesto or conference decisions.”⁸⁹

Binding Labour and the Liberal Democrats is contingent on the introduction of electoral reform. “A commitment (or at least openness) to PR by the Labour Party” claimed Rustin in 1985, “would in itself be a major factor making for the reconstruction of an anti-Thatcher alliance, in place of the anti-socialist collusion between Tories and the Alliance which has dominated recent British politics.”⁹⁰ Hutton writing a decade later affirmed “The Liberal Democrats are one obvious ally” for the Labour Party. “There is even a case for a formal electoral alliance, if only to make clear the nature of their common project.”⁹¹ Hirst claimed “In a general election, voting Democrat or SDP is voting for a party that either can only govern in coalition with Labour or will let in Labour as the largest governing party.”⁹² However, whether this has ever been the case is open to debate, and

⁸⁹ T. Davis, & D. Green, ‘Labour’s One Hope: Labour cannot win the next election’, *Marxism Today*, Feb 1989; P. Hirst, ‘Strong Medicine’, *Marxism Today*, October 1991; Hirst, *After Thatcher*, pp. 230-231

⁹⁰ M. Rustin, *For a Pluralist Socialism*, (Verso, London, 1985) pp. 139-140

⁹¹ Hutton, *The State We’re In*, p. 325

⁹² Hirst, *After Thatcher*, p. 30

the events of May 2010 with the formation of a Conservative-Liberal coalition makes doubtful the claim of voting Liberal Democrat is tacitly supporting Labour.

Summary

Whilst in Europe coalition politics is the norm, it has at Westminster been considered the 'un-British' way of doing politics, with the two major political parties, apart from at times of national emergency, subscribing to the traditional Westminster Model of single party government. British politics is not, for illustration, German or Australian politics, where 'sister' parties form coalitions should a viable situation arise: the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union of Bavaria (CSU) and in Australia the Liberal Party and the National Party. Nevertheless, talk of a Labour-Liberal Democrat Coalition has always found support, based on the assumption the Social Democratic Party (SDP), the subsequent Alliance and then Liberal Democrats are a party of the 'centre-left', formed in opposition to the Thatcher government, part of the wider 'progressive' anti-Conservative majority in the country. PR would facilitate such an understanding.

Pluralists assess the declining 'tribal' nature of British politics, with weakening party affiliation, reduced party membership and a decline in the vote share of the two major parties although still dominating the number of constituencies, requires the adoption of a proportional electoral system. Whether it be the breakdown of traditional class loyalties (a more affluent working class and a socially-liberal middle class with economic freedom); greater equality for women and homosexuals; a new 'political class' of University educated professionals; the rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalism and to a lesser extent English nationalism; the reduced influence of Trade Unions in a service rather than producer economy;

and the decline of religion and traditional morality within society; there is a need for these groups to gain representation in the House of Commons.

Single-party government fails to represent the diversity of views in society, as a single-party government acts in the interests of its own electoral base and 'tribe'. Only under a reformed electoral system would a government represent such diverse interests. All those groups and factions which previously had been excluded from the decision-making process, would find themselves included, in a new collegiate and consensus-based politics. The Labour Party would be forced to move beyond the alleged narrow class-based party, only seeking to represent its core constituents in working-class communities, to a broad-base social movement, representing in agreement all the anti-Conservative forces in the country. Furthermore, a rapprochement with the Liberal Democrats, or the SNP given that they are now the third biggest party in British politics, would be necessary to build a 'progressive' coalition at Westminster, better representing society, an expression of twenty-first century pluralistic Britain.

Democratic Elitism

Democratic Elitism rejects the classical theory of democracy moving away from discerning the 'common good' through debate and deliberation towards a liberal, representative, procedural and importantly limited model of democracy. The thoughts of two political thinkers who ascribed to the elitist model of politics will be outlined: Joseph Schumpeter, whose work *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* was based upon forty years of observations of socialism and democracy and Karl Popper *The Open Society and its Enemies* which sought to contribute to the understanding of totalitarianism and the significance of the perennial fight against it, by putting forward a new theory of democracy.

Furthermore, the work of the aforementioned will be supplemented by other thinkers and groups, including the Fabian Society, as the ideas put forward by this particular group of middle-class radicals and intellectuals is vital in understanding the Labour Party's satisfaction with the Westminster Model of government.

Schumpeter

The democratic method according to the eighteenth-century philosophy of democracy is, in the opinion of Schumpeter, "that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realises the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will." Consequently, the "selection of the representatives is made secondary to the primary purpose of the democratic arrangement which is to vest the power of deciding political issues in the electorate."⁹³ Therefore, democracy is the rule of the people, and the people have a right to rule. Such a view of democracy – voicing, reflecting, and representing the moral and intellectual development of society turning the legislature into a great debating chamber – is mistaken, for it is not possible for representatives of the people to represent what could be called the 'will of the people', so it was not possible to conform to 'what people really want.' As each individual has the capacity to reason to different conclusions it is impossible for representatives and parliament as a whole to discern the 'common good'.

Moreover, Schumpeter writes an ordinary citizen will display more intelligence and clear-headedness in a card game than a political discussion with other non-

⁹³ Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, p. 250, 269

politicians as they cannot comprehend the scale of the decisions made and their impact compared to the practical politician. “For the private citizen musing over national affairs there is no scope for such a will and no task at which it would develop. He is a member of an unworkable committee, the committee of the whole nation, and this is why he expends less disciplined effort on mastering a political problem than he expends on a game of bridge.”⁹⁴ The non-politician has a reduced sense of responsibility and an absence of volition explaining why there is a lack of judgement on their behalf, for at the bridge table there are clearly defined rules disciplining and immediately responsible to the players. “These conditions, by their failure to be fulfilled for the political behaviour of the ordinary citizen, show why it is that in politics he lacks all the alertness and the judgement he may display in his profession.”⁹⁵ Max Weber expressed similar sentiment, writing about the dangers which mass democracy presented to national politics. Principally, “the *emotional* elements will become predominant” with the “mass”, regardless of social strata, thinking “only as far as the day after tomorrow... exposed to momentary, purely emotional and irrational influences.” Successful politics is conducted with the head, aided through a “smaller number of those who participate in the deliberations” and “the more unambiguously responsibilities are understood by each of the participants and by those whom lead.” Indeed, “the finest political achievements of the English parliament are the products of unambiguous responsibility.”⁹⁶

Through the limitations of the ordinary citizen’s capabilities, he or she argues and analyses in a primitive manner, incapable of the rationality of a politician. As a result, the deciding of issues by the electorate becomes secondary to the election

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 261

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 261

⁹⁶ M. Weber, ‘Parliament and Government in Germany’, in P. Lassman, & R. Speirs, (etds) *Political Writings*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994) p. 230

of the men and women who are to do the resolving. Accordingly, “we now take the view that the role of the people is to produce a government, or else an intermediary body which in turn will produce a national executive or government.”⁹⁷ Furthermore, compromise cannot be reached on qualitative issues. For example, the issue of taking the country to war is a matter of conscience for the representative, which might be opposite to that of his or her constituents. However, the representative has greater access to the facts and figures and is therefore better placed to make political decisions. Moreover, the government must have one agreed position which is adopted by all those in the government, for it is unworkable to have a plethora of disparate views. Indeed, it is the government that can make the most informed decision due to their ability to access information.

Schumpeter states: “The voter outside of parliament must respect the division of labour between themselves and the politicians they elect”, understanding “once they have elected an individual, political action is his business and not theirs. This means that they must refrain from instructing him about what he is to do.”⁹⁸ Consequently, leadership becomes the true function of the electorate’s vote, as the electorate have abdicated responsibility. However, a party seeking re-election must consider the electorate’s views or otherwise it risks being removed from office. Aneurin Bevan, made a similar argument to Schumpeter, stating the electorate “may not know the facts as he knows them. Indeed, they cannot expect to do so. In our complicated society there must be division of labour.”⁹⁹ However, Bevan judged confidence existing only when a political party choose a

⁹⁷ J. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, p. 295

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 295

⁹⁹ A. Bevan, *In Place of Fear*, (Quartet Books, London, 1990) p. 35

representative of a like mind, yet not necessarily of the same background, or else confidence will decline.

Consequently, the definition of democratic method becomes “that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decision in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.”¹⁰⁰ Democracy is therefore a competition for leadership, further defining democracy “to free competition for a free vote”, meaning men and women are sent to the top by a process of competitive elections. As the act of voting is an open competition, democracy becomes like the market place, in which various groups and individuals – equivalent to enterprises and entrepreneurs – compete for the votes of electors, the political ‘consumers’. “What businessmen do not understand is that exactly as they are dealing in oil so I am dealing in votes.”¹⁰¹ Although imperfect, like economic competition, “The justification for this is that democracy seems to imply a recognised method by which to conduct the competitive struggle, and that the electoral method is practically the only one available for communities of any size.”¹⁰² Therefore, when the electorate go to the polls to cast their ballot, they are merely stating their preference for one set of leaders over another, asking themselves whether the current government warrant another term of office, or whether they should be replaced. This is the only political control the electorate have over their elites as they have the ‘function of evicting’ the government and inserting a new one. In turn, this should result in considerable amount of freedom of discussion for all, especially the press, which is considered a cornerstone of a democratic society.

¹⁰⁰ Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, p. 269

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 285

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 271

Schumpeter states “the first and foremost aim of each political party is to prevail over the others in order to get into power or to stay in it...the decision of political issues is, from the standpoint of the politician, not the end but only the material of parliamentary activity.”¹⁰³ James Bulpitt advanced the idea of ‘statecraft’, that the primary objective of political parties is “The art of winning elections and achieving some degree of governing competency.”¹⁰⁴ Therefore, a political party in power must govern competently if it is to remain in power, and in the same way that armies strategically compete over a stretch of land or a hill, political parties are also in a competition. The Labour Party is engaged in a political battle with the Conservative Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish and Welsh nationalists and all other political parties that enter the contest with the aim of controlling the legislature.

PR is rejected by Schumpeter as voters cast their ballot for the creation of a government. Once the representatives are within the legislature, laws are passed through majority decisions, emphasising the importance of what happens in the legislature. “Evidently the will of the majority is the will of the majority and not the will of ‘the people’. The latter is a mosaic that the former completely fails to ‘represent’”, as ‘the people’ is a far greater concept than the majority. Once in the legislature a majority is still required to pass laws, therefore it is reasonable to assume the majority is formed by one party. Schumpeter goes on to state how PR will:

“offer opportunities for all sorts of idiosyncrasies to assert themselves...

prevent democracy from producing efficient governments and thus prove a

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 279

¹⁰⁴ J. Bulpitt, ‘Thatcherism as Statecraft’, in M. Burch & M. Moran, (eds.), *British Politics: A Reader*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1987) p. 169

danger in times of stress... If acceptance of leadership is the true function of the electorate's vote, the case for proportional representation collapses because its premises are no longer binding. The principle of democracy then merely means that the reins of government should be handed to those who command more support than do any of the competing individuals or teams."¹⁰⁵

Popper

Popper is concerned less with the question 'who should rule?' deeming it should be replaced by a new question: "How can we organise political institutions that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?"

Popper's theory rests on the "adoption of the proposal to avoid and resist tyranny" and he distinguishes between two types of government: one in which a government can be deposed without bloodshed through a general election with social institutions providing means by which the rulers may be dismissed by the ruled, and the second by which the ruled can only be got rid of by social revolution. Therefore, implied in the adoption of this principle is the "conviction that the acceptance of even a bad policy in a democracy (as long as we can work for a peaceful change) is preferable to the submission to a tyranny." In addition, while democracy means 'rule by the people' or 'popular sovereignty', people, according to Popper, do not rule anywhere. Instead it is governments that rule.¹⁰⁶

The theory of the 'removal of government' compared to the 'old' theory of democracy raises the practical problem of PR. Rule of the people favours PR, for if people rule through their representatives then numerical distribution of opinion

¹⁰⁵ Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, pp. 272-273

¹⁰⁶ K. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Vol. 1, first edition (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1945) pp. 120-125.

should mirror as closely as possible the views of those who rule – the people. Such an argument collapses if Popper’s argument is accepted, for PR suffers from a number of failings and thus is problematic. Whereas under a single-member constituency system an MP has the freedom to vote against the party line, under a proportional system the MP is “bound to (their) party because he has been chosen to represent it and it alone.” Furthermore, PR “does not represent the people and its views but simply the influence that the various parties (and party propaganda) had upon the electorate on polling day.”¹⁰⁷

“Accordingly, nobody looks on election day as a Day of Judgment; as a day when a responsible government stands to account for its deeds and omissions, for its successes and failures, and a responsible opposition criticises this record and explains what steps the government ought to have taken, and why.”¹⁰⁸

The formation of a government becomes problematic, due to the multiplicity of political parties under a proportional electoral system, as small parties can have significant influence over a government’s decisions. Yet, so long as “one takes the ‘essence’ of democracy to be popular sovereignty, one has to swallow these problems as a democrat because proportionality appears to be ‘essential’.”¹⁰⁹

Importantly, PR impacts on the government’s removal by the people’s verdict in three ways. Firstly, the unlikelihood of an overall majority results in the people’s verdict not being expressed, as no party has been thrown out, for no judgement has been passed. Secondly, people get used to not holding political leaders responsible for their actions, and a loss of support simply indicates a momentary wavering in popularity. Finally, under PR it is possible for a party which has lost considerable support to remain in power through the support of a minor party,

¹⁰⁷ K. Popper, *All Life is Problem Solving*, (Taylor and Francis, Florence, 2013) p. 95

¹⁰⁸ K. Popper, ‘Popper on Democracy’, *Economist*, 23rd April 1988, p. 28

¹⁰⁹ Popper, *All Life is Problem Solving*, p. 95

thus governing against the decision of the electorate. Moreover, the minor party could bring down a government without reference to the electorate, forming a new government with an opposition party – a “grotesque contradiction to the basic idea of proportional representation, which is that a party’s influence should correspond to the number of its votes.”¹¹⁰

For Popper, it matters not who rules “if it is possible to get rid of the government without bloodshed. Any government that can be thrown out has a strong incentive to act in a way that makes people content with it. And this incentive is lost if the government knows it cannot be so easily ousted.”¹¹¹ A two-party system appears to be the best form of democracy, leading to self-criticism, a result of competition and “clear condemnation by the electorate that cannot be disregarded”, forcing “parties to learn from their mistakes or to go under.”¹¹² Indeed, there is an imperative for the opposition to be as “good and strong as possible. Otherwise the voters are forced to let a bad government go on governing, because they have reason to think that ‘nothing else will be any better’.” Popper dismisses the argument that PR is ‘more democratic’ than FPTP, as it refers to an outdated theory of democracy as government by the people, which has been superseded by the majority power of dismissal.¹¹³

Laski

Harold J. Laski’s political journey covered pluralism, Fabian socialism and Marxism.¹¹⁴ Having been influenced by the success of the Attlee government he

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 96

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 94

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 97

¹¹³ Popper, ‘Popper on Democracy’, pp. 25-28

¹¹⁴ M. Beech, & K. Hickson, *Labour’s Thinkers*, (Taurus Academic Studies, London, 2007) pp. 58-77

affirmed the purpose of a general election was the creation of strong government. Laski rejected claims that parliament should represent a microcosm of society and in England and America “you have no law prohibiting the existence of social groups and you get a two-party system.” On the European continent “you get a proliferation of groups that in turn leads to an unstable ministerial system; and where there is ministerial instability, you get, I suggest, the development of revolution... That makes me hostile to proportional representation on the ground that it multiplies groups.” Laski suggests the “business of a legislative assembly is not to mirror the variegated opinion of a democracy but to make possible the existence of an executive with some degree of permanence.”¹¹⁵

He reiterated this point in *Reflections on the Constitution* that as a strong believer in a “stable executive with sufficient authority to drive important and substantial programmes through the House of Commons in the life-time of the Parliament of five years, I remain completely unconvinced by advocates of proportional representation, in any of its numerous forms, or of kindred expedients like the alternative vote.” Such was Laski’s faith in FPTP he did not think it important that “from time to time, a minority of the electoral votes may give a party a majority of seats so that it is able to form a government. For it would be a very stupid party, obviously courting defeat, which failed to remember that it must not outrage the Opposition, that it must show a real respect for a minority of importance, and that it must pay careful attention to the currents and cross-currents of opinion outside the House of Commons. Consequently, constitutional reforms that pose a threat to the clarity and consistency of government, especially a socialist government, should be rejected, where compromise naturally inhibits the implementation of

¹¹⁵ M. De Wolf Howe, *Holmes-Laski Letters: The correspondence of Mr Justice Holmes to Harold J Laski*, (Oxford University Press, London, 1953) p. 494

controversial or radical policies. Moreover, 'Minority government', he argued "is invariably uneasy government, and usually cowardly government."¹¹⁶

The 'Mandate and the Manifesto'

The rejection of PR and an emphasis on party governments lends itself to the doctrine of the 'mandate and the manifesto'. With the extension of the franchise in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it "gradually came to be accepted" according to Harvey and Bather "that political reform meant that the electorate could not only choose a Government but indicate a policy."¹¹⁷ Additionally, Utley considered with heightened tensions between social classes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, two political parties emerged with policies designed to appeal to the different social classes. "These issues demanded a national policy, or rather a choice of national policies. They necessarily had a centralising influence on politics, and this was of immense importance for the doctrine of the mandate."¹¹⁸ The growth in the electorate during the period and the introduction of the secret ballot had meant that in the constituencies, individual electors could no longer be bought off. Furthermore, candidates could not know every elector in the constituency. As a result, "votes had to be won by promises of legislation."¹¹⁹

Utley reasoned that the essence of the doctrine is that the government "must obey the people", appealing "not primarily to the distinctive interests of particular localities but to the will of the people as a whole."¹²⁰ If for example, a candidate

¹¹⁶ H. J. Laski, *Reflections on the Constitution*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1951) pp. 55-56, 59

¹¹⁷ J. Harvey, & L. Bather, *The British Constitution*, (MacMillan and Company Ltd., London, 1966) p. 523

¹¹⁸ T.E. Utley, 'The Mandate', *Cambridge Journal*, Vol. 3: 1, (October 1949) p. 10

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10

was elected on a popular platform of abolishing tuition fees, the member's freedom once elected would have increased for he would not be bound by a national policy dimension. However, "His ability to discharge his promises would depend on the willingness of other Members, many of whom would be committed to incompatible policies, to co-operate with him. Consequently, he would be forced into compromises and uncertain, fluctuating coalitions, and if any national policy ever emerged from all these compacts it would bear a small enough relation to anything which any constituent in the whole of the kingdom ever imagined he was voting for."¹²¹ This has a direct impact on the doctrine and for PR that would make more likely independent and small parties. "The more undisciplined a legislature, the harder it is for the electorate to exert any continuous influence on policy."¹²²

Roy Hattersley, former Deputy Leader of the Labour Party and traditionally a defender of FPTP, wrote "Critics of our present system underestimate the importance of the twin doctrines of the manifesto and the mandate – parties publishing their programme before the election and promising that, given the chance, they will do their best to put it into practice after polling day. With proportional representation that process – offering the electorate the chance to reject or endorse specific policies – is rendered impossible."¹²³ The manifesto is the contract between the executive and the electorate, providing a direct link between the electors and the elected, not to be watered down or negotiated away through horse-trading. The principle of the 'mandate and the manifesto' ties in with certain elements in the Westminster Model, including ministerial authority and responsibility, impacting on a minister's relationship with his or her Civil

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 10

¹²³ *Guardian*, 'The Centre cannot hold', 19th December 1988

Servants, and draws on the extensive power residing in the executive.

Additionally, 'collective responsibility' – the principle that all those in government will uphold government policy or resign if they disagree – under the pressures of coalition has the potential to breakdown.

A programmatic party such as the Labour Party, with its commitment to social change, led Richard Crossman to affirm "Our morality requires us to keep faith with our party, recognising that we have been sent to Parliament to carry the mandate out...Now, what could be more immoral than entering Parliament and failing in our faith to the party outside?"¹²⁴ Rose observes that within the Labour Party the manifesto acts as a contract not just between the Party and the electorate but also within the different parts of the Party – the Parliamentary Labour Party with its commitment to serving the nation and the Party conference and role of the membership.¹²⁵

However, both Labour governments and Conservative governments face unexpected events and it is not possible for a manifesto to foresee all actions, and therefore contain the relevant policies. Yet the actions of the government are not rendered illegitimate and nor is the authority of the government brought into question, due to the 'implied manifesto'. Emy, and Hofferbert and Budge considered knowledge of the longstanding ideology and values of the party permits the electorate to have a reasonable expectation of policies.¹²⁶ Hattersley affirmed:

¹²⁴ R. Crossman, *Inside View*, (Jonathan Cape Ltd., London, 1972) p. 107

¹²⁵ Rose, *Do Parties Make A Difference?*, pp. 58-59

¹²⁶ H. Emy, 'The Mandate and Responsible Government', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 32:1, (1997) p. 70; R. Hofferbert, & I. Budge, 'The Party Mandate and the Westminster Model: Election Programmes and Government Spending in Britain, 1945-85', *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 22:2, (April 1992) p. 157

“The government can’t promise all it’s going to do, it can’t do all it promises. With FPTP you sort of know which side the Party is going to be on when the crunch comes even if events arise that government had not anticipated. That is possible under FPTP but not under PR and coalition.”¹²⁷

A Conservative government would in times of financial difficulty be expected to cut government expenditure and cut taxes for families and business to boost consumer spending. A Labour government on the other hand would increase government expenditure through public works and welfare to boost the economy. Yet, should there be a coalition government, especially if it consists of political parties who have no history of working together, then the expectation of how the government will act is unknown. Furthermore, Bale professes single party government or minority government are far more likely to enact their manifesto commitments than coalition governments, for greater control of the premiership and government can be exercised by the electorate. Indeed, between 1988 and 2005 eighty-eight per cent of manifesto pledges were upheld within the lifetime of the next parliament.¹²⁸

The theory of the ‘mandate and the manifesto’ offers a view of democratic legitimacy, acting as a contract between the winning political party and the electorate, regardless of whom individual voters have cast their ballot in favour of and whether they have read the manifesto. “Voters have no way to bind those they elect to do what they wish. Nor can politicians in office compel events to produce what they promised when in opposition. Once in office, the manifesto is a touchstone by which the current practice of the governing party can be assessed; it can also be an albatross signifying that its achievements are

¹²⁷ Interview with Lord Hattersley, 17th November 2014

¹²⁸ *Guardian*, ‘Curb your cynicism: politicians do keep their manifesto promises’, 14th April 2015

wanting.”¹²⁹ The manifesto becomes a ‘statement of intent’, forewarning the opposition that they have no constitutional justification to prevent policy, and informing civil servants about the political commitments of a newly elected government. The electorate, faced with competing programmes of government on a national basis, will give the winning political party the moral authority to govern, allowing it carry out its manifesto commitments, through a different set of leaders in office.

Leadership, the Labour Party and the Fabians

Schumpeter’s theory results in leadership becoming a key facet, in the light of the electoral mass “incapable of actions other than a stampede.”¹³⁰ The leadership of the Labour Party seeks to represent workers within the confines of Westminster, locating the class conflict in Westminster, by having working people and those sympathetic to the working class and socialism elected to Parliament. However, Marc Stears, claims that the Labour Party has a split attitude towards leadership. On the one hand “Labour insists that there is something inherently suspect about the very idea of leadership”, trumpeting “its egalitarianism” not presuming one individual is ahead of the other by “virtue of personality, expertise, or ability to represent key interests.” On the other hand, the party requires a “singular focus for the public, a singular decision-maker at the centre, and a singular figure with whom the broader movement can identify.”¹³¹ Tony Crosland considered in *The Future of Socialism* people would rather tend to their gardens than become

¹²⁹ Rose, *Do Parties Make A Difference?*, p. 61

¹³⁰ Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, p. 283

¹³¹ M. Stears, ‘Democracy, Leadership and Organising’, in M. Glasman, J. Rutherford, M. Stears, S. White (eds.), *The Labour Tradition and the politics of paradox*, (The Oxford London Seminars 2010-2011) pp. 58-59

engaged in politics.¹³² A diary entry by Richard Crossman in 1959 reveals the unease that some Labour politicians feel when contemplating leadership and their class. Hugh Gaitskell said to Richard Crossman:

“We, as middle-class socialists have got to have a profound humility. Though it’s a funny way of putting it, we’ve got to know that we lead them because they can’t do it without us, with our abilities, and yet we must feel humble to working people.”¹³³

The Fabians, contrary to pluralists, consider society should be engineered by administrators from the top-down – preferably Fabians or Labour people – who could govern on behalf of the working class. Reform of society could be achieved by having likeminded individuals in positions of power – permeating the establishment – implementing reform through the parliamentary route, thus committing the Labour Party to equality and efficiency through a centralised state. Strong, decisive and responsible government would result, entailing a rejection of a written constitution and PR, as both would undermine the Westminster Model, the sovereignty of parliament and importantly reduce the opportunity of a parliamentary majority.

Marxism was rejected on the basis that evolutionary socialism was the ‘wave of the future’ rather than violent revolution, and through ‘gradualism’, ‘moderation’

¹³² T. Crosland, *The Future of Socialism*, (Cape, London 1956) Beckett concurred: “A lot of people in this country are not very interested in politics. They know when it comes to polling day they have a chance to kick ‘that lot out’, and they are prepared to do so... but most of the time they really don’t want to be bothered. They do not want you coming around all the time, getting them to express their opinions. They’d rather go fishing or golfing. They like the idea to elect people who try and do the things they said they would do, and if they don’t they can kick them out every four or five years. That suits the British character.” Interview with Beckett MP, 26th March 2014

¹³³ R. H. S. Crossman, *The Backbench diaries of Richard Crossman*, (etd.) J. Morgan, (Hamish Hamilton and Jonathan Cape, New York, 1981) pp. 769-770. Entry for Thursday 13th August 1959

and a 'step by step' approach, socialism could be introduced. Webb affirms organic reform is based upon four principles: that it is democratic, acceptable to the majority of people; gradual, thus causing no dislocation; regarded as moral by the mass of the people; and constitutional and peaceful.¹³⁴ The British State, duly reformed, would become in the words of George Bernard Shaw "A first-rate practical instrument of democratic government."¹³⁵

Little attention was paid to the possibility that the structure by which they hoped to achieve reform was permeated with values opposed to theirs, and therefore attempts to enact their values might be defeated. The existing structure of the British State could be utilised to change society in accordance with their values. Norton writes that the socialist approach to the constitution considers it possible "to impose Socialist control of government and so create a strong, centralised government which can implement Socialist policies and concomitantly withstand attempts at obstruction by the City, by industrialists, by the capitalist-controlled mass media and by international financiers." Moreover, "The Socialist emphasis on the mandate and intra-party democracy favours MPs who are willing and prepared to ensure the implementation of the party manifesto."¹³⁶ Sovereignty was not to be undermined by a written constitution or PR, which would hinder legislative and executive power ensuring the forward march to socialism through parliament, could continue. Collectivism was to be advanced by a parliamentary majority committed to socialism, enacted on behalf of the working class, not necessarily by those from the working class.

¹³⁴ S. Webb, 'Historic', in G. B. Shaw, *Fabian Essays*, (George Allen & Unwin, London, 1962) pp. 66-67

¹³⁵ G. B. Shaw, *Report on Fabian Policy and Resolutions, Fabian Tract No. 70*, (Fabian Society, London, 1896)

¹³⁶ Norton, *The Constitution in Flux*, pp. 264, 266

The Hollowing Out of the British State and its impact on Democratic Elitism

Due to the changes made to the British state, questions are raised as to how much influence the state has over national affairs and therefore the elite view of democracy. The 'hollowing out of the state' first applied by R. A. W. Rhodes, claimed "potentially dramatic changes", notably local government reform, privatisation and agencification, were leading to "diminished central capacity" in the British state. "In sum" he argued, "current trends erode the centre's capacity to steer the system – its capacity to govern."¹³⁷ Power has moved upwards to the European Union and other international bodies, outwards to the private sector through privatisation and QUANGO's, and downwards to local government and the devolved bodies. Indeed, dissatisfaction with the political system can be discerned; in 2001, the lowest poll was recorded at a General Election post-WW2 registering at 59%. The two subsequent elections in 2005 and 2010 saw only marginal improvements; 61% and 66% respectively. Moreover, with declining party membership it does suggest that the electorate are disengaged from mainstream politics and are apathetic towards political elites.

If Schumpeter's theory is accepted, that we elect competing elites to govern on our behalf, yet these elites no longer have the power and capacity to govern, then a central plank of elite theory is brought into question. Consequently, the pluralist analysis arguing for extra-parliamentary politics, reengaging with the electorate at community level, empowering groups and charities, acknowledging the diversity of society is the method to encourage electoral participation. However, a counter thesis can be put forward, namely the 'reconstituted-state' thesis. Whilst the impact of globalisation, market principles and new public

¹³⁷ R. A. W. Rhodes, 'The Hollowing Out of the State: The changing Nature of the Public Service in Britain', *Political Quarterly*, (1994) pp. 138-151

management is accepted, the core executive can still play a positive role and is strongly placed relative to other actors in the policy process for it possesses, both the resources and strategic learning capabilities to reshape its existing capacities and develop new forms of intervention.¹³⁸

Summary

By rejecting the classical definition of democracy where parliament is representative of the people, and accepting most members of society are unable or unwilling to participate in the role outlined by classical democracy, the elitist theory is arguably a more 'realistic' interpretation of the limits of political participation. By accepting the fundamental position of leaders and leadership, Schumpeter states his theory is "a theory much truer to life" and "Propositions about the working and the results of the democratic method that take account of this are bound to be infinitely more realist than propositions which do not."¹³⁹

This, in contrast to the old view of democracy, is a thoroughly practical solution to government. The rationale of FPTP is as Schumpeter states "to produce strong governments and to avoid deadlocks"¹⁴⁰, therefore delivering single-party governments rather than coalitions.

Schumpeter continues: "Owing to the electoral system the actual redistribution of seats is apt to give an exaggerated picture." FPTP, manages to produce exaggerations due to the 'Cube Law'; a 2% lead in the popular poll should equate to a 6% more seats. Thus, the lack of proportionality is considered a positive by

¹³⁸ See D. Richards, *New Labour and the Civil Service: Reconstituting the Westminster Model*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire, 2008)

¹³⁹ Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, p. 269

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 270

defenders of FPTP, as it has the ability to produce strong governments.”¹⁴¹

Schumpeter’s theory allows the Labour Party to accept the British State and Constitution, with a strong executive dimension wielding its parliamentary majority to enact legislation, delivered through a plurality electoral system. In rejecting the Marxist critique of the state and capitalism and accepting the Fabian belief in Gradualism and parliamentary reform, the Labour Party considers it can deliver Socialism on behalf of the working class through the Westminster system.

Marxism

Marxists contend that the Labour Party’s faith in the reforming capabilities of Westminster has been erroneous, for the Labour Party is not the vehicle to introduce socialism and emancipate the working class. “The Labour Party is a dead end for Socialists...It is time to look for an alternative to Labour. We need socialism more urgently than ever. But it won’t come through parliament and the Labour Party.”¹⁴² The present electoral system has impacted on the Labour Party, moderating policy and ensuring a dominant position on the British left and harnessing the support of the British working class. This section will firstly outline Labour’s adherence to constitutional politics, along with why Westminster has been deemed the only arena in which to fight the class war. Secondly, how the Labour’s electoral strategy of moderation – a consequence of FPTP – ties into the Party’s unwavering faith in parliamentary politics. Lastly, if we accept the premise of the Marxist interpretation that the Labour Party is incapable of delivering Socialism, then what role, if any can electoral reform play, in bringing about Socialism.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 377

¹⁴² A. Callinicos, *The Revolutionary Road to Socialism: What the Socialist Workers Party Stands For*, (Socialist Workers Party, London, 1983) pp. 30-31

Ralph Miliband observed in *Capitalist Democracy in Britain* that the importance of the House of Commons does not derive from its actual powers but “enshrines the elective principles”, providing legitimacy for the government, which in turn relies on its capacity to command a majority in the House of Commons. This has been the state of affairs for over three hundred years. Miliband goes on to state this is a “unique prerogative” turning the House of Commons into a “focus of hope”, suggesting all that is required to bring about fundamental change is a majority in the House of Commons. “In other words, there is no need to look for revolutionary alternative: the mechanism for any change that may be wanted is already available.” In due course, given the correct parliamentary arithmetic, a socialist order could come to fruition with the winner claiming a ‘mandate’, based on the “habitual assertion that the British people had expressed a clear desire”. This all forms part of the “democratic mythology” which in turn feeds into the political culture of Great Britain, becoming the mainstay of democratic life. Finally:

“The whole of political life in Britain has been dominated by the belief that the House of Commons was, or could be made to become, the effective instrument of such changes as various classes, groups, and interests might at different times want to achieve in the economic, social, and political character of British society.”¹⁴³

Consequently, extra-parliamentary activity is rendered futile, for there is no need for people to take to the streets, exert pressure through trade unions, charities, popular movements, when a majority in the House of Commons, committed to socialism can deliver a socialist Britain.

¹⁴³ R. Miliband, *Capitalist Democracy in Britain*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1982) pp. 20-21, 36

Labour's Constitutionalism

An electoral strategy in Britain naturally leads to the House of Commons becoming the most important institution as this is the institution where the British government stands or falls. The influence of the Fabian Society 'gradualism' can be observed. Keir Hardie considered "the propaganda of class hatred is not one which can ever take root in this country...Mankind in the main is not moved by hatred but by love of what is right. If we could have socialism on the S.D.F (Social Democratic Foundation) lines nothing would be changed – save the worse."¹⁴⁴ Ramsay MacDonald, Labour's first Prime Minister – an individual who held considerable influence both within the Parliamentary Labour Party, and outside Westminster – considered, "Neither Marx nor Engels, saw deep enough to discover the possibilities of peaceful advance which lay hidden beneath the surface...Socialism is no class movement...It is not the rule of the working class; it is the organisation of the community."¹⁴⁵

The early leaders of the Labour Representation Committee and Labour Party, such as Hardie and MacDonald, placed their faith in society evolving towards socialism, draining British socialism of a scientific analysis, instead adhering to an ethical creed. People it was deemed were bound together through a common identity, reducing the importance of class. Consequently, British socialism synthesises 'class' and 'nation', and the Labour Party's faith in the institutions of the British State led the Labour Party down the path of moderation and electoral politics. Cliff and Gluckstein state that this has been to the advantage of the Labour, allowing the party to channel the class struggle through political

¹⁴⁴ Quoted in P. P. Poirier, *The Advent of the Labour Party*, (Allen & Unwin, London, 1958) p. 143

¹⁴⁵ Quoted in D. Coates, *The Labour Party and the Struggle for Socialism*, (Cambridge, 1975) p. 137

institutions. "Since the birth of the Labour Party there had been a link, albeit indirect and tenuous, but real nevertheless, between the class struggle and voting Labour" meaning "politics is about elections and which party forms the government."¹⁴⁶

Since the inception of the Labour Party electoralism and constitutionalism have been evident: The 1903 secret Gladstone-MacDonald Pact was designed to give the party a greater chance of securing representation within Westminster.

Supporting the Liberal Government from 1910-1914 and entering the Wartime Coalition from 1915-1918 further bound the Labour Party to the British State.

John McGurk, chairman of the 1919 Labour Party Conference reiterated the point made by Sidney Webb, emphasising how the British constitution, offered the most feasible route to the betterment of the working class, acting as a strong opposition to the parties of capital, affirming:

"We are either constitutionalists or we are not constitutionalists. If we are constitutionalists, if we believe in the efficacy of the political weapon... then it is both unwise and undemocratic because we fail to get a majority at the polls to turn round and demand that we should substitute industrial action."¹⁴⁷

The first minority government in 1924 and the second minority government in 1929-1931 further convinced the Labour Party on the merits of the levers of power. All that was required was a parliamentary majority, and the Labour Party could then govern in the same fashion as its Conservative counterpart, accepting the conventions of the parliamentary system. After participating in Churchill's

¹⁴⁶ T. Cliff & D. Gluckstein, *The Labour Party – A Marxist History*, (Bookmarks, London, 1988) pp. 319 & 388

¹⁴⁷ Labour Party Conference Report, 1919, p. 113

Wartime Coalition the Labour Party achieved a parliamentary majority in 1945 and in doing so it became apparent that, with political will and an electoral majority, the machinery of the British state could be used to the benefit of the working class. Aneurin Bevan, wrote *In Place of Fear*, that as a young miner in a South Wales Colliery, his concern was with one practical question: “Where does power lie in this particular state of Great Britain, and how can it be attained by the workers?...Where was power and which road to it?”¹⁴⁸ During the United Kingdom’s first attempt to enter the Economic Community, under Harold Macmillan’s Conservative Government, Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell famously told Labour Party Conference in 1962 that entry would result in “the end of Britain as an independent nation-state... the end of a thousand years of history”¹⁴⁹, warning Labour voters of the implications of European federalism and the transfer of our sovereignty and democratic rights. Peregrine Worsthorne, the Conservative and former Editor of the *Sunday Telegraph*, considered by 1978 Labour was now a party of the establishment, witnessing:

“the transmogrification of Labour from a moralising band of proselytising missionaries into a political arm of the governing class... classical-type members of the British political establishment.”¹⁵⁰

Pimlott argues that Labour’s constitutionalism stems from the influence of the trade unions: “representation was what they had in mind” and “policy was secondary.”¹⁵¹ Only when representation had been gained, could the Labour movement consider policy and think about enacting ‘socialism’ onto the statute

¹⁴⁸ Bevan, *In Place of Fear*, p. 21

¹⁴⁹ Labour Party Conference Report, 1962, p. 159

¹⁵⁰ P. Worsthorne, ‘Too Much Freedom’, in M. Cowling, *Conservative Essays*, (Cassell Ltd, London, 1978) p. 144

¹⁵¹ B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930’s*, (Allen & Unwin, London, 1977) p. 196

book. Pimlott continues: the “Purpose of the Labour party has always been to win seats: to gain the election, at local and national levels, of men and women who are representative of the working-class.”¹⁵² The trade union movement, arguably a conservative force, do not seek to overturn the capitalist system, instead acting as a shield for workers against capitalism. “Labourism” David Judge maintains “binds the private interests of workers indissolubly to capital, by securing material gains through compromise and integration.”¹⁵³ Labour MPs from Scotland, for example, were engaged in ‘brokerage’, going down to Westminster and bringing back financial benefits for their constituents. Once the Labour Party, as the political wing of the trade union movement, had achieved representation, parliament could be considered the best defence against big business and market forces.

Such continuity, respect and unwavering faith in the British Parliamentary system led Miliband to state, in his oft quoted phrase, “Of all political parties claiming socialism to be their aim, the Labour Party has always been one of the most dogmatic – not about Socialism but about the Parliamentary System.”¹⁵⁴ As such the Labour Party has been concerned about winning the levers of power, not the transformation of society. Miliband goes on to avow “The Labour Party has not only been a parliamentary party: it has been deeply imbued by parliamentarianism.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 196

¹⁵³ D. Judge, *The Parliamentary State*, (Sage Publications, London, 1993) p. 101

¹⁵⁴ Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, p. 13

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13

Labour's Dominant Position on the Left

Commanding the support of the working-class has allowed the Labour Party to permeate deep into the psyche of the working-class that their best interests are dependent upon voting Labour. McKenzie and Silver conducted a survey in the mid-1960s discovering "The Labour Party is perceived overwhelmingly by its working-class supporters as the party of the working class and for the working class and pursues policies which are beneficial to it."¹⁵⁶ The Labour Party is perceived, and views itself, as the representative of the working-class, existing to further the interests of the working-class, something which could not be achieved without the existence of a Labour Party.

The two-party system and the role FPTP plays in maintaining the situation allows the Labour Party to continue to be the dominant force on the British Left, and unless the two-party system irreversibly breaks down then Labour's position is likely to remain. Ralph Miliband contests, "In electoral terms, whether at national or local level, the Labour Party occupies a crushingly dominant position in relation to other groupings on the left."¹⁵⁷ The Labour Party has successfully bettered the Liberal Party, Communist Party of Great Britain, the SDP Liberal Alliance, the Socialist Worker's Party, Respect and most recently the Green Party. Consequently, it became very difficult for other political organisations who seek to act on behalf of the British working class, to offer a credible alternative, as the Labour Party could extract material benefits in a way unavailable to another party of the left.

¹⁵⁶ Quoted in L. Panitch, *Working-Class Politics in Crisis*, (Verso, London, 1986) p. 60

¹⁵⁷ R. Miliband, 'Moving On', in R. Miliband & J. Saville (eds.), *Socialist Register*, (Merlin Press, London, 1976) p. 129

The Moderating Effect of FPTP

Labour's electoral strategy under FPTP, according to the Marxist critique forbids the party adopting a radical outlook, continuously chasing the votes of non-socialists in order to win an electoral majority. Thus the Party adopts reformist measures to appease the desires of 'Middle England', 'Worcester Woman' and 'Mondeo Man' – moderate policies which are designed to win the vote of the 'median voter' rather than policies committed to the introduction of socialism. Furthermore, FPTP discourages political fusion, aiding unity within political parties, thus leading to compromise over policy, in an attempt to woo the votes of non-socialists. Unity, as Leo Panitch states, becomes the key enabling the Labour Party to maintain its "Immediate electoral utility as a defensive agency for the working class."¹⁵⁸ The idea of betrayal is ever present in the Labour Party - 'whilst cowards flinch and traitors sneer, we'll keep the Red Flag flying here' – could be applied to MacDonald during the events of 1931 and the breakaway SDP in 1981. Disunity and division, has the potential to split the Labour vote, allowing a party of capital to come through the middle and win the constituency, consequently reducing the prospect of high office.

In order to win elections, the Labour Party has to be a 'broad-church', winning the votes of the middle classes, as the working class alone are insufficient in delivering Labour governments. Moderating policies comes naturally to the Labour Party, with the argument becoming increasingly circular, for to win the votes of more non-socialists the leadership has to become more conservative. Whatever radicalism the Labour Party espouses is quickly side-lined and excluded. "Dire prophecies (of the self-fulfilling sort) of electoral disaster" would

¹⁵⁸ Panitch, *Working-Class Politics in Crisis*, p. 25

result, claims Miliband, “at the hands of decent ordinary men and women who are not socialists if the Labour Party were to adopt the doctrinaire, unrealistic, and pernicious policies advocated by the left.”¹⁵⁹ In addition, electoralism requires votes, not a definite political commitment. Consequently, the Labour Party seeks the support of conservative forces, for example, Tony Blair courting the support of Rupert Murdoch in the run up to the 1997 general election, to ensure the *Sun* newspaper supported Labour, with the purpose of gaining votes.

It is questionable whether the working class in Britain have much interest in radical politics: the adage ‘nobody as conservative as the British working class’. Indeed, a significant minority of working-class people vote Conservative – ‘Angels in Marble’ in the eyes of Benjamin Disraeli – and have played an important role in delivering Conservative governments. Peter Shore asked, “How is it that so large a proportion of the electorate, many of whom are neither wealthy nor privileged, have been recruited for a cause which is not their own?”¹⁶⁰ The reasons for the alleged conservatism are manifold; the impact of the non-conformist churches with the chapel offering education and betterment for the working class, the concept of deference accepting the supposed superior ability to govern, the media including print and television, the trade union movement who have channelled the working class down the parliamentary road, the moderation of the Labour Party, the influence of the Conservative Party on sympathetic elements of the working class and the proficiency of the establishment to build the British nation.

¹⁵⁹ Miliband, *Capitalist Democracy in Britain*, pp. 78-79

¹⁶⁰ P. Shore, *The Real Nature of Conservatism*, Labour Party Educational Series, No. 3, September 1952

The Role of Electoral Reform and Proportional Representation

Electoral reform can be perceived in both a positive and a negative light. It can break Labour's dominant position on the British left and lead to a socialist party representing the working class, aiding the transformation of the British economy and society. Conversely, electoral reform can be perceived as a bourgeois trick, designed to distract the working class from the real and day-to-day class struggle, sedating revolutionary demands. Constitutional reform would therefore be mere institutional tinkering. Hilary Wainwright deemed "Socialists should be at the forefront of attempts to make it (the electoral system) fair, whether or not it is to our immediate electoral advantage... In the long run, socialism needs the active support of the overwhelming majority of people; we have nothing to fear from an electoral system which requires us to win such support."¹⁶¹ Arthur Scargill considered PR to be a "fundamental socialist concept... no socialist seriously committed to democratic, accountable representation can advocate any other electoral system."¹⁶²

Wainwright contests that the New Left is "more critical in every way of Britain's parliamentary institutions. Westminster is not the hallmark of democracy that it is for the Labourist left...the New Left, with its experiences of campaigning in close co-operation with other organisations on the left, is far less protective of the Labour Party's monopoly of working class politics", part of Labour's opposition to PR. Working in alliances with other organisations on the left has led to the belief that the consequences of PR are not considered a threat. Moreover, PR would provide the opportunity for "some party of the left, from inside and as well as

¹⁶¹ H. Wainwright, *Labour A Tale of Two Parties*, (The Hogarth Press, London, 1987) pp. 280-281

¹⁶² A. Scargill. 'Proportional Representation: A Socialist Concept', *New Left Review*, 1/158, July – August 1986, p. 76

outside the Party, to establish an electoral competitor to the Labour Party.” The present situation of electoral competition emanating from the centre and right “the all-powerful pressure within the party is to silence the left in the mad rush for the centre.” Whilst PR would be secondary to the pressure from society, “such a party could provide a beacon spreading light on needs, initiatives and ideas that up till now have existed only in Labour’s shadow.”¹⁶³

Scargill saw PR “not as a device for compromise and coalition but as the exact opposite: a means of *polarizing* political views around alternative programmes and class approaches, of clarifying the fundamental contradictions within capitalism and exposing the class nature of this society, thus involving more and more people in the struggle to transform it.”¹⁶⁴ Consequently, PR would allow ideological and political purity – winning power “for my class and its allies”¹⁶⁵ – unlike the collusion of the Labour Party with capitalism under the present system. Socialism will lack support and legitimacy unless a majority can be garnered in favour and therefore what is required is an “electoral system which gives an appropriate number of parliamentary seats in direct relation to the number of votes cast.”¹⁶⁶ In addition, the PR method should allow half the seats to be allocated through geographical constituencies and the other half by Labour Party conference, thus reflecting the views of party members. Echoing the sentiment of Wainwright, Scargill writes “No change in electoral process will on its own alter the nature of a society.” However, PR does “help provide the basis for carrying that tradition forward within the structures already familiar to the British people. Furthermore, it demands levels of political campaigning and education sadly neglected in recent decades by the leadership of the Labour Party and key

¹⁶³ Wainwright, *Labour A Tale of Two Parties*, pp. 281-282

¹⁶⁴ Scargill, ‘Proportional Representation’, p. 80

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 80

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80

organisations in the Labour movement.”¹⁶⁷ The inherent fairness of PR will be a “vote for clarity, for participation, for mobilising the British people to build a society worth living in. A vote for proportional representation is a vote for democracy, and a vote for socialism.”¹⁶⁸

Richard Kuper writes that the notion the electorate are sovereign through a choice of competing teams for government in a general election once every four or five years, is an “extraordinarily emaciated vision of democracy.”¹⁶⁹ In contrast socialism – with its aim to meet human needs and aspirations – requires “democratic institutions at every level of state and society, through which people actively participate in shaping their own destinies.” FPTP only offer a restricted involvement. It assumed “the voter, in exercising your choice and expressing your sovereign independence, affect the outcome in the way you desire.”¹⁷⁰

Kuper outlined the benefits of PR for the left: Firstly, tactical voting would cease as every vote would count, rectifying Labour’s loss of support; secondly, a left-wing alternative to Labour would receive seats in proportion to its vote share, forcing the Labour Party to alter its policies; thirdly, PR would be one aspect of democratising every sphere of the British state; lastly, the combined strength of such a socialist party, together with the left in the Labour Party, would determine the weight of socialist ideas in the country as a whole.¹⁷¹

Robin Blackburn affirms the “workings of the British electoral system are, quite simply, indefensible” contributing to a “mediocre and constipated two-party

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 80

¹⁶⁹ R. Kuper, *Electing for Democracy, Proportional Representation and the Left*, (Socialist Society, 1990) p. 9

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-31

system that fails to reflect a far more various society.”¹⁷² Opponents of PR in the Labour Party see it as a threat to the “unity and prospects of the labour movement; Left Labourites add that it would lead to coalition governments dominated by the Centre.”¹⁷³ Blackburn reiterated the argument “PR would certainly make it easier for a New Left party to secure electoral representation” it would not weaken the “overall representation of the Left in a truly proportional system, but merely put Labour in a less inflated position, and one in which it might be pulled to the Left rather than the Right. It should not be forgotten that past Labour governments have, in political terms, always been coalitions under the structural domination of the Right.”¹⁷⁴ Interestingly, a Labour agreement with the *Centre* to introduce PR would strengthen the Left inside and outside the Labour Party, as it would “oblige Labour’s leaders to consider a possibility which has scarcely ever bothered them before – that they might face competition from that quarter.”¹⁷⁵

A twin process is advocated, coordinating extra-parliamentary activities with the parliamentary process. In *The British Road to Socialism* the Communist Party declared “when a socialist majority in Parliament is won it will need the support of the mass movement outside Parliament to uphold the decision it has taken in Parliament. Conversely, the Parliamentary decisions will give legal endorsement to popular aims and popular struggles.”¹⁷⁶ The state, which the Labour Party seeks to control through a parliamentary majority, is not neutral: it is a Capitalist State; business interests, the power of the financial district in the City of London, the press and media, armed forces and secret service, House of Lords and the

¹⁷² R. Blackburn, ‘The Ruins of Westminster’, *New Left Review*, 1/191, January-February 1992, pp. 7-8

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 15

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35

¹⁷⁶ *The British Road to Socialism*, (third revised edition October 1968) p. 48

Crown are all institutions which are deeply conservative and would fight to preserve their position against Socialism. Consequently, a mere majority for the Labour Party in the House of Commons is insufficient for Socialism for it is the capitalists who have and maintain control.

Summary

The role of electoral reform is key, fostering the formation of an electorally successful socialist party, breaking up Labour's hegemonic hold on the British Left. No longer would the working class assess that there is no alternative to Labour, as those who consider the Labour Party has been complicit in the advancement of capitalism, would have the opportunity to vote for an authentic party of the left, committed to the introduction of socialism. Importantly, their vote under a system of PR for a socialist party would result in representation, breaking Labour's hold on the working class, who would no longer have to fear voting for anything but Labour in case of ending up with a party of capital. Voting for the Communists would provide a degree of legitimacy in a Capitalist democracy, which according to Miliband is a necessary prerequisite and should be treated as a duty and opportunity, not a distracting and meaningless chore.¹⁷⁷

Yet, Marxists could argue that electoral reform is a distraction. Electoral Reform may have support among the 'North London dinner table sets', academics, *Guardian* readers, constitutional reform pressure groups such the Electoral Reform Society – the liberal intelligentsia. It is, therefore, a bogus concept; free elections are illusory, as elected politicians, regardless of political party, will be part of the ruling class under which ever electoral system is utilised. Such is the

¹⁷⁷ Miliband, 'Moving On', in Miliband & Saville (eds.), *Socialist Register*, p. 139

power and influence of the ruling class, they can shape opinion by using the media and education system to ensure the present system is maintained. Furthermore, elections obscure the fact that the struggle of the working class is a daily event. Whereas “Parliamentary reformists think the working class should bestir itself only once every five years” by casting a vote in favour of the Labour Party, “the battle between the classes goes on day in, day out.”¹⁷⁸

Although the Labour Party has considerable support from the working class, the faith they place in parliamentary politics and the Labour leadership is misdirected. The deeply lodged Fabian watchwords of ‘Gradualism’, ‘moderation’ and ‘reformism’ located within the psyche of the Labour Party, result in the Party being incapable of bringing forth socialism. Instead the Labour Party which has become part of the capitalist state has been deeply imbued with ‘parliamentarianism’, and through elections the ‘class conflict’ is channelled through the parliamentary method. FPTP gives the Labour Party a hegemonic position on the British Left – the ‘true voice’ of the working class - ensuring that the Labour Party can pursue its moderate policies, chasing the votes of the whole nation.

The Labour Party far from fostering revolution within working class communities has acted as a break, channelling the demands of workers through the parliamentary route. Electoral politics and democratic representation were the means by which the Labour leadership sought to show it was a credible and potential party of government. Furthermore, it was the means which allowed the Labour Party to show its respectability, and become acceptable and be accepted by the establishment, tying it to the British State. Accordingly, the extra-

¹⁷⁸ Cliff & Gluckstein, *The Labour Party – A Marxist History*, p. 276

parliamentary route has been considered obsolete, a result of the Labour Party's inherent belief in democratic elections. Yet, the Marxist analysis considers extra-parliamentary tactics to be a necessary pre-condition to enact Socialism. The Labour Party is not a vehicle for the introduction of socialism; it is rather an organisation whose aim has been to win elections, attempting to win the levers of power every four or five years.

Conclusion

Pluralism, democratic elitism and Marxism place a different emphasis on the role of the electoral system and the purpose of elections. Whilst they are disparate schools of thought, there is in some areas overlap and agreement. Marxists, much in the same vein as pluralists, consider the Labour Party's faith in the reforming capabilities of the parliamentary system is mistaken and the role of extra-parliamentary activities to be vital in bring forth socialism. Parliament is, for pluralists, detached from the localities in which grievances occur and therefore unable to adequately respond, therefore insufficient for curing socio-economic ills. Instead, democracy is located in a vibrant network of autonomous bodies, a view contrary to those who subscribe to the elitist tradition. Furthermore, the House of Commons fails to adequately represent the groups and cleavages in society which under FPTP are prevented from finding expression and influencing government policy. PR would increase the likelihood of coalition, negotiations and consensual politics at Westminster, preventing parties acting in the interests of their own 'tribe' and utilising the sovereign powers of parliament at their own behest. Instead, the House of Commons would reflect the society of the day, not the society of years gone by, fostering the formation of new political parties and providing greater opportunity for new political parties to gain representation within parliament.

The state which the Labour Party seeks to control through a parliamentary majority is not neutral but, for Marxists, a capitalist state. Consequently, whilst electoral reform could open up the House of Commons to an authentic party of the left, it would have to be supplemented by extra-parliamentary activities to give extra legitimacy in taking on the conservative forces in society. Emancipating the working class is not possible through the parliamentary system and the working class need to bestir, or be bestirred as the 'class struggle' is reduced to an electoral event once every four or five years. Democratic elitism with its emphasis on government and leadership does not take into account the daily struggle of the working class that manifests itself in a variety of ways. Symbolically, the crossover between pluralism and Marxism is highlighted by the support offered to Charter 88 from Ralph Miliband and Hilary Wainwright, both favouring the emergence of a political party on the left committed to socialism, something more likely under PR. Reforming the electoral system it is claimed would break Labour's dominance, offering a genuine and viable socialist alternative, committed to the emancipation of the working class.

Democratic elitism – reducing elections to a competition for votes and the creation of government – rejects PR on grounds that it reduces the likelihood of single party government and the control exercised by the electorate. Thus it offers a more limited vision for the electorate than pluralism or Marxism, one in which government does the governing. Yet it ties in with the Labour Party's strategy of electoral politics, the nature of the Westminster Model and the influence of the Fabian Society. The unique relationship the Labour Party has with the working class and its objective of representing working-class interests, eventually becoming a governing party of the British state, channelled the Labour Party through the parliamentary road to socialism. Consequently, with elections

being about the election of government and FPTP's ability of delivering single-party government, arguments in favour of electoral reform – such as those made by pluralists and Marxists – are dismissed.

Chapter 2 - Making their mind up? Labour and the Westminster electoral system in historical perspective

The notion that constituencies elect their representatives based on the simple plurality 'of the person with the most votes wins' can be dated back to 1265, when Simon de Montfort summoned Parliament to Lewes. Consequently, territorial constituencies using First-past-the-Post (FPTP) are an established fact in British politics, predating the rise of modern political parties. The Labour Representation Committee (LRC) – as latecomers to the political system having entered the British State at the beginning of the twentieth century – sought “to promote and co-ordinate plans for labour representation.”¹⁷⁹ Focusing on the attitude of the Labour Party throughout the twentieth century up to the growing demands for electoral reform in the mid-1980s and the commissioning of the Plant Report, the chapter will chart the key events and arguments used by Labour politicians. The period analysed includes the pre-World War One debates and the electoral dilemma facing the Party, the inter-war years in which Labour experienced minority government and Ramsay MacDonald's 'great betrayal', the post-World War Two era and the height of the 'two-party' system and finally the growing interest in proportional representation in the 1970s, minority government and the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government.

1900-1914

The problem facing the LRC was gaining representation to the House of Commons when fighting in three-cornered contests, with a lack of funds, against the two established parties of British politics; the Liberal Party and the

¹⁷⁹ H. Pelling and A. J. Reid, *A Short History of the Labour Party, (11th edition)*, (MacMillan, Houndmills, 1996) p. 7

Conservative Party. In secret, James Ramsay MacDonald arranged a meeting with Herbert Gladstone, the Liberal election agent. It was agreed LRC candidates would have a free run in certain constituencies if they left the Liberals an open field elsewhere. The Gladstone-MacDonald Pact of 1903 was born out of fear of splitting the anti-conservative vote and did have some success in both 1906 and 1910, allowing the LRC to gain representation. In 1906 of the 29 seats won by the LRC 11 were in double-member constituencies; of the fifty LRC candidates, 18 enjoyed a straight contest with a Conservative opponent; and only three LRC MPs elected in England and Wales faced Liberal opposition. In January 1910 Labour fought just 27 seats against Liberal opposition and in December 1910 a mere 11.¹⁸⁰

By 1914 only 9 out of its 39 seats had been won against Liberal competition. Whilst the Liberals and Labour reaped the benefits of the pact, at constituency level Labour activists resented standing down in favour of the Liberal candidate, especially at a time when the Labour Party was building up their political organisations across Great Britain. The Pact also highlighted a contradiction within the Party: the trade union movement – that sought to represent the working class within the House of Commons, whilst maintaining its independence and delivering social goods for the working class – had bound itself to a party of capital in the form of the Liberal Party. Moreover, the Liberal Party, whilst embracing some social policy reforms, in Victorian Britain had been the party of *laissez faire* economics, free-trade, the industrial revolution and the new business classes and, whilst it was experiencing an ideological shift, it remained wedded to

¹⁸⁰ See V. Bogdanor, *Politics and the Constitution: Essays on British Government*, (Aldershot, England, 1996) p. 121; N. Blewett, *The peers, the parties and the people: the general elections of 1910*, (Macmillan, London, 1972) pp. 241, 262

the capitalist system. Therefore, an ideological tension remained between liberalism and socialism.

In 1908, a Royal Commission on Electoral Systems was set up under Herbert Asquith, the Liberal Prime Minister. The Commission claimed there were over 300 different electoral systems. The report recommended – with one dissident, who supported the Single Transferable Vote (STV) – the introduction of the alternative vote (AV), arguing it was “the best method of remedying the most serious defect which a single-member system can possess – the return of minority candidates.” Yet according to Butler there was a lack of enthusiasm to discuss the Commission’s findings as it was not even debated in Parliament.¹⁸¹ Although too divided to give evidence to the Royal Commission, the Labour Party remained concerned about its ability to gain greater representation in the House of Commons and the restrictive nature of the Pact with the Liberals, with the Party failing to gain further ground. Duly, interest in electoral systems took hold and between 1908 and 1914 the Party internally debated the matter.

Arthur Henderson, the then leader of the Labour Party, put forward a proposal at the 1909 Labour Party Conference for a number of electoral reforms including “the prevention of the election of members by a minority of votes.”¹⁸² However, this proposal rode on the back of other reforms to electoral practices including universal suffrage and one-man-one-vote. During this period the Trades Union Conference (TUC) also concerned itself with the matter, yet was indecisive. In 1908 the TUC called for an inquiry into the Second Ballot method of voting¹⁸³, yet one year later defeating by a large majority a resolution moved by Labour Chief

¹⁸¹ See D. Butler, *The Electoral System in Britain Since 1918*, (second edition) (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1963) pp. 6-7

¹⁸² Labour Party Conference Report, 1909, p. 87

¹⁸³ Trades Union Congress Annual Report, 1908, pp. 155-56

Whip, George Roberts, that proposed PR as “the best method of removing electoral anomalies and inequalities.”¹⁸⁴ Therefore, whilst the Labour Party and the TUC expressed reservations about FPTP, they had not yet set upon a clear alternative.

Henderson returned to electoral reform at the 1910 Labour Party Conference, moving a similar motion to that of 1909, although when a delegate from the Battersea Labour Party moved a motion supporting PR Henderson spoke against. Mentioning the Royal Commission and urging conference not to bind the leadership to a particular system whilst the PLP was considering the Second Ballot and the STV, Henderson stated that the Party had “listened to Lord Courtney (a Liberal peer and the Secretary of the Proportional Representation Society), but in spite of all they heard and the consideration they gave to it, the Party was divided as to whether this was really the best method.”¹⁸⁵

Consequently, the Labour Party was officially committed to an unspecified form of PR, yet divisions existed as to which electoral system was the way forward. Furthermore, it was debateable whether the rank and file had any knowledge of the working and the effects of different forms of PR.

MacDonald, a key figure as a practical politician and a political thinker, remained unconvinced on the merits of electoral reform, refuting the arguments in favour of PR during the Edwardian debates. Constitutional reform, whilst appearing reasonable will entice socialists, yet “will probably not bear examination. They may be but ‘will-o’-the wisps’ leading into bogs those who foolishly follow.”¹⁸⁶ On the matter of the electoral system MacDonald’s first concern was based on the

¹⁸⁴ Trades Union Congress Annual Report, 1909, p. 163

¹⁸⁵ Labour Party Conference Report, 1910, pp. 75-77

¹⁸⁶ J. R. MacDonald, *Socialism and Government*, (Independent Labour Party, London, 1909)

expense of multi-member constituencies rather than targeting constituencies which the Labour Party had a genuine chance of winning. Therefore, wealthier parties would be favoured.¹⁸⁷ MacDonald's second concern was based on the strength of minorities whom he considered did not automatically deserve representation based merely on their existence. He told delegates in 1911 that "no democratic body like the Labour Party ought to associate itself with the idea (of PR)."¹⁸⁸ Philip Snowden disagreed, arguing Labour's dependency on the Liberals was a consequence of Labour's inability to win three-cornered contests under FPTP, and as such meant that the Labour Party could never be truly socialist. Some form of PR would allow the Labour Party to be truly independent in the House of Commons. The high-profile nature of MacDonald played its part in the 1911 conference, which defeated a motion 1,255,000 against and only 97,500 in favour of PR.

In 1913 and 1914 the debate within the Labour Party intensified. At the 1913 Labour Party Conference a delegate proposed that "no scheme of redistribution will be satisfactory which does not include a system of Proportional Representation applicable to all parts of the United Kingdom." However, another delegate moved that 'Proportional Representation' be replaced by the 'Alternative Vote' hoping that Conference vote on AV rather than PR.¹⁸⁹ In the same year a report was published by the National Executive Committee (NEC), *The Labour Party and Electoral Reform: Proportional Representation and the Alternative Vote*. Roberts, the Chief Whip, and W.C. Anderson, the Labour MP and Chair of the ILP, set out arguments in favour of PR, affirming three-cornered contests led to the election of MPs on a minority of the vote, something regarded as

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 150-153

¹⁸⁸ Labour Party Conference Report, 1911, p. 103, 105

¹⁸⁹ Labour Party Conference Report, 1913, p. 108

“undemocratic.” They were conscious of the Labour Party’s reliance on the Liberal Party to gain representation. AV would leave the Labour Party open to attack from the Liberals, who could unite with the Conservatives – “a combination of capitalist forces against Labour” – with the potential to harm the representation of the Party.¹⁹⁰ There could be no guarantee that ‘weak-kneed’ Liberal electors would put the Labour candidate as a second preference and a real danger existed that the Labour candidate would be eliminated before second and third preference were counted.

STV “would spur into activity many Labour organisations which are now compelled either to remain idle or to support candidates of capitalist parties” giving each Labour MP “security” and “independence.”¹⁹¹ STV would provide both “freedom” and the elector “equality in the value of the vote” as under FPTP an “elector has often no first choice nor even a second choice offered to him. If he votes at all he must often record his vote for some candidate who cannot possibly represent him” and “thousands of Labour voters would for the first time have the opportunity of voting for a Labour candidate.”¹⁹² The Labour Party would be free to “act independently and to formulate its own policy and to remain in every sense independent and distinct from the capitalist parties.”¹⁹³ Acknowledging that coalition would result under STV, Roberts and Anderson considered “the character of the government that can be formed will be determined by the public declarations made by the parties and candidates seeing the suffrages of the electors.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ G. H. Roberts and W. C. Anderson, ‘The Case for Proportional Representation’, in J. R. MacDonald, G. H. Roberts & W. C. Anderson, *The Labour Party and Electoral Reform: Proportional Representation and the Alternative Vote*, (The Labour Party, London, 1913) p. 7

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 13

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 14

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17

MacDonald led the arguments against PR, utilising the same rationale used at the 1911 Labour Party Conference. Labour according to MacDonald's calculations would be worse off under PR and "Today every vital political school of thought finds its champion in the House of Commons, and, in addition, is moulding Parties in the House of Commons."¹⁹⁵ The PR view is political opinion in the constituencies should be "divided into watertight compartments...Socialists should vote for Socialists, Labour Party electors for Labour Party candidates, Liberals for Liberals and so on."¹⁹⁶ This would not give "democratic control" as the resulting situation in the House of Commons "is different in its character and in its policy from the separate groups which appeal to the constituencies and receive separate support at the election."¹⁹⁷ Under PR parliamentary problems of "combination and cooperation are left to be solved by detached groups which have no mandate" appealing to the country "as though they were to be absolutely separate in their Parliamentary action."¹⁹⁸

Consequently, MacDonald attached great importance to what happened in the House of Commons, for this was the institution that mattered most in the democratic process. If PR was adopted, the Commons would have to proceed on the same lines of "criticism, combination and majority rule"¹⁹⁹ as under FPTP. PR would make the House of Commons less representative as parties would have to be regrouped, "either by coalition or otherwise... and then all their boasted party independence vanishes." This would cause "an enormous amount of log-rolling and the very separateness of the elections makes the necessary co-operation in

¹⁹⁵ MacDonald, 'The Case Against Proportional Representation', In MacDonald, Roberts & Anderson, *Proportional Representation and the Alternative Vote*, p. 26

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28

Parliament all the more dishonest.”²⁰⁰ Appeals made to the country in elections would be more misleading and on the matter of independence from the Liberal Party, “nothing has hampered our Movement in the country more than this false idea of independence” writing damningly “it is humbug.”²⁰¹ However, MacDonald did back the introduction of AV - albeit in the final paragraph - stating AV “would enable us to fight every seat we had a reasonable chance of winning and in doing so we would not be hampered by the cry that we were splitting the Liberal vote.”²⁰²

The significant influence MacDonald held over the Labour movement was vital in influencing the debate in the early years of the Labour Party, although it was apparent that given the disparate views clear opposition to FPTP existed. However, the reformers could not find consensus on which alternative to FPTP they wished to adopt. At the 1914 Labour Party Conference speeches were made by MacDonald, Roberts and Snowden making their case for the status quo or PR. Conference voted and both PR and AV were rejected, 1,387,000 to 704,000 and 1,324,000 to 632,000 respectively, with the power and influence of MacDonald key in defeating STV. It was reported that members were “always suspicious of anything that came from the middle-class movement”, reiterating comments made in *Justice* “that had a resolution in favour of the present system been put to the delegates it would have been defeated by a still bigger majority.”²⁰³ The Labour Party had been committed to electoral reform in 1909 and PR in 1910 yet was also concerned with other electoral practices. The indecisiveness over the electoral system reflects the conflicting views over the way to gain representation and the role the Party should play in the British state,

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 30

²⁰³ Labour Party Conference Report 1914, 27th January 1914, p. 105; *Justice*, 1st February 1914

impacting on the depth of the commitment to replace FPTP, for PR was rejected in 1911 and rejected again in 1914 along with AV.

1914-1918

In return for extending the life of the Parliament during World War One, a Speaker's Conference was established, with a remit of Electoral Reform. It recommended abolishing plurality voting with most rural seats using AV in 358 constituencies and the STV for cities (boroughs) in 211 which returned three to seven members. Attending the Speaker's Conference on behalf of the Labour Party was S. Walsh, G. J. Wardle and F. Goldstone who proceeded to argue and vote in favour of AV despite the 1914 Conference resolutions.²⁰⁴ Although unknown at the time, Michael Steed claims "Had this particular mixture been implemented, it would after the decline of the Liberal Party have proved harmful to Labour (which would not have had its under-representation in more rural areas corrected) and beneficial to the Conservatives (who would have been more fairly represented in the industrial cities)."²⁰⁵

During this period the Liberal Party was still a strong political force in Great Britain and dominated the Wartime Coalition, and with the electoral victories of 1906 and 1910 fresh in the memory, electoral reform was a fringe concern. The former Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone supported FPTP as it forced together a disparate group of Liberals – Radicals, Unionists and Free Traders – under the same banner. Subsequent Liberal Prime Ministers were equally as sceptical; Asquith admitted "The matter is not one which excites my passions,

²⁰⁴ M. Pugh, (1974) *The Background to the Representation of the People Act of 1918*, Ph.D Thesis, University of Bristol, United Kingdom, p. 73

²⁰⁵ M. Steed, 'The Evolution of the British Electoral System', in D. Butler (etd.) *Adversary Politics and Electoral Reform*, (William Clowes & Sons Limited, London, 1975) pp. 44-45

and I am not sure it even arouses any very ardent enthusiasm.” Lloyd George wished the House of Commons would not imperil the rest of the Speaker’s recommendations by pressing their proposals for PR: believing it not, an essential part of their package and programme for reform.²⁰⁶ Snowden commented “Many Liberals either failed to understand how the single transferable vote worked at all, and even if they did they clearly failed to appreciate the calamity that was about to befall them.”²⁰⁷

In the changed political circumstances of the War, Henderson considered that Labour had more to gain than to lose from AV. Henderson, in conversation with C. P. Scott in December 1917, claimed “that for more than 20 years – ever since I went into Parliament – I had held that a really progressive and democratic policy could only be based on the union of the Labour and Radical parties.” When Scott asked how a Labour Party intending to run candidates over the whole country could secure co-operation with progressive Liberals, said that “he would depend on the Alternative Vote and on a friendly understanding between Liberalism and Labour to give each other their second choice.”²⁰⁸ Such a ‘friendly understanding’ never saw fruition and if it had come about, it would not necessarily have been helpful to the Labour Party

The Bill oscillated between the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The opposition of the House of Commons towards PR had gradually stiffened, until it had been practically eliminated from the Bill, apart from two and three-member University seats. The Conservative dominated House of Lords reinstated PR thinking it in the best interests of the Conservative Party, based on the premise

²⁰⁶ House of Commons Debate, Vol: 95, col. 1169, 4th July 1917; House of Commons Debates, Vol. 95, col. 492, 28th March 1917

²⁰⁷ Quoted in Curtice, ‘The electoral system’, in Bogdanor, *The British Constitution*, p. 510

²⁰⁸ Wilson, *Political Diaries of C. P. Scott, 1911-1928*, pp. 316, 317

that AV benefitted the Labour Party who would receive the second preferences of Liberal voters. When the Bill returned to the House of Commons AV was reinstated. On 6th February 1918, the Bill was in danger of being lost with the end of the session and prorogation ceremony scheduled for later the same day. A compromise was reached in which AV was dropped and a royal commission would examine setting up PR on a limited basis. It was debated a month later in the House of Commons, and quietly rejected.

The 1920s

The 1920s was a defining decade for the Labour Party, increasing its representation in the House of Commons, and along with the Conservatives, seeing the decline of the Liberal Party. The 1918 'Coupon Election' saw Liberals and Conservatives endorsed by the government receive the 'coupon' letter, refusing to stand against one another, in the hope of continuing the wartime coalition. The result was a Liberal Prime Minister, Lloyd George, propped up by a much larger Conservative Party, which dominated the government. However, the Liberal Party had split between 'Coalition Liberals' led by Lloyd George and those who favoured political independence led by Herbert Asquith. As such, the political landscape had fundamentally altered and the Labour Party emerged as the strongest opposition party largely by default, achieving 22 per cent of the vote and fifty-seven MPs. The perception that the Liberals were indistinguishable from the Conservatives as a party of capital would have appeared justified.

In February 1921, Sir Thomas Bramsdon, a Liberal MP secured time for a PR Bill. The Bill was debated on 8th April 1921 with 25 Labour MPs voting for and 5 MPs voting against. At the time, three prominent Labour members were vice-presidents of the Proportional Representation Society: Snowden, Clynes and

Lord Parmoor. The Proportional Representation Society claimed sympathisers to the Bill included the Trades Union Congress, based upon a Resolution of Annual Conference in 1918, and the Independent Labour Party based on a Resolution from 1914. The defeat of the Bill ensured the conclusion of the question for that Parliament. Interestingly, far more Labour MPs attempted to introduce PR for local government elections in February 1923 and a Liberal bill a month later to introduce AV.²⁰⁹

Marquand writes that the effects of PR in the 1920s would have made the political motives of MacDonald very difficult. MacDonald's first objective was to ensure that British politics revolved around a struggle between the Conservative and Labour parties, in which the Liberals could be dismissed as irrelevant. The second was that Labour must present itself as a credible alternative government which had the ability to govern singlehandedly.²¹⁰ MacDonald in his diary wrote "we shall always tend to return to two great Parties, and that is the position today. The two parties fighting for supremacy are our own and the Tory Party of reaction." MacDonald had bluntly observed in 1920, the old battles for electoral reform were over and the new question was whether Parliament was suitable for modern social conditions.²¹¹ MacDonald was more interested in the long-term ambitions of the Labour Party commanding the heights of the British State and the practical considerations of government, rather than the short-term gains of electoral reform.

Yet MacDonald had made statements to the contrary, suggesting his hostility towards PR was mellowing. In the *Socialist Review* in December 1922 he wrote

²⁰⁹ D. Butler, *The Electoral System in Britain Since 1918*, p. 43

²¹⁰ D. Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, (Jonathan Cape, London, 1977) p. 289

²¹¹ J. R. MacDonald, *Diary*, Entry 1st May 1923; J. R. MacDonald, *Parliament and Democracy*, (Leonard Parsons, London, 1920) pp. vi-vii

“The changes in election problems that followed the last extensions of the franchise seem to me to have greatly strengthened the case for the adoption of some scheme of PR.” In the *New Leader* in January 1924, whilst PR may result in minority or coalition government under the present situation “everything points to a continued ‘stalemate’.” The first effect of PR would be to “loosen party bonds.” Members “will more frequently than they now do, use their own judgement as to how to vote.” Parties in the House of Commons will rule “more by their administrative success than by party force, whilst the legislation that will be carried will have to be more in accordance than it now too often is with public desires.” Consequently, “It will weaken organisation, but strengthen reason; it will make Ministers more the instruments of the general (electorate).”²¹²

In spite of these comments favouring reform MacDonald's aims, as stated by Marquand, appeared to be making headway, vindicated by the general election results of November 1922 and December 1923. In 1922 Labour won 142 seats, on an increased vote share of 29.4%, becoming the official opposition. Cook comments “The net outcome of 1922 for the Labour Party was its growth from a relatively ineffective and insecurely-based force to the position of a vigorous and determined opposition securely based in several major industrial regions.”²¹³ December 1923, fought on the issue of ‘free-trade’ and ‘protection’, saw further Labour advances into the remaining Liberal strongholds in the industrial areas. The three parties were separated only by 100 seats (Conservatives 259, Labour 191 and the Liberal's 159) the Labour Party had announced their readiness, if called upon, to form a Government. On 21st January 1924 Baldwin's Conservative government was defeated by 72 votes on a Labour amendment to

²¹² ‘Socialist Review’ and ‘New Leader’ quoted in *Manchester Guardian*, ‘Labour Party Leaves its Members a Free Vote’, 2nd May 1924

²¹³ C. Cook, ‘Labour's electoral base’, in C. Cook & I. Taylor (eds.) *The Labour Party An Introduction to its History Structure and Politics*, (Longman, London, 1980) p. 86

the King's speech. Asquith instructed his Liberal Party to vote with the Labour Party and bring down the Conservative government, rather than form an anti-socialist alliance. The following day Baldwin resigned, and the first Labour Government took office.

Labour's NEC in 1923 had called upon the parliamentary leadership "to accept full responsibility for the government of the country without compromising itself with any form of coalition."²¹⁴ Given the precarious parliamentary arithmetic the Labour government was likely to be short-lived unless it could form an alliance with one of the parties of 'capital'. Indeed, relations between Labour and the Liberals in the formative weeks of the government appeared cordial: a Liberal candidate did not contest the Burnley by-election, ensuring Henderson could return to Parliament. The Liberal Chief Whip Vivian Phillips, in a speech on 9th February 1924 stated "For the first time for ten years the forces of progress in this country were able to command a majority in the House of Commons...With goodwill and consideration, not only in parliament but in the constituencies, they could march together a long way before their paths need diverge...By the result of the recent Election it had fallen to a Labour Government to try to do many things which Liberals desired to see done. The Liberals were ready to put the public need before any mere party interest and to help a Labour Government to do these things."²¹⁵ Such optimism proved to be short lived.

If the Liberals believed that they would receive gratitude for keeping Labour in power, they were mistaken. MacDonald, displayed little cordiality and in conversation with Scott, had "reverted again and again to his dislike and distrust of the Liberals. He could get on with the Tories. They differed at times openly

²¹⁴ R. W. Lyman, *The First Labour Government: 1924*, (Chapman and Hall, 1957) p. 89

²¹⁵ Quoted in T. Wilson, *Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914-1935*, (Collins, London, 1966) p. 289

then forgot all about it and shook hands. They were gentlemen, but the Liberals were cads.”²¹⁶ Lloyd George in April 1924 had protested at Labour’s attitude towards the Liberal ‘patient oxen’ who were keeping them in office. In his first speech as Prime Minister, MacDonald emphasised that the Labour Party will concern itself with what it considered to be the great national and international matters, setting the tone for how his government would act and their attitude towards any idea of coalition.

“Coalitions are detestable, are dishonest. It is far better, I am perfectly certain, for the political life of our country, and for the respect, in which we desire to be held by colleagues who disagree with us, that we should express our views as an independent political party.”²¹⁷

Marquand notes the cause of MacDonald’s “lordly, not to say cavalier, attitude to the Liberals” was the desire for British politics to revolve around the Labour Party and Conservative Party, and thus the Liberals had to be marginalised and shown to be ineffectual. Regardless of the threat of Liberal MPs in parliamentary votes bringing down the Labour government at almost any moment, MacDonald refused to allow the “government to look as though it depended on the Liberals” for this would “not only strengthen their credibility” but “would weaken Labour’s credibility as well.” Consequently, MacDonald, “had to prove that he could govern without the Liberals, and he could only do that if he behaved as though he did not care whether they voted against him or not.”²¹⁸ In spite of being a minority government and the limits this placed on its actions, the Labour government

²¹⁶ T. Wilson, *The Political Diaries of C. P. Scott 1911-1928*, (Collins, 1970), pp. 460-1, 15 July 1924.

²¹⁷ House of Commons Debates, Vol: 169, Col. 773, 12th February 1924

²¹⁸ D. Marquand, ‘1924-1932’, in D. Butler, *Coalitions in British Politics*, (MacMillan Press, London, 1978) pp. 53-54

intended to govern as if it was a majority. Accepting parliamentary procedure the King's government would continue and should they be defeated on a vote of confidence, they would in the same fashion as the Liberals or Conservatives, appeal directly to the country.

The principal voices for positive relations with the Liberal Party wrote Wilson was the *New Statesman* and Snowden. However the "attitude of the Labour party was faithfully reflected by its leader" sharing "the same petulant rage against the Liberals for continuing to exist was apparent... and in the country Liberal MPs were subject to a spontaneous assault by Labour organisations, especially in constituencies which Liberals had narrowly captured from Conservatives in the absence of Labour candidates."²¹⁹ MacDonald, speaking at the newly opened Tufton Street Labour Club in May 1924 expressed his doubts about PR and whilst it was "admirable and unanswerable in theory up to a point", the issue of the purpose of voting remained:

"What we have got to solve in representation is not merely how the House of Commons is going accurately to reflect party opinion outside, but when party opinion outside has been accurately reflect in the relative proportion of parties in the House, how from that representation are you going to form a workable Government?"²²⁰

After failing to abandon FPTP in 1918, the Liberals and Lloyd George were becoming increasingly conscious during the 1920s that they were now the third party in British politics and only PR could save them. In January 1924, a Liberal Committee was set up to examine the merits of PR and AV. In May the second

²¹⁹ Quoted in Wilson, *Downfall of the Liberal Party*, pp. 290-292

²²⁰ *Manchester Guardian*, 'Premier's Doubts of PR', 17th May 1924

reading of a Private Member's Bill containing PR, put forward by a Liberal, was up for debate. On 30th April, a Liberal Party meeting decided to back the view of John Harris, arguing that co-operation was dependent upon electoral reform, and no election should take place until this had been passed into law. Pugh notes: "Two days before the debate the Liberals formally invited Labour to support the Bill and let it be known that the Liberal party would meet to reconsider its attitude after the vote on the Bill had been taken. There was a widespread feeling that this was intended to be an ultimatum."²²¹ Labour resented both having to rely on Liberal votes in the House of Commons and the proposal put forward by the Liberals for PR. As such, the Parliamentary Labour Party rejected a majority recommendation from the Cabinet to support PR. So incensed were Labour backbenchers that it was decided 'by a large majority' to leave the Bill to a free vote but to give it no facilities if it passed the second reading. The argument ran that since the Liberal Party failed to bring in PR when they thought it would be helpful to the Labour Party, why should the Labour Party help the Liberals when they think it will be helpful to them.²²²

Herbert Morrison, Labour MP for Hackney seconded the rejection of the Bill. Morrison considered under PR it would be impossible for candidates to make themselves known and impossible for candidates when elected to keep in touch with their constituents afterwards, thus emphasising the constituency link. Under PR the tendency would be for "special groups representing minority opinion on special questions to make immoral bargains in the House of Commons, and that in fact the whole philosophy behind PR was the elevations of the minority and the subjection of the majority to specialist opinions of cranks and freaks." Any theory of government based on the coming together of antagonistic opinions was wrong

²²¹ Butler, *The Electoral System in Britain 1918-1951*, p. 44

²²² *Manchester Guardian*, 'Labour Party Leaves its Members a Free Vote', 2nd May 1924, *The Times*, 'The PR Bill', 2nd May 1924

and contrary to the interests of democracy and of the country. In a swipe at the Liberal Party, Morrison affirmed PR was the natural philosophy of decaying parties and it was not natural to strong men and women who wanted the country to be governed wisely and firmly. FPTP did maintain secure representative government and the present political situation was temporary and would return to that of two parties.

Henderson, the Home Secretary, deemed that while the government would have been willing to consider AV, it could not however do the same for PR.

Henderson, before turning his attention to the behaviour of the Liberal Party towards the minority Labour government, stated on this particular matter three factors had to be considered. Firstly, no party had made reference to the issue in their manifestos; secondly the division which existed in all parties; and thirdly, the treatment PR had received in previous parliaments and its rejection. Referring to the 'ultimatum' delivered by the Liberal Party Henderson, to loud cheers from Labour benches stated: "If we have to be threatened like this, if, because we won't go their way on all occasions, certainly not on this, if because we will not promise to bring in a bill, as my right hon. friend asks, we are to be threatened, I can only retort by saying, 'Well get on with the job'."²²³

The actions of the Liberals potentially reinforced the growing scepticism towards PR in the Labour Party since the 1916-1917 Speaker's Conference. Joining with the Conservatives to reject the measure 238 votes to 144, only 28 Labour MPs voted in favour and 90 against, in total a majority of 94 against. Of those who voted in the Cabinet, four supported PR and two voted against. James Maxton, in an address to a May Day 1924 rally in Glasgow epitomised Labour's attitude. The

²²³ *Manchester Guardian*, 'Commons Reject PR: Majority of 94 Against Liberal Measure', 3rd May 1924

Liberals, he said had tried to drive them into a particular lobby, but they had decided to tell Asquith, Lloyd George and the rest to go to hell. Now, he added, the Liberals were threatening to hold a series of weekend meetings throughout the country. God help Asquith and Lloyd George if they tried to address a meeting at Bridgeton Cross on a Saturday night.²²⁴

By rejecting PR, Labour had put at risk the parliamentary support of the Liberals, not to the disappointment of some Liberals. As *The Times* reported, the 'Patient Oxen' were uneasy²²⁵ and could no longer endorse policies which transgressed 'liberal principles'. Accordingly, the days of the first Labour government were numbered and during the August and September 1924, the government came under increasing pressure. Two treaties with the Soviet Union and the Campbell Case – the charge of 'incitement to mutiny' against a British Communist newspaper editor and the Labour government's decision to suspend prosecution – led to a perception that Labour was sympathetic to communists, providing ammunition for Labour's opponents. On 31st September the Conservatives registered a motion of censure, and the Liberals followed with an amendment calling only for a select committee inquiry. MacDonald and the Cabinet treated both issue as a Matter of Confidence on the Government. On 8th October, the Conservatives abandoned their censure motion and voted for the Liberal amendment. Duly, the government was brought down by 264 votes to 198 and so ended the Labour Party's first government.

Yet a general satisfaction existed with FPTP within the Party and amongst Labour-supporting intellectuals. A Fabian Tract published in 1924, written by Herman Finer, deemed "What Government are we going to make?" was the

²²⁴ Wilson, *Downfall of the Liberal Party*, p. 296

²²⁵ *The Times*, 3rd May 1924

ultimate electoral question.²²⁶ Finer argued that the workings of Parliament force “men to leave their small caves and enter into larger combinations for the support of a common programme” meaning the exactness of representation is “neither real nor ultimate political moment.”²²⁷ The single-member constituency encouraged a MP to fulfil their duty in return for recompense and a MP is a representative not a delegate “subject to a possessive relationship with his constituents” with whom he can consult and in turn who the constituents can blame or praise. Consequently, the single-member system is “highly representative” whilst also giving “a predictable sphere of independence for the Member.” Given that a Parliament cannot foresee everything that is going to happen, the close connection of MPs and electors guarantees “popular consultation” along with the importance of by-elections in gauging political opinion.²²⁸

Furthermore, a Cabinet must rest upon a party organisation and to “be effectively responsible to the country must rest upon the support of a single party.” The electorate then “is best able to know who is to praise or blame” at a general election.²²⁹ Secondly, the need for political bargaining with “ministrable” groups – a reference to small parties who during coalition negotiations could expect to become government ministers – is avoided. Finer also considered that AV did not offer a majority in the “English political sense of the word i.e. a majority of positive supporters.” Moreover, and in accordance with the objectives of MacDonald and the Labour Party “it is likely that within 15 years the Liberal Party will be electorally defunct... It would be the height of political unwisdom to introduce a

²²⁶ H. Finer, *The Case Against Proportional Representation*, Fabian Tract 211, (Fabian Society, London, 1924). P. 7. PR has always recommended itself to men with a mission, but without much visible evidence of popular support. p. 3

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7

new and vicious element into the constitution to counteract a temporary ill.”²³⁰

George Lansbury, at the 1926 Labour Party Conference, “thought that the majority of the decisions under the present system had worked for the other people; but if they were wise, they could now make it work for themselves.” He went on to affirm “while Electoral Reform is needed to remedy the existing defects, the proposals of the Proportional Representation Society, involving large constituencies and numerous representatives for each constituency, are not in the best interests of democratic government and ought to be opposed.”

According to Butler the statement implicitly supports AV.²³¹

As MacDonald had first stated in the House of Commons, the Labour Party was ‘not afraid of what fate we may meet in the process.’ The fact that the Labour government had been removed from office on a Liberal motion, reinforced the perception that the Liberals were opportunistic and unsympathetic to the Labour Party, thus legitimising MacDonald’s policy of keeping them at arm’s length. The relationship between the two parties had disintegrated during the 1920s and the feeling within the Labour Party was a socialist majority was on the horizon. Therefore, reliance upon the Liberals for parliamentary support would be a thing of the past. Moreover, electorally in 1924 it appeared Labour was on course to displace the Liberals as the main opposition to the Conservatives, gaining 1 million more votes than in 1923 and the lead over the Liberals widening to 2.5 million in 1924. Indeed, between 1925 and 1929 Labour won 11 seats from the Conservatives in by-elections, plus a further 2 seats from the Liberals. Labour was learning and experiencing how to win under FPTP in the 1920s and the

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-17

²³¹ Labour Party Conference Report, 1926, p. 273; Butler, *The Electoral System in Britain since 1918*, p. 47

objective of a return to a 'two-party' system was coming to fulfilment, with the Liberals in the process being reduced to a rump of MPs.

1929-1931 – The Second Labour Government

Held in the face of rising unemployment the 1929 general election produced a hung parliament. Labour, whilst polling over 300,000 fewer votes than the Conservatives was returned to Westminster with 287 MPs, the Conservatives second with 260 MPs and the Liberals on an improved 59 MPs. It was to date the best electoral result for Labour in both votes and seats. Stanley Baldwin, the sitting Conservative Prime Minister resigned immediately and advised the King to send for MacDonald, as anything else might have seemed 'unsporting'. Baldwin was determined, wrote A.J.P. Taylor; that Lloyd George should not get the credit for turning the Conservatives out – or still worse, for keeping them in²³² - negating any possibility of the Liberals putting Labour into office. Baldwin's actions further marginalised the influence of the Liberal Party, suggesting the Conservatives were at ease with British politics revolving around the Conservatives and the Labour Party. On 5th June 1929 MacDonald became Prime Minister for the second time.

The Liberal Party were fully aware that only through political bargaining and coalition building would they be able to influence government policy, a consequence of now being the third party in British politics. Parliamentary mathematics necessitated Labour would be able to form only a minority government, reliant on the support of the 'king-maker' Lloyd George and his truncated Liberal Party which contained a significant minority of MPs inclined

²³² A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*, (Penguin Books, London, 1970) pp. 342-343

towards the Conservative Party rather than Labour. As such there was no guarantee Lloyd George could hold his party together and force it to vote with Labour. However, Lloyd George had the ability to turn out the Labour Party by aligning his party with the Conservatives. MacDonald's distrust of Lloyd George, a feeling shared in Labour and across the House, had not mellowed even in light of the precarious parliamentary arithmetic. A diary entry in 1929 claimed the Liberal leader was "like Samson shorn of his locks and bent on destruction...one of those men who are never happy unless they are the leading figures or are pulling down others."²³³

The Labour Party, led by MacDonald and in light of his governing principles was concerned with winning power yet as in 1924 this was only achievable with Liberal support or acquiescence, to ensure the survival of the full parliament. The Liberals were fully aware of their position as 'Kingmaker' and sought to gain electoral reform, particularly a form a PR, from any bargaining, preventing terminal electoral decline. The Labour Party knew conceding demands on electoral reform had the potential to perpetuate the Liberal Party and give them a significant foothold in British politics indefinitely. A former Liberal, F. W. Pethick-Lawrence, commented on Labour's favourable electoral position, urging MacDonald "we should make no bargain of any kind with Lloyd George and particularly about any change in electoral method. PR would be the devil. It would destroy our constitution and substitute the folly of continental politics. The alternative vote would postpone an absolute Labour majority – perhaps for a generation." Furthermore, he believed "There is a great feeling in the party

²³³ J. R. MacDonald, *Diary*, 19th December 1929

against electoral change. It might be induced to support it but it would be against its conviction, and this would be very bad for the morale of the party.”²³⁴

MacDonald, in his government's first King's Speech, wondered “how far it is possible, without in any way abandoning any of our party positions... to consider ourselves more as a Council of State and less as arrayed regiments facing each other in battle... So that by putting our ideas into a common pool we can bring out... legislation and administration which will be of substantial benefit for the nation as a whole” a statement often interpreted as MacDonald's first overtures at a ‘National Government’. He had of course ruled out coalition in 1924. The statement included a direct reference to electoral reform. Yet, in the ensuing debate, MacDonald's position on the matter appeared non-committal as to which alternative was preferable, and importantly added what he considered to be the objective of an election:

“One view of Government is the static view where we are in exact replica, on a very small scale, of the millions of electors...But the other view is that the real, final purpose of an election is to elect a Government – and I use the word rather apart from merely electing a House of Commons.”²³⁵

Fair records how MacDonald, after consultation with the Cabinet and leaders of other parties, proceeded to set up a Speaker's conference led by Viscount Ullswater who had presided over the conference on electoral reform in 1917-18 and on devolution in 1919-20. Preparations for the Conference consumed four

²³⁴ Pethick-Lawrence to MacDonald, 2nd June 1929, MacDonald Papers, Public Record Office, PRO 30/69/1300 Quoted in J. D. Fair, ‘The Second Labour Government and the Politics of Electoral Reform, 1929-1931’, *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, Vol. 13: 3, (Autumn, 1981) p. 278

²³⁵ House of Commons Debates, vol. 229, cols. 49, 64-65, 73-74, 2nd July 1929

months, much to the annoyance of Lloyd George, before the deliberations began on 4th December 1929.²³⁶ Ullswater records in his report “It was arranged that the conference should itself determine the subjects which it would consider, in the light of the suggestions made by the parties, and the order in which they would be taken.” Ullswater also noted in his report that the chances of a successful conference were hindered by the lack of framework and parameters, leading him to speculate “whether it reflects the attitude of the Prime Minister to the whole subject of the enquiry...anyone with experience in such matters will recognise what a handicap the absence of terms of reference must impose on a conference so constituted, faced by so vast a field of possible enquiry, and concerned as it must be with so many complicated and controversial issues.”²³⁷ MacDonald’s decision not to provide strict terms of reference suggests he intentionally desired the Conference to get bogged down in wrangling, thus scuppering the chances of the Conference.

The make-up of the Conference reflected the House of Commons with seven Labour members, seven Conservatives, four Liberals, and four representatives from the House of Lords, including the chair. It was decided that enquires would be made into electoral funding, the use of motor vehicles in transporting voters and relaying election speeches to other locations by radio. In addition, plural voting would be examined. MacDonald explained to Ullswater that it was necessary to enquire into the “representative value of the national vote cast in the constituencies for the candidates belonging to the various parties...Can any scheme of counting votes give to each vote approximately an equal value for

²³⁶ Fair, ‘The Second Labour Government’, p. 279-281

²³⁷ Quoted in J. F. S Ross, *Elections and Electors*, (Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1955) p. 319

representation purposed? If it can, would it sacrifice other requirements of an efficient democratic machinery?"²³⁸

In spite of its minority position, the Labour Party was conscious of the need to give the impression of credibility and respectability, tying it to the British State and showing the electorate it was capable of governing. In December 1929, the government was facing difficulties in passing a 'Coal Bill' and without the support of Liberal MPs would be defeated. Lloyd George sought to use the Coal Bill as leverage to prise electoral reform out of the government, as it was now a national necessity. Herbert Morrison told the Liberals that they had a choice; vote for the Coal Bill and be a progressive party or bring down the Labour Government. Moreover, the political outlook for the Liberals was bleak as the country was steadily getting back to the two-party system.²³⁹ MacDonald and Lloyd George met at the beginning of February 1930, in an attempt to bridge the gap between the two men. MacDonald noted in his diary, "Lloyd George came and talked with Thomas, Snowden, Henderson and myself about an agreement to keep us in office for from two to three years, turned upon whether we would give him a bargain on Electoral Reform...He is fighting for his life and asks us to give it to him. In the two years, he will take to himself our good record and leave for us our bad. The bargain proposed really amounts to this: we get two years of office from the Liberals and give them in return a permanent corner on our political stage."²⁴⁰

The successes gained by the Labour Party throughout the 1920s at waging electoral war on the Liberals was, through electoral reform, at risk of being undone especially when for the first time the Labour Party was the biggest party

²³⁸ MacDonald to Ullswater, 25th & 30th July, 1929, MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/1300 quoted in Fair, 'The Second Labour Government', p. 280

²³⁹ *The Times*, 'Liberal Party Policy', 14th June 1929; *The Times*, 'The Coal Bill', 6th January 1930.

²⁴⁰ J. R. MacDonald, *Diary*, 3rd February 1930

in the House of Commons. Legislating for an alternative electoral system ran the risk of undermining MacDonald's aim of returning to a two-party system. In a memorandum MacDonald outlined his scepticism towards any deal with the Liberals. "In general terms, I am in favour of some agreement, but I am not in favour of making it definite in details or committing it to writing. We should apply the conditions which, without hampering either Party, were observed after the second election of 1910, when we held a balance and kept the Liberal Government in."²⁴¹ An agreement which lacked detail, whilst giving both parties freedom, would have offered very few guarantees of lasting for a full parliament.

MacDonald listed seven difficulties the Labour Party would face if it were to go further than the loose agreement outlined above.

1. Neither an agreement nor an understanding can be kept private, (impacting) on the spirit of the Party.
2. Its details will be almost impossible to fix, and once we admit that we are definitely in the hands of the Liberals... the attempt to fix details from week to week will put us more and more in a position subordinate to the Liberals.
3. It will strengthen Mr Lloyd George's grip upon his own Party and... authority in the country.
4. It will hamper us at by-elections and generally in carrying on in the country an offensive against the Liberals.
5. In the present temper of our Party no such measure could be introduced in an agreed form. It would lead to an abandonment of any expectation we may have (of) returning to a two-Party system.

²⁴¹ Note dates 4th February, 1930, MacDonald Papers, 5/171 Quoted in Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, pp. 529-530

6. Up to the present we have kept the initiative in our hands... we will have to face a conflict with the House of Lords sooner or later, that will put the Liberals very much in our hands and we should lose whatever advantage that will give us.

7. We should, therefore, delay the conversation and endeavour to go on week by week negotiating on troubles as they arise. That undoubtedly leaves our tenure of office somewhat uncertain, but the price we shall have to pay for a two years' security will be so high that we cannot pay it.²⁴²

Compromising the independence, responsibility and accountability led MacDonald to express reservations at the prospect of a pact with the Liberals. A report appeared during March 1930 MacDonald was complaining that Lloyd George was intriguing with Labour people behind his back. Liberal obstruction continued and it became increasingly clear to the Labour government that only electoral reform would overcome the Liberal *impasse*. On 18th March 1930, the Labour leadership agreed to introduce an electoral reform Bill, agreeing to concede AV, and the Liberals duly abstained.

However, MacDonald's scepticism towards electoral reform, its impact upon the independence and electoral capability of the Labour Party, along with the distrust of the Liberals surfaced quickly.

“From the birth of the Party until now we have held rigidly to the position that we were standing on our own legs and that has been inculcated as a cardinal principle from John o’Groats to Land’s End. It has become part of the very

²⁴² *Ibid.*,

nature of the Party... the scheme proposed by the Liberals would secure for them the very maximum possible representation, and for us the minimum."²⁴³

Additionally, it was obvious that any such electoral innovation would induce an end to the two-party system in which his party had only recently become a vested member:

"Supposing we agreed to support the scheme we should have to get it through the Party, both in Parliament and at the Annual Conference. This we could not possible do without being quite candid as to our reasons... We should have to use arguments which will admit that we have given up hope of creating two parties, one of which would be ourselves, and that we have fallen back upon the assumption that a progressive majority in Parliament would always have to be found by a combination which would either frankly be a Coalition with a sharing of office, or a Government such as we have at the present moment depending upon the support of the Liberals."²⁴⁴

Labour representatives in the ongoing Speaker's Conference, which had reconvened on 8th May 1930 after the recess, were deliberately obstructive, seeking to change electoral practices and finances – destroying the plural vote and the perceived financial advantage of the Conservatives – rather than the electoral system *per se*. Indeed, the idea of adopting an electoral system which boosted the Liberals at the expense of the Conservatives seemed unattractive. The Tory members thought it best to 'let sleeping dogs lie' and sought to wreck any proposals, but voted with the Liberals that if any change were to be made it

²⁴³ "Memo by J.R.M.," MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/5/166 Quoted in Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, pp. 531-532

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 532

should the adoption of PR perhaps fearing a combination of anti-conservative forces in constituencies. According to Campbell, Labour representatives would hear nothing but AV, which the Tories vetoed, and duly the conference broke up in July without agreement.²⁴⁵

PR was unacceptable to the Labour members of the Conference. Lord Arnold, Paymaster-General in MacDonald's government, claimed that parliament had no mandate to introduce PR and that it was only a means of representing minorities. According to the Conservative Samuel Hoare, "Socialist after Socialist (damned) PR with bell, book and candle. The Socialists could not have been more heavy footed. Indeed, they burnt their boats so completely that I do not see how they can ever get into them again."²⁴⁶ All Labour members of the Conference bar one opposed AV yet were willing to consider AV, conditionally on the adoption of other reforms such as expenditure and University representation. There is disagreement in the literature as to where Labour committee members were receiving instruction. Butler, Fair and Skidelsky suggest the NEC proposed members of the committee to "offer a modicum of alternative vote on the condition that their list of reforms in the election law also be accepted," a view supported by Snowden in his memoirs. Marquand concludes otherwise, believing Labour members were told to oppose AV.²⁴⁷

James Maxton, a leading Clydesider, during the second reading of the '*Representation of the People (No. 2) Bill*', declared himself as not at all

²⁴⁵ Quoted in J. Campbell, *Lloyd George, The Goat in the Wilderness*, (W&J Mackay Limited, Chatham, 1977) p. 264

²⁴⁶ "Further Developments of Electoral Reform", 23rd May, 1930, Templewood Papers, V1, 2 Quoted in Fair, 'The Second Labour Government', p. 287

²⁴⁷ Butler, *The Electoral System in Britain Since 1918*, pp. 60-61; Fair, 'The Second Labour Government', p. 287; R. Skidelsky, *Politicians and the Slump: The Labour Government 1929-1931*, (MacMillan, London, 1994) p. 164; P. Snowden, *An Autobiography*, (Ivor Nicholson and Watson Ltd, London, 1934) p. 887; Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, p. 533

enthusiastic about this measure, as it showed the power of Lloyd George over the Government rather than the more important matter of the implementation of socialism. Furthermore, emphasising the social and economic factors above issues of political reform, Maxton desired attention be paid to the “immediate and urgent problems confronting the country, the first being that of the social condition of the people and the problem of poverty, and secondly, the general problem of economic reconstruction.” These issues should take precedence, as whilst “Our Parliamentary machine runs along very clumsily, and places upon every one of us a terrible restraint. The question,” he continued, “of how we are going to operate when we get here is one that ought to be decided as a question of more importance than how we are to adjust the machinery which sent us here.”²⁴⁸ Consequently, what mattered for Maxton was not the method of election but what happened once one was in the House of Commons. Voting on the second reading divided along strict party lines, 290 votes to 230.

In March 1931, the clause allowing for AV was carried by 277 votes to 253. Despite the whips, 11 Labour and 2 Liberal MPs voted against it and 27 Labour members were absent unpaired. Beckett, the Labour MP for Camberwell was critical of the Labour Government supporting AV, reminding the House of MacDonald’s previous statements that the “hopeful future he said the Labour Party would have under the present system was to be sacrificed to prolong inordinately the dismal present.” J. M. Kenworthy MP, who sat on the Bill’s committee stage, spoke out against AV as a sell-out to the Liberal Party, perpetuating the three-party system, and to “make the winning of a majority by the Labour Party almost impossible.” Moreover, “On some great issue in the

²⁴⁸ Quoted in *Manchester Guardian*, ‘Electoral Reform Bill: Second Reading Carries Majority of 65’, 4th February 1931. Kenworthy quoted from House of Commons Debates, Vol. 249, 4th March 1931, cols. 495-496

future, such as the public ownership of the coalmines, the Alternative Vote would be used against them by the Liberals – ‘that dying party’.”²⁴⁹ Regardless of Labour Party opposition, the Bill was finally passed in the Commons by 278 to 228 votes on 2nd June 1931.

Continuing reliance of Liberal votes in the House of Commons during 1930 and into 1931 raised the prospect of closer ties between Labour and the Liberals, to ensure the survival of the government for the full parliament. By May 1931, the regularity of meetings between the Cabinet and Liberal leaders led to speculation there would soon be Liberals in government, something Skidelsky believes MacDonald seriously considered.²⁵⁰ Owen writes that Lloyd George, in a memorandum to his secretary in July 1931, recorded a conversation with MacDonald, in which MacDonald had said that the Labour Party wanted an ‘alliance’ with the Liberals and that he hoped that Lloyd George would join the government as Foreign Secretary or Chancellor of the Exchequer. This is disputed by Thorpe who states the document cited by Owen has never been found since and in turn references a paper in which Lloyd George tells Lansbury that if he joined Labour it would antagonise millions of Liberal supporters. Labour supporters would have been equally antagonised, especially the Trade Unions who had been angered by the wrecking of the Trade Disputes Bill. As such, Thorpe states “The case for arguing that a Lib-Lab coalition was about to be formed in July 1931, therefore, is virtually non-existent.”²⁵¹ What did exist however, was a situation whereby it was clear to all that the Liberals were

²⁴⁹ *The Times*, 6th March 1931, *Manchester Guardian*, ‘The Alternative Vote: Rejection Motion Defeated Majority of 26’, 5th March 1931

²⁵⁰ Skidelsky, *Politicians and the Slump*, pp. 328-31

²⁵¹ F. Owen, *Tempestuous Journey: Lloyd George, His Life and Times*, (Hutchinson, London, 1954) p. 717. Thorpe references Lloyd George to Lansbury, 16th February 1931 (Lansbury Paper, 10). A. Thorpe, *The British General Election of 1931*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991) p. 56

keeping the Labour Party in government, without being bound to the government through cabinet positions, ministerial roles and therefore collective responsibility.

The Bill progressed into the House of Lords where it was subject to wrecking amendments, with the Peers focusing on the lack of a mandate for reform and seeking to restrict its implementation to the 174 seats in boroughs with more than 200,000 people. Thus, the passage of the Bill was delayed to the extent where the Government would not have an opportunity to reconsider it until parliament reconvened in the autumn. The government were prepared to use the Parliament Act to introduce AV, as neither Labour nor the Liberals were optimistic about their electoral chances during deep economic problems and so were therefore keen to reach an understanding whereby the prolongation of the government was ensured. However, the financial crisis of 1931 led to a split in the Cabinet over cutting unemployment payments, thus causing the collapse of the Second Labour government. MacDonald would go on to form a 'National government' with the Conservatives and the Simonite Liberals, resulting in a Labour Prime Minister leading a government dominated by Conservative MPs. MacDonald's act would go down in Labour folklore as the 'Great Betrayal' impacting on the Party's attitude towards coalition at Westminster, and what this means for the working class whom the Labour Party represents.

By the end of the 1920s and the second Labour government, the Labour Party had become increasingly sceptical about the merits of proportional representation. The Labour Party was willing to countenance AV - but not PR - and was put forward by the Labour government to buy the support of the Liberal Party, not for any intrinsic virtue of the voting system. Sir Austin Chamberlain, a Conservative MP, borrowed a phrase from Oscar Wilde when describing the attitude towards AV: "Whistler had no enemies, but he was intensely disliked by

his friends. It would not be quite true to say that this Clause has no enemies... but it is true to say that it is intensely disliked by its friends.”²⁵²

The growth of the Labour Party as an electoral and political force throughout the 1920s, experiencing minority government in 1924 and 1929-31, encouraged the Party to move away from PR. It was thought that the Liberal Party – often accused by Labour politicians as being akin to a ‘decaying corpse’ – was in terminal decline and soon would be electorally defunct, meaning British politics would once again revolve around two parties: Labour and the Conservatives. Therefore, the adoption of an electoral system which perpetuated the three-party system was highly disagreeable to many within the Labour Party, for it would continue the situation as through the 1920s in which the Labour Party had to rely on the Liberals, meaning a party of capital could obstruct a party committed to socialism. AV was a device hoped to ensure the survival of the second minority Labour Government for a full term, and whilst close to becoming law, was supported with little enthusiasm. The experience of government had taught the Labour Party two vital lessons: firstly, minority government reliant on the support of other political parties was restrictive and therefore was to be avoided; and secondly, with a parliamentary majority the workings of the British State would enable the Labour Party to enact its brand of socialism.

1931-1945

Jennifer Hart refers to this period as the “Barren Years” and Martin Pugh comments on the period from 1931-1939 that electoral reform excited “virtually no interest.”²⁵³ The Labour MP J.R. Leslie described himself as among the “lone

²⁵² House of Commons Debates, 4th March 1931, Col. 524

²⁵³ Hart, *Proportional Representation*, p. 248; M. Pugh, *The Electoral System in Britain*, p. 84

scouts” in the Labour Party for PR.²⁵⁴ The National Government had seen no need to pursue the Labour Government’s Electoral Reform Bill, particularly in the light of its vast parliamentary majority. The Labour Party, bar a few voices, had little interest in changing the voting system despite suffering the heaviest loss of seats to befall a major party from 288 MPs to 52 MPs. However, by default those who had chosen in the Labour Party not to serve in the National Government were the only credible opposition, and in light of the ‘Great Betrayal’ it was probably considered this was a reasonable result. Cecil H. Wilson Labour MP for Sheffield Attercliffe and an advocate of PR was bemused at the leading figures in the Labour Party, such as Dalton and Morrison, who wished to maintain the present system.²⁵⁵ Morrison, as shown, was staunchly in favour of FPTP, a position he unwaveringly held both pre and post-World War Two.

In 1935 the Labour Party still fared badly – 40% of the votes won them less than one-quarter of the seats – but the Party remained loyal to the system which seemed to offer them the best chance of gaining a clear parliamentary majority. Richard Crossman, who would in the Wilson governments of 1964-70 be a leading figure in promoting a range of constitutional reforms, noted in his 1939 *How Britain is Governed* that the electoral system in Britain created a “temporary dictatorship”²⁵⁶ between elections. However this was beneficial for government, as a system that encouraged more than two parties tended to lead to weaker governments:

“proportional representation in parliamentary elections would be a national disaster. It would of course make the strength of the parties in the House

²⁵⁴ *Manchester Guardian*, ‘Electoral Reform: All-Party support of PR’, 8th July 1943

²⁵⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, ‘Unjust Election System: Labour Member criticises Party attitude to PR’, 12th September 1936

²⁵⁶ R. Crossman, *How Britain is Governed*, (Labour Book Service, London, 1939) p. 29

reflect more accurately the division of opinion in the country; but in so doing it would ensure the survival of the third party and encourage the formation of a fourth and fifth.”²⁵⁷

Moreover, weakening of government would be disastrous for the Labour Party and the working classes, as change and reform would be impossible. In 1963, Crossman reiterated his objection to PR, arguing “Wherever proportional representation has been tried, it has fulfilled his (Bagehot’s) prediction that it would undermine the independence of the MP and increase the powers of the party managers who control the electoral lists.”²⁵⁸ Honeyman writes he never considered electoral reform again, “but his lack of action on the issue suggests that he remained very sceptical about the benefits of electoral reform generally, and proportional representation specifically.”²⁵⁹

The Cabinet, which by May 1943 included Labour Ministers, had managed to ignore 114 MPs from all parties who had supported G. W. Rickard’s motion calling for a conference on electoral reform. Nevertheless, the wartime coalition was forced to include methods of elections in the terms of reference of the 1944 Speaker’s Conference, a result of a two-day Commons debate in February 1944. On 8th February 1944 Sir Winston Churchill formally invited Colonel D. Clifton Brown to Chair the Conference. Nine Labour MPs along with James Maxton (Independent Labour Party) and Denis N. Pritt (Labour Independent) constituted the Labour membership. Pritt dismissed AV as it did not go far enough, whereas STV had the great benefit of resolving the redistribution problem and the

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31

²⁵⁸ R. Crossman, ‘Introduction’, in W. Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, (Fontana/Collins, Glasgow, 1963) p. 10

²⁵⁹ V. Honeyman, *Richard Crossman*, (I.B. Taurus, London, 2007) p. 96

“extreme misrepresentation” of the present system would be replaced by “actual opinion.”²⁶⁰

According to Butler, the main issue for Herbert Morrison, the Labour Home Secretary, “were the principles of redistribution and the fusion of the local government and parliamentary franchise; he did not think there would be much interest in proportional representation.”²⁶¹ What occurred was a repeat of the previous Conference. Both Labour and the Conservatives were hostile towards any reform, STV being rejected by twenty-five votes to four and AV by twenty votes to five.²⁶² Some Labour members felt that only by a combination of the Liberal and Labour votes, which would be made possible by the Alternative Vote, would the Conservatives ever be defeated. This relied on the assumption that Liberal voters were more inclined to put the Labour candidate as the second preference rather than Conservative, an issue which has raised considerable intrigue. Two Labour members of the Speaker’s Conference, having failed to convince their colleagues, abstained from voting on this issue²⁶³ and the adoption of the Alternative Vote at any election in a single-member non-University constituency was rejected. Once again the Labour Party had come down on the side of FPTP and confirmed its opposition the AV.

Post-World War Two: 1945-1974

The wartime coalition, of which the Labour Party had been a key part, broke up on 23rd May 1945 and the General Election was called for the July. The result

²⁶⁰ *Manchester Guardian*, ‘Electoral Reform problems: Mr. Morrison and ‘Tricky’ Questions of Redistribution’, 2nd February 1944

²⁶¹ D. Butler, *The Electoral System in Britain since 1918*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1963) p. 91

²⁶² *Conference on Electoral Reform and Redistribution of Seats* (Cmd. 6543), 1943-1944, p. 8

²⁶³ Pugh, *The Electoral System in Britain 1918-1951*, p. 92

was a Labour landslide victory with a Commons majority of 146 seats, a net gain of 209 seats of which 79 were constituencies which had never previously returned a Labour MP. Breaking into territory which had never previously been captured and winning 394 seat, the Conservatives had gone down to their biggest defeat since 1906. The Labour Party polled 48.2% of the vote and a national swing was 12%. Importantly, the Labour Party had no need to seek alliances and negotiate with the Liberals, as they had done previously, and the long-term objective of replacing the Liberals as the main opposition to the Conservatives had been achieved. Clement Attlee became Labour Prime Minister, the first leader of the Labour Party with the ability to utilise a parliamentary majority. For the first time in the Labour Party's history, the workings of FPTP had handed the party such a victory that the manifesto commitments of 'Let us Face the Future Together' could be enacted on to the statute book.

Indeed, significant importance was attached to the doctrine of the 'manifesto and the mandate'. Morrison, told the Labour Party conference in 1945: "Only by a Labour majority – a coherent Labour majority – can our programme be put through. I make no promise about what will happen to that programme if we do not get a clear and coherent and united majority."²⁶⁴ The intellectual climate within the Labour Party towards the British State was one of acceptance, believing that having captured a parliamentary majority, they could control the machinery of government. Dalton, when opening the second reading debate on the Bank of England Bill, stated: "I hold in my hand a document entitled 'Let us Face the Future, a Declaration of Labour Policy for the Consideration of the Nation.' The nation considered it and having done so elected this House of

²⁶⁴ Quoted in S. Beer, *Modern British Politics*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1982) pp. 179-183

Commons. We have an unchallengeable popular mandate to carry out all that is contained in this document."²⁶⁵

Such was the confidence in the reforming capabilities of a Labour majority in parliament, talk of coalition and a deal with the Liberals was unnecessary. Butler notes that many of the policies enacted by the Labour government solidified the Liberals in opposition to it. Talk of coalition came from the Conservatives, led by Winston Churchill who had never heard of a 'Liberal-Socialist', and therefore held out hope for an anti-Socialist agreement between the Conservatives and the Liberals. The 'Woolton-Teviot' agreement of May 1947 made possible 'Conservative Liberal' mergers and in the 1950 General Election 53 candidates stood under miscellaneous headings such as 'National Liberal and Conservative', 'Conservative and National Liberal, 'Conservative and Liberal' or 'Liberal and Conservative'.²⁶⁶ Such varied headings would continue on into the 1960s with local Conservative associations happy to stand down in favour of a candidate with an aforementioned title.

In 1950 Attlee referred to a rejection made in 1944 in refusing the calls of Liberal leader, Clement Davies, for a new inquiry into electoral matters²⁶⁷, an understandable decision given the political situation. Five years previously, the Labour Party had won its first landslide victory and during the parliament had not lost a by-election to the Conservatives. Furthermore, in the 1950 General Election, Labour polled 13,267,466 votes, at that time the highest poll ever won. However, boundary changes by the then Home Secretary, Chuter Ede, had an adverse effect on the Labour Party, with the changes favouring suburban and

²⁶⁵ H. Dalton, *High Tide and After: Memoirs 1945-60*, (London, 1962) p. 40,

²⁶⁶ D. Butler, '1945-1977', in Butler, *Coalitions in British Politics*, p. 95

²⁶⁷ Quoted in P. Catterall, 'The British Electoral System, 1885-1970', *Historical Research*, Vol. 73, (June 2000) p. 171

middle-class constituencies.²⁶⁸ The result was a majority of five, thus making for a more insecure and weakened government. The cause of Labour's downfall was England, for both Scotland and Wales increased their representation. Industrial working-class constituencies returned Labour MPs with extravagant majorities, whereas suburban England reverted to the Conservative Party.

For eighteen months the Labour government battled on through Cabinet resignations and divisions until Attlee, under no constitutional obligation, called an election for 25th October 1951. Whereas in 1929 Labour had won more seats on fewer votes than the Conservatives, the system 22 years later had worked to the disadvantage of Labour. On a 48.8% of the vote, a total poll of 13,948,883 – an increase of 2.7% on 1950 – Labour suffered a net loss of 19 seats and won only 295. Cook claims the cause of Labour's defeat was the Liberal Party, who fielded a mere 109 candidates, forcing erstwhile Liberal voters into the hands of the Conservatives. Accordingly, Labour faced the Conservatives in 495 straight fights in 1951 compared to 109 in 1950.²⁶⁹ Ironically, the reduced electoral capability of the Liberal Party – the abiding wish of the Labour Party – had hurt Labour's electoral chances. Should Cook's assertion be correct that erstwhile Liberals voted Conservative, then the validity of the claim Liberal voters naturally lean towards the Labour Party is questioned. Consequently, the 1950 general election suggests that under a preferential electoral system there is no guarantee Liberal voters would put Labour as a second choice nor in a straight contest between Labour and the Conservatives that Liberal voters would vote Labour.

Returning to the opposition benches did not dampen Labour's enthusiasm for FPTP. Morrison wrote of the benefits of the two-party system and rejected PR in

²⁶⁸ K. O. Morgan, *Callaghan A Life*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997) p.362

²⁶⁹ C. Cook, 'Labour's Electoral Base', in Cook & Taylor, *The Labour Party: An Introduction*, p. 99

a Labour Educational Series booklet. The Labour Party had always been independent of the Conservative Party and Liberal Party and the British two-party system “leads to greater coherence and responsibility in government and opposition and the work of parliament.” Recognising Labour and the Conservatives were made up of individuals who, whilst subscribing to fundamental principles, differed on certain matter, believed the electors had to make a “broad choice as to which of the two great political parties more generally represents their point of view.” PR would result in “a series of minority groups to Parliament would make it very difficult to form majority governments... If there is no majority for any Party in Parliament, it means that coalitions have to be formed and bargains have to be struck, with the result that governments are unstable and firm, consistent policies are difficult to carry out.” Both parties are against PR “based on substantial constitutional considerations of public policy.”²⁷⁰

In an article outlining the working of British parliamentary democracy, Morrison offered a traditional defence of the Westminster Model of governance, believing the “British Parliament is one of the most efficient and up to date instruments for its purpose.” Specifically, on the workings of the electoral system and its impact on the British political system Morrison considered a backbench MP was a representative not a delegate, “acting in the general public interest.” An MP also has a duty to uphold the government realising that the alternatives are “either a Government formed by the opposition or a general election in which he will be involved.” FPTP was a “safeguard against the development of minor or splinter parties” which was one of the reasons why the British people opposed PR, as PR would result in “no chance of forming a Government and no chance of getting their policies adopted except as a result of bargaining with other parties.” This

²⁷⁰ H. Morrison, ‘Our Parliament and How it Works’, Labour Party Educational Series, Number 4, January 1953

view was recognised as beneficial by the British people due to their “practical” nature, “that when they vote they are voting for a Government, and that their votes are wasted if they are spent upon a party which has no chance of forming a Government at any foreseeable date.”

Moreover, a two-party system leads to an effective Government and an effective Opposition, meaning that it is within parties that broad agreement is obtained and how party policy would be enacted. For Morrison, a democratic country in which there are many views faces a choice. It can either organise points of view into separate parties, “for the reconciliation between them to take place as a result of bargaining at the general election and in Parliament itself.” However, the “preferred method” is the “reconciling” of different views “within the framework of the parties, each of which within itself contains the elements from which a Government can be formed.”²⁷¹ In 1953 Herbert Morrison looked back at the Attlee administration and praised its record on parliamentary reform. Reducing the delaying power of the House of Lords, the abolition of University Seats and the final remnants of plural voting and increasing MPs salaries by two-thirds had all played their part in transforming the House of Commons from a ‘talking shop’ to a ‘workshop’.²⁷²

In his textbook, *Government and Parliament*, published in 1954, Morrison declared the importance of the mandate given by the British people, writing that the opposition has a moral duty and justification to sustained opposition should the government try and introduce controversial legislation for which there is no mandate. So attached had Morrison become to the workings of the British State

²⁷¹ H. Morrison, ‘British Parliamentary Democracy’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 4: 2, (1949) pp. 356-358

²⁷² H. Morrison, *Our Parliament and How It Works*, (Labour Party, London, 1953) pp. 10-12, 27-28

that “If the Opposition is to be given no moral case for obstruction, the Government must ‘play the game’ and respect the principles of parliamentary democracy, otherwise representative government will be endangered.” Furthermore, “the British people rightly attach importance to a party being sufficiently coherent and united to give the country a Government not only of sound policy but of adequate strength and unity of purpose.” Indeed, Morrison goes on to write, perhaps influenced by the 1950-51 Labour government, “let the electorate remember that whilst there are objections to excessively large parliamentary majorities, there are even greater objections to a majority so small that the legitimate freedom of the MP is gravely limited.”²⁷³

Losing despite receiving more votes than the Conservatives in 1951 provoked very little comment in the party as did Labour’s under-representation in 1955. Three successive election defeats in 1951, 1955 and 1959 did not make Labour more favourably disposed towards reform. The period between 1935 and 1970 was the height of the two-party dominance. Average two-party vote during these years was 91.3%, the highest in 1951 with 96.85% and the lowest in 1964 with 87.5%. In the 1959 General Election, 6 Liberal MPs and an independent Conservative were the only non-Labour or non-Conservative MPs returned to the House of Commons. The Scottish and Welsh Nationalists remained peripheral. Few worried about the electoral system, leading A. H. Birch to comment that in the 1960s the electoral system was “no longer a bone of contention”²⁷⁴. Labour’s position in the two-party system was secure and they were now the only opposition to the Conservative Party. With governments being returned on well over 45% of the vote, few worried about any theoretical injustice to the Liberals,

²⁷³ H. Morrison, *Government and Parliament*, (Oxford University Press, 1954) pp. 98, 161-162, 165

²⁷⁴ A. H. Birch, *Representative and Responsible Government*, (Allen & Unwin, London, 1964) p.227

the third party. Indeed, the arguments for electoral reform and the introduction of PR could easily be dismissed as special pleading on their part, out of kilter with the desires of the nation who were choosing between two competing policy platforms.

Harold Wilson's Labour Party was elected in 1964 with a slim majority of four, returning the Labour Party to power after thirteen years of opposition. The new Prime Minister had no contingency plan for such a small majority which could be easily eroded through by-election defeats. Wilson intended to govern as though he had a larger majority and enact the government's legislative programme accordingly. Two backbench Labour MPs, Woodrow Wyatt and Desmond Donnelly, suggested that a Lab-Lib understanding could be reached yet this was rejected by Jo Grimond. One of the features of the consultations with the Liberals in 1964 was electoral reform. During the summer of 1965, Wilson had allegedly looked seriously at changing FPTP in exchange for parliamentary support, "albeit without in any way committing himself."²⁷⁵ Yet, Ziegler adopts a different view, affirming Wilson was "forthright in his denunciation of anything smacking of a coalition, even if it were merely to involve accepting Liberals in a few of the less important jobs." However, Wilson was forced to look seriously at the matter in August 1965. Gerald Kaufman took soundings amongst backbenchers and broadly three were against a Lib-Lab pact for every two in favour of it and one uncommitted and Wilson could dismiss the possibility. Even if they had wanted to seek a deal with the Liberals, the Parliamentary Labour Party "would never let them get away with it."²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ D. Butler & A. King, *The General Election of 1966*, (MacMillan, London, 1966) p. 2; J. Kirkup, (2012) *The Parliamentary Agreement Between the Labour Party and the Liberal Party 1977-1978 'The Lab-Lib Pact'*, Ph.D Thesis, Cardiff University, United Kingdom, pp. 29-30

²⁷⁶ P. Ziegler, *Wilson: The Authorised Life*, (Weidenfield & Nicolson, London, 1993) p. 207

Unlike in the 1940s, no attempt was made to exclude methods of election from the terms of reference for the Speaker's Conference on Electoral Law which addressed such things as registration of voters, the voting age, absent voting, election expenses, television and sound broadcasting, election petitions, and relief. When the Conference came to discuss PR – in this case the STV – all Labour members denounced it. George Strauss considered FPTP had two major benefits: direct representation and effective government. "The effectiveness of parliamentary democracy" most importantly depended on a "close association of Members of Parliament with their constituents."²⁷⁷ A Government with a majority was "essential" for "A government-representing party which takes full responsibility for everything which happens cannot put forward the excuse: 'we would have done if we could, but we could not because we are in a minority', and a Government that goes to the country on a programme tries to carry it out in Parliament. If it does not, it is attacked at the next election and may be turned out but that Government must take full responsibility without any excuses."²⁷⁸

John Mendelson, Labour MP for Pensitone, believed that pressure from academic circles and the Electoral Reform Society was simply to increase third party representation for the Liberal Party "and saw no reason why the baby should not ever be mentioned by name."²⁷⁹ Mendelson, dismissed PR supporters who argued they were the "superior custodians of purity of democratic representation; because accuracy of representation... is only one half of the problem of government that faces a Commonwealth, and without the other half

²⁷⁷ LSE Archives PARKER 4/2 A, House of Commons Mr Speaker's Conference on Electoral Law, Wednesday 9th November 1966, p. 3

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Wednesday 9th November 1966, p. 5

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Wednesday 16th November 1966, p. 9

and that is effective government, all discussion about accuracy of representation are academic.”²⁸⁰

Mendelson deemed that once the first proposition – specifically that third-party representation hindered the chances of forming a single-party government – had been accepted, the second inevitable proposition was the “casting about for possible arrangements on a political programme which no single party wants... the search for policy that no single coalition partner really wants if he could form a single party government.”²⁸¹ The seriousness of this was based on two factors. Firstly, “the essential basis of a democratic system of Government must be the ability of the electorate to place responsibility where it clearly belongs... It is the job of government that the electorate have to judge” the basis of all “political responsibility in a Commonwealth.” Secondly, Coalition government makes it “difficult to judge where responsibility really belongs” leading to more political cynicism.²⁸²

James Idwal Jones, a Labour MP from Wales understood that “the prime object of a general election is to choose a government, a government according to a political policy” and the “task of a minority... is to seek a majority.”²⁸³ Jones thought this should be done by the hard work of the third party, not by changing the rules and the altruism of a major party. Jones refuted that safe seats were necessarily negative, stating “security of tenure for Members means security of tenure for governments as well”, although qualified the statement arguing “the best thing for a government at times is to be put on the opposition benches.”²⁸⁴

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Wednesday 16th November 1966, p. 8

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, Wednesday 16th November 1966, p. 10

²⁸² *Ibid.*, Wednesday 16th November 1966, p. 10

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, Wednesday 16th November 1966, p. 15

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, Wednesday 22nd November 1966, p. 16

Samuel Charles Silkin “always unhesitatingly” came down on the side of “effectiveness... No democratic system can survive unless it is effective and that one has to subordinate even justice to that principle.”²⁸⁵ When the vote took place during Conference on STV, 19 to 1 voted against; the one dissentient being the Liberal MP, Eric Lubbock the grandson of the founder of the Proportional Representation Society.

When Lubbock subsequently tried to raise STV in the Commons in 1968 he was rebuffed by Labour ministers. The object of the electoral system for the Home Secretary, James Callaghan, was to elect a government, not to be fair to the Liberal party.²⁸⁶ He sympathised on behalf of the Liberal Party, but it was “one of the inexorable facts of life that third parties come up against when a general election arises.” In effect, this was to rule out coalition government. Another minister, Merlyn Rees, when arguing against a change, referred to Professor Laski’s (mocking) assertion that there were 949 different methods of proportional representation. Rees was confident that ‘our democracy works’, one reason for which was “the clear majority which is given to the government of the day.”²⁸⁷

It was clear in the post-World War Two era that the electoral battle lay between the Conservatives and Labour, with the Liberals few in number and only on the margins of British politics. The importance of the Labour victory in 1945 would live long in the Party’s collective memory, enacting social reforms to the benefit of the working class through the traditional practices and workings of the British

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, Wednesday 22nd November 1966, p. 16

²⁸⁶ *Conference on Electoral Law* (Cmnd. 3202), 1966-1967, p. 5

²⁸⁷ House of Commons Debates, Vol. 770 (14th October 1968) col. 39 and 775. (11th December 1968) 462.

State. On the matter of constitutional reform, it is as Miles Taylor states, that “legislative efficiency” was the “ultimate consideration.”²⁸⁸ Legislative efficiency – free from the parliamentary wrangling with smaller parties – would be aided by a socialist majority in the House of Commons. The best way to deliver a majority was through FPTP, and when it did come to reform the Labour Party was more concerned with electoral practices – the law relating to broadcasting during elections and the lowering the age of voting from twenty to eighteen which had been recommended by the Conference – than with voting methods. Wilson dissolved parliament in 1966 and went to the country attempting to win an increased majority. The result was a landslide, with a 96 seat majority. Whatever troubles and failures the Wilson government faced, and the ensuing defeat in 1970, they were convinced on the merits of FPTP.

1974-1983

In February 1974 Edward Heath called an election on the issue of ‘who governs Britain’ – the Trade Unions or the government at Westminster? The reply from the British electorate was inconclusive. The Conservative polled 100,000 more votes but the Labour Party won four more seats returning 301 seats to the House of Commons. As the sitting Prime Minister Heath had the constitutional right to seek to form a government, he spent three days attempting to guarantee the support of the Liberal Party offering a Speaker’s Conference on Electoral Reform. When this was rejected Wilson’s Labour Party formed a minority government, considerably short of a parliamentary majority. However, the support of the Liberal Party was intentionally avoided and on the parliamentary vote to pass the Queen’s Speech, Callaghan, the Home Secretary, deemed “it would be frivolous

²⁸⁸ M. Taylor, ‘Labour and the constitution’, in D. Tanner, P. Thane & N. Tiratsoo (eds.) *Labour’s First Century*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000) p. 166

to think you could defeat the Government on their programme without serious consequences arising.” Moreover, the behaviour of the opposition parties was irresponsible, and seemed to be “little more than a simple desire to bring down a Labour Government no matter what its policies, so that the Conservative and Liberal parties may climb into office on the back of a spurious national coalition.” Belief in the benefits of coalition, for Callaghan, was misguided:

“A coalition is like a mule. It has no pride of ancestry and no hope of posterity. And on what policies would this unfortunate hybrid animal be expected to graze? ... While its forelegs would be galloping off in the direction of public ownership of development land required for cheaper house building, its hind legs would be stuck fast in the speculators muck. I pity the jockey of such an ill-begotten mount.”²⁸⁹

For the first time since 1929, FPTP had failed to produce a clear winner and as such doubt had been poured onto the legitimacy of the electoral system. Two months into the Labour government, during a Cabinet meeting on 4th April 1974 Roy Jenkins brought up the question of the Edward Heath’s Speaker’s Conference which had come to an end with the dissolution of Parliament in February 1974. Barbara Castle notes in her diaries how the conversation transpired. Jenkins claimed the Conference had “unfinished business left over from the last Parliament and he was thinking of reconstituting it. But before he did he wanted to discuss how we should handle the matter of the single transferable vote”, an electoral system not favoured by the Labour Party since pre-World War One. Jenkins continued: “If we did not include it in the terms of reference we should look as though we were the only party not interested in electoral reform.

²⁸⁹ *Observer*, ‘Callaghan: Coalition is a pipe dream’, 17th March 1974

As the Liberals were very likely to propose its examination, it would be better for us to take the initiative. He suggested therefore that we should get the Speaker's Conference to examine it in a 'low pressure way'."

The response to Jenkins' suggestion was critical. "Bob Mellish looked alarmed at this, while Mike (Michael Foot) came in emphatically: 'Once we get into this it will grow and grow,' he protested. 'Why hasten the conference at all? I have always believed the Tories would come down for the alternative vote because it is in their interests.'" Indeed, in the mid-1970s it was the Conservative Party who were more inclined to electoral reform forming the 'Conservative Action for Electoral Reform' in 1975, fearing that the Labour Party would continue to form governments on reducing vote shares, thus introducing socialism without popular backing. With four out of the last five general elections delivering Labour governments (albeit only 1966 with a landslide victory) Conservative statecraft and their ability to win elections was brought into question. This was against a backdrop of a declining number of Scottish Conservative MPs from 31 in 1959 to 16 in 1974, and the group enjoyed the support of such backbenchers as Nicholas Scott, Anthony Kershaw and Douglas Hurd.

Foot's criticism of Jenkins' proposal was approved by Bob Mellish who added "he was darn sure the Speaker was in no hurry to have the conference reconstituted. Willie Ross (the Secretary of State for Scotland), in his lugubrious way, pointed out that all this was linked with the Kilbrandon Report, which had itself recommended a form of proportional representation as the only way of eliminating the perpetual Labour majorities in Scotland and Wales which devolution would produce." Castle continues: "If we were not careful we could see the end of any possibility of a Labour Government. Harold reminded us that nothing could stop the Speaker's Conference from producing an interim report –

particularly if we put on it some of the Labour maverick types like George Strauss as we had done before. It was obviously best to let this sleeping dog lie as long as possible. So we sent Roy away with a flea in his coalition ear.”²⁹⁰

In the days running up to the October 1974 general election Harold Wilson affirmed that whilst he remained leader of the Labour Party he would not enter a coalition with any party, and proceeded to damn the tactics of the Liberal Party. It was the dream of ‘manipulating voices’ that the result of a general election would be the Liberals holding the balance of power, meaning “permanent majority for the Conservatives by the creation of a new Liberal Party out of the ashes of the Labour Party. They are wasting their time. This party is not for burning.”²⁹¹ The electorate gave the Labour Party a majority of three in a different political climate across Great Britain. Whereas in 1964 the only non-Labour or non-Conservative and Unionist MPs were nine Liberals, by 1974 thirty-nine MPs were neither Labour nor Conservative. Importantly, eleven of whom were from the SNP who would play a pivotal role through the course of the Parliament. The fracturing of the two-party system in the 1974-79 parliament was not necessarily harmful to the Labour government, as the Conservative opposition was reliant on agreement amongst a disparate group of political parties.

Wilson affirmed at the 1975 Party Conference that Labour was “the natural party of government”²⁹², implying a satisfaction with the electoral mechanism which was delivering Labour governments, having only lost one election since 1964. The Labour Party was fulfilling its objective of governing in the same manner as its Conservative opponent. Yet, this did not prevent Roy Jenkins on Tuesday 18th

²⁹⁰ B. Castle, *The Castle Diaries 1974-1976*, (Weidenfield and Nicolson, London, 1980) pp. 69-70

²⁹¹ *Guardian*, ‘Wilson rules out deal with ‘Liberal Tories’’, 4th October 1973

²⁹² Bogdanor, *The People and the Party System*, p. 153

November once again raising the issue of proportional representation and the Speaker's Conference in Cabinet. Castle claims it was "pleasant to have Roy Jenkins slapped down." Jenkins "gave his excuse that the Conference ought to be reconvened to discuss certain outstanding items of electoral procedure and that it would be very difficult 'not to refer electoral reform to it at the same time'." What was worrying was that, with Harold's connivance, he had already sounded out the Opposition on this possibility. Ted Short, who ought to know better, supported him. There was, he said, 'great pressure for it', though 'we must watch it very carefully'."

However, Castle declares the rest of the Cabinet turned on them. Denis (Healey) who "with good pragmatic vigour, denounced the idea as 'absolute madness'." Even people like Roy Mason, Fred Peart, Malcolm and Willie Ross were against. Only the hard core of Jenkinites coalitionists (Harold Lever, Shirley Williams and Reg Prentice) were in agreement. So Harold had to sum up that the idea was turned down. But those rightists will go on beavering away, with Harold and Jim as their instruments, until they have finally destroyed the Labour Party's independence and power to govern single-handedly."²⁹³ Interestingly, those whom Castle listed as 'Jenkinite' coalitionists did not all go on to join the Social Democratic Party (SDP). Lever was made a Life Peer in 1979 and Prentice was deselected for his constituency in 1977 and stood for the Conservative Party in 1979. Williams, would be one of the 'Gang of Four', a founding member of the SDP.

Ron Hayward, former General Secretary of the Labour Party, speaking in 1976 warned PR would mean "Coalition government at Westminster, on the lines of

²⁹³ Castle, *The Castle Diaries 1974-1976*, p. 554

our European partners, and it is goodbye then to any dreams or aspirations for a Democratic Socialist Britain.”²⁹⁴ However, the Labour Party lost its parliamentary majority in April 1976 and as the government could not deliver on the guillotine on the Committee stage of the Devolution Bill, the attitudes of nationalists hardened against Labour. The Conservatives saw their opportunity to strike and put down a motion of censure for 23rd March. Callaghan needed to appease the minority parties and established a Speaker’s Conference to examine representation in Northern Ireland to buy Unionist support and Proportional Representation for European Elections and Devolution for David Steel’s Liberals. Callaghan and Steel were wary of the need to avoid a general election, fearing heavy losses. On 23rd March 1977 the ‘Lab-Lib’ Pact was born, with the Labour government and the Liberals announcing the formation of a Joint Consultative Committee which would “examine Government policy and other issues prior to their coming before the House and Liberal policy proposals.”²⁹⁵

The weight of feeling and tension within the Labour Party are revealed in this period on the debate on PR for Europe and the proposed devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales. Callaghan told Steel, “As he would understand, proportional representation was an animal of a very different colour, for the party was against it and so was I”²⁹⁶ highlighting the hostility at the top of the Labour Party.

Consequently, forcing the Labour Party to walk through the Lobbies in favour of a Regional List for the European Parliament would split the Cabinet and the Party, and accordingly collective responsibility was suspended. It was agreed that the government would ‘commend’ the Bill, thus ensuring a ‘free vote’. By the Second Reading collective responsibility was suspended and the Bill passed by 381

²⁹⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, 28th February 1976

²⁹⁵ *The Times*, 24th March 1977

²⁹⁶ J. Callaghan, *Time and Chance*, (William Collins Sons & Co, London, 1987) pp. 445-456

votes to 98. However, 74 Labour MPs opposed the Bill and 90 abstained including Cabinet ministers; Foot, Benn, Orme, Shore and Silkin, all of which was overlooked by Callaghan.²⁹⁷

In December 1977, during the Second Reading of the Bill, Pugh emphasises that “Labour opponents of the scheme interpreted the question purely as a device by the Liberals to edge the country nearer to a general PR system; Fred Willey tried to damn the idea by referring the House to the effort of the 1929-31 Labour government to do a deal with the Liberals over PR.”²⁹⁸ Kirkup charts the course of events. Willey tabled an amendment calling for a vote to strike out the government’s preference for Regional List and replace it with FPTP, already in place as a schedule to the Bill, passing 321 votes to 224. 85 abstentions yielded a majority of 98. The PR clause was defeated by 319-222 votes, with the Labour Party dividing 147 for PR (including 60 Ministers) to 122 against and 46 Labour MPs abstained. 25 government Ministers either voted against PR or abstained.²⁹⁹ It was clear that a substantial section within the Labour Party were against the Regional List System, particularly when the Commons majority of 183 against PR for the devolved assemblies is taken into account.

The ‘Lab-Lib’ Pact came to an end in June 1978, placing the Labour Party in a precarious parliamentary position. Callaghan considered calling an election for the autumn but held back only for the ‘Winter of Discontent’ to harm the electoral chances of a Labour victory. Margaret Thatcher brought forward a ‘vote of no confidence’ for the 28th March 1979, on which the government fell by 311 votes to

²⁹⁷ NA, CAB 128/62 CM (77): Cabinet Conclusions, 17 November 1977 Quoted in Kirkup, *The Lab-Lib Pact*, p. 286. See also M. Hagger, ‘The United Kingdom: The Reluctant Europeans’, in V. Herman, & M. Hagger (eds.) *The Legislation of Direct Elections to the European Parliament*, (Gower, Hampshire, 1980) pp. 204-238

²⁹⁸ Pugh, ‘Political Parties and the Campaign for Proportional Representation’, p. 294

²⁹⁹ Kirkup, *The Lab-Lib Pact*, pp. 285-291

310. The Scottish Nationalists sided with the Conservatives along with seven MPs from Ulster and an Independent. The Liberals, who nine months prior were partaking in the Lab-Lib Pact, also supported the Conservative motion, thus questioning the validity of the 'Progressive Left' argument. As Callaghan stated immediately after the Commons vote, echoing MacDonald's view in 1924, 'We shall take our case to the country'. In the ensuing general election, the Conservative Party won a working majority and beckoned in an era of neo-liberal economics undermining the planks of social democracy. Few worried about the electoral system within the Labour Party in consideration of winning 42.4% of the seats on 36.9% of the vote, thus benefitting from the working of FPTP.

Indeed, Healey reflected on the Lab-Lib Pact and the whittling down of the Labour majority through by-election defeats and defections in his autobiography. Released in 1990, the same year the Plant Commission was set up, potentially as a repost to the growing demands for electoral reform within the Labour Party, he dismissed PR, coalition government and defended FPTP and single-party government. Moreover:

"Labour cannot escape from its problems through alliances with the Centre parties, or through proportional representation. The non-Labour majority is probably as large as the non-Conservative majority; there is no guarantee that members of the Centre parties would vote Labour if their own candidates stood down – or vice-versa. Proportional Representation could not be introduced in Britain without years of wrangling over its precise form; previous attempts to change the British constitution, over devolution or the House of Lords, are not an encouraging precedent. The experience of PR in other countries shows that it has many defects. It tends to give excessive influence

to tiny political parties... and rarely produces a government which can act decisively in a crisis.

In any case, if the Labour Party cannot defeat the Conservatives on its own, it is unlikely to do so in an alliance with the Centre or Nationalist parties; it is even less likely to form an effective government with them if it did. The Centre parties are deeply divided both on their values, their policies and their leadership; and each Nationalist party has only one aim, which none of the other parties share.”³⁰⁰

The Labour Party after the defeat in 1979 could not have foreseen the eighteen years in opposition that awaited, and the internal trauma caused by Militant and the breakaway Social Democratic Party (SDP). Indeed, the ‘the gang of four’ – Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams, William Rogers and David Owen – who sought to ‘break the mould of British politics’ committed, to many in the Labour Party, an act of treason akin to Ramsay MacDonald in 1931. As the ‘mould’ was to be broken through PR the SDP were guilty by association, and responsible for returning the issue to the political agenda. Anderson and Mann state: “Proportional representation was too closely associated in most Labour minds with the hated SDP defectors and their Liberal allies to make any headway in the party.”³⁰¹

In 1983, the Labour Party manifesto was dubbed the ‘longest suicide note in history’ and was rejected by the British electorate, with Margaret Thatcher winning the first of her landslide victories. Labour achieved only marginally more votes than the SDP/Liberal Alliance, but considerably more seats; 8.4 million

³⁰⁰ D. Healey, *The Time of My Life*, (Penguin Books, London, 1990) pp. 458 & 582-583

³⁰¹ P. Anderson & N. Mann, *Safety First: The Making of New Labour*, (Granta, London, 1997) p. 294

votes won 209 seats compared to Alliance who polled just below 7.8 million votes but won only 23 seats. Bogdanor calculates that the Labour Party received thirty more seats than it would have achieved under PR. Curtice and Steed made two calculations, estimating on a national PR system Labour would have won twenty-nine fewer seats, and a local PR system estimating the Labour would have returned twenty-two fewer seats.³⁰² Having become one of the two major parties in British politics, the Labour Party's position in the system was secure under FPTP even in the face of an electorally dominant Conservative Party and a resurgent third party.

Summary

A debate has existed towards the electoral system within the Labour Party since its inception. Whilst the Labour Party has flirted with electoral reform on a number of occasions, the Party has been committed to introducing PR for the House of Commons from 1910-1911 and 1918-1926. AV has often been advocated by some through genuine conviction and also as a compromise; "the lowest common denominator that the Liberals and Labour could agree if nothing else were possible"³⁰³ according to Anderson and Mann, as seen during the 1929-31 Labour government, a device to buy Liberal support in order to remain in power rather than for any intrinsic merit of the electoral system.

A range of factors have shaped the Labour Party's attitude towards the electoral system: the best method to increase parliamentary representation and to become an independent political force, and the relationship with the Liberal Party. The

³⁰² V. Bogdanor, *What is Proportional Representation?*, (Martin Robertson, Oxford, 1984) p. 21; J. Curtice & M. Steed, 'Appendix 2', in D. Butler & D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1983*, (Macmillan, London, 1983) p. 259

³⁰³ Anderson & Mann, *Safety First*, pp. 293, 429 footnote 40

experience of minority government in 1924 and 1929-31 highlighted what a parliamentary majority could achieve if it was not reliant on the acquiescence of a party of 'capital'. Coalition and the policy compromise involved, an event made more likely under PR, was inferior to single party government, as moderate Labour MPs and Cabinet Ministers such as Healey deemed. The argument from the Left during the Lib-Lab Pact, was unhappiness at the thought that 13 Liberal MPs had more influence over the Government than the 80 Labour MPs in the Tribune Group; a belief that the tail could wag the dog and a further watering down of the commitment to socialism. In addition, political events have shaped Labour attitude including MacDonald's 'great betrayal' and the breakaway SDP, whose acts constituted betrayal of the Labour Party and the working class they sought to represent.

Whilst MacDonald is resented for the events of 1931, and displayed a split attitude towards electoral reform, it was his underlying belief that British politics should revolve around a Conservative Party and a Labour Party that has had a great bearing on the governing ideology of the Party. The Labour Party should be independent, capable of fighting and winning elections across Great Britain and forming single-party governments. Consequently, any role for the Liberal Party had to be marginalised and its capability as an electoral force neutered. The 1924 minority government and the attitude of the Labour Party in the 1920s clearly shows that MacDonald had every intention of keeping the Liberals at bay, emphasising that Labour was a Party capable of governing the British State. Interest in reform duly subsided as Labour's position in the two-party system strengthened. Attlee's 1945 reforming government was the fulfilment of Labour's promise in the 1920s, utilising a parliamentary majority to enact social reform.

MacDonald's attitude towards elections and governing was shared by subsequent Labour Party leaders and prominent figures within the Party, becoming the dominant view. Indeed, from the 1930s through to the mid-1970s, there was a lack of voices willing to make the case for electoral reform; a minority pursuit both within the Labour Party and wider society. The Westminster Model was accepted by the Labour Party, who chose to prioritise economic issues rather than constitutional reform. Whatever electoral and political difficulties the Labour Party faced, few within the Party believed it could escape them through PR and coalition. On the occasion when a deal had to be made, it was out of necessity rather than a conviction in the merits of parliamentary deals. In the period analysed a variety of systems were put forward by dissenting voices, yet it was the perceived benefits of FPTP that held sway within the Labour Party.

Chapter 3 - The slow rise and quick fall of the Plant Report

The 'Plant Report: A Working Party on Electoral Reform', was an internal Labour Party enquiry that met from 1990-1993. Although the enquiry looked at potential electoral systems for the European Parliament, Regional and Devolved Assemblies, a reformed Second Chamber and subsequently developed a remit for Local Government, the main focus of the chapter will be the House of Commons, in line with the rest of the thesis. This chapter will begin by outlining the circumstances in which the Plant Report was written, the reasons for the growing pressure for reform and why the Labour leadership felt compelled to hold the enquiry. The chapter will then move on to the 1991 *Democracy, Representation and Elections* document, referred to in this chapter as the 'Interim Report', outlining the remit of the Working Party, theoretical issues and the nature and implications of different voting systems. In 1992, a short summary was released, referred to as the 'Second Interim Report', informing the progress the committee had made and the issues looked at to date. The Final Report published in 1993 states the arguments for and against reform of the electoral system and then recommends – decided through a series of votes by those on the committee – an electoral system for the House of Commons, the Second Chamber and the European Parliament.

Through the use of interviews with those who sat on the committee, newspaper articles and secondary literature the issues raised in the report will be dissected, resulting in the issues of *real politik* supplemented with theoretical issues, raised in both the Interim and Final Report. The chapter will establish how proportional representation (PR) became a defining issue for the Labour Party in the late 1980s and early 1990s, how conclusions were reached on the Plant Report and how the leadership sought to influence and ultimately contain PR.

The growth in pressure for voting reform

As highlighted in Chapter 2, the 1970s witnessed the decline of the combined vote share and seats for both Conservative and Labour parties, with the rise of the Liberal Party and the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP). For Joyce Gould, the February 1974 General Election shifted the focus in both the Labour and Conservative parties on to the legitimacy of FPTP. It was a “watershed moment” highlighting “The unfairness of FPTP in terms of votes and seats became clearly apparent for the first time since World War Two.”³⁰⁴ Many in the Labour Party cared little about the perceived unfairness of the electoral system when PR was discussed for the proposed devolved assemblies and European elections, it was viewed as ‘the thin end of the wedge’, leading people to question the legitimacy of the Westminster electoral system and eventually prompting a move away from FPTP. The breakaway SDP in 1981 were ‘guilty by association’ in their support of electoral reform and Labour politicians held the opinion that the ‘Gang of Three’ and others who joined were traitors or cowards, and whose actions hindered the Labour Party’s ambition of returning to office.

Indeed, FPTP was not considered at fault for Labour’s defeat in 1979 or the electoral meltdown in 1983, when the Labour Party’s share of the vote fell to 28 per cent. Instead it was a failure of policy – ‘the longest suicide note in history’ – leadership, presentation and organisation in the face of the electoral populism of Thatcherism. The Labour Party was deemed to be unelectable and given the internal Party strife with ‘entryism’ and the ‘hard left’, PR was low on the agenda. When the issue was raised, it was dismissed: Jack Straw considered PR to be about “giving parties who get the least number of votes the most power. It’s very

³⁰⁴ Interview with Baroness Gould, 3rd March 2015

clever.”³⁰⁵ Peter Hain penned *Proportional Misrepresentation* in 1986 rejecting PR as it suffered from many flaws, whilst favouring AV for the House of Commons. After the second Thatcher landslide in 1987, an election in which the Labour Party considered it ran a successful campaign in terms of presentation and organisation, four percentage points gained had translated into only twenty more seats, a disappointing return. Consequently – and for reasons outlined below – interest in constitutional reform and, importantly, electoral reform and PR grew.

Prior to 1979, the Conservative Party when in government had broadly supported the social and economic settlement introduced by the Attlee government. However, when the Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher was elected in 1979 it embarked upon a series of economic, political and social reforms that ran contrary to the ideology of the Labour Party: privatisation of nationalised industries, restriction of trade union practices, restructuring the welfare state, all of which suggested the ‘post-war consensus’ had ceased. The Thatcher government was committed to the New Right ideology: shrinking the size of the state, cutting spending and liberalising the economy. Whilst pledging to ‘set the people free’, the power of local government was limited, the Greater London Assembly was closed down and the government utilised Royal Prerogatives and Privileges in order to pursue its agenda.

Such significant social and economic changes, it was argued by electoral reformers, should have been supported by the majority of the electorate. On a minority of the popular vote deep societal and economic changes were driven through parliament, disregarding the views of the opposition inside and outside

³⁰⁵ *Tribune*, 20th December 1985. Quoted in A Conservative Research Department Paper, ‘Proportional Representation’, *Politics Today*, (No. 12), 19th September 1991, p. 214

parliament. Moreover, such an argument was used with increasing regularity by the opposition parties in parts of Britain where the Conservatives were in electoral retreat, specifically in Scotland. Yet this was not without problems. The Labour Party as a unionist party had adopted a 'nationalist argument', suggesting a government at Westminster – the place in which Labour was seeking to form a government – lacked legitimacy and that a significant minority of Conservative voters that remained in Scotland, should in effect have no representation.

Labour's Constitutional Reform Agenda

The actions of the Conservative government had prompted a plethora of prose from authors such as Paul Hirst, Will Hutton, Michael Keating and David Jones, and David Marquand critiquing the British Constitution, advocating reform of the electoral system and promoting a pluralistic approach. Pressure groups formed campaigning for constitutional reform notably the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform (LCER) and Charter 88, a reawakening of interest in civil liberties and in new forms of government. Charter 88 was critiquing not only the actions of the Conservative government but the perceived constitutional conservatism of the Labour Party. It followed *Samizdat*, a non-party newsletter committed to bringing together all anti-conservative forces publishing under the auspices of the Constitutional Reform Centre, for a new legal settlement. Neil Kinnock succinctly dismissed Charter 88 as "whiners, whinges and wankers"³⁰⁶ highlighting both Labour's belief in the Westminster Model of government and the contempt in which constitutional reformers were held.

³⁰⁶ Quoted in Anderson & Mann, *Safety First*, p. 429

The Labour Party having traditionally been sceptical of wide ranging constitutional reform in the post-World War Two era, had become convinced of the need to alter Britain's constitutional settlement. Had Labour won in 1992 a number of new institutions and other changes would have been introduced – a Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, signing up to PR for the European Parliament, an elected House of Lords by some system other than FPTP – all of which required the Labour Party to have a view on constitutional issues and PR. Pledging to introduce these institutions with no clear view, basis and agreement would have provided the Conservatives with an 'open goal' to attack Labour, arguing constitutional upheaval would result from a Labour government who had given no consideration to the implications of its policy. Moreover, the Scottish Constitutional Convention and the Executive of the Labour Party of Scotland were heavily engaged in drumming up support for a Scottish Parliament, perhaps realising that promoting a Scottish Parliament as a 'one party state' was going to be a 'hard sell'. Consequently, the pressure for reform from different parts of Britain forced the British Labour Party to look more closely at new ideas.

Roy Hattersley, then Deputy Leader of the Labour Party and Shadow Home Secretary, led the arguments against reform over the Plant process. He maintains that in this period "PR was very fashionable and there's nothing more damning I can say than the word 'fashionable'."³⁰⁷ PR was one of many 'fanciful ideas', an outpouring in Hattersley's mind of 'radical chic' that would disappear once poll ratings improved. Yet such ideas did find favour. Mary Georghiou commenting in the electoral reform edition of *Samizdat* – a publication dedicated to constitutional reform – argued that democracy should be Labour's elusive 'big idea' and if the party were to adopt electoral reform it would be seen as a

³⁰⁷ Interview with Lord Hattersley, 17th November 2014

symbolic indication that the voters could trust Labour with power. “Labour needs to show it trusts the electorate if it expects the electorate to trust us. To get the trust it needs Labour will have to admit that some people do not just want a different government but to change the way the government is elected.”³⁰⁸

Dame Margaret Beckett shared Hattersley’s sentiment, stating that there was “a lot of talk about how the electoral system cheated the British people and what people really wanted was fair votes – that this demand was increasing.” With this feeling in the air, the Labour Party felt compelled to look into the matter. For Beckett the analysis was fallacious, as it was only a small but vocal minority demanding reform, not representative of the majority who were simply not interested.³⁰⁹ Alan Duncan from the GMB Union and Alun Michael, the MP for Cardiff South and Penarth concurred. At the 1989 Labour Party Conference the former affirmed: “There are some in this party who would have us believe that electoral reform is a burning issue, high on the political agenda. It is not” as the debate “has no interest or concern amongst the people we represent.” The latter was “not surprised *The Guardian* leader writer is urging us to go on this detour” though in truth it was “an irrelevant trip down a blind alley.”³¹⁰

Heath, Jowell and Curtice in *Labour’s Last Chance*, paint a picture of internal contradictions. In a cross-section survey, two different questions about electoral reform were asked, receiving differing responses. One question asked respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement that:

³⁰⁸ *Samizdat*, September / October 1990

³⁰⁹ Interview with Margaret Beckett MP, 26th March 2014

³¹⁰ Labour Party Conference Report, 1989

Britain should introduce proportional representation so that the number of MPs each party gets matches more closely the number of votes each party gets.

48% agreed, and only 27% disagreed. A second question put the matter differently, incorporating two commonly-expressed viewpoints for and against electoral reform, as follows:

Some people say that we should change the voting system to allow smaller parties to get a fairer share of MPs. Others say we should keep the voting system as it is to produce effective government. Which view comes closest to your own?

In response, only 33% favoured a change, while 60% favoured the *status quo*. Moreover, as measured by this latter question, opposition to electoral reform has grown slightly since 1983³¹¹ (54% favoured keeping the existing system in the 1983 cross-section study while 39% were in favour of change). Consequently the oft professed popularity of PR was not necessarily as strong as the proponents claimed.

The electoral possibilities of PR

Although the evidence from the period suggests that support for electoral reform among the electorate is somewhat weaker than was acknowledged by its proponents, polling emerged of the electoral benefits for the Labour Party if it committed to electoral reform. The extra votes and seats would increase the likelihood of forming a government. The influence of academic commentators like

³¹¹ A. Heath, R. Jowell, & J. Curtice, 'Can Labour Win?' in A. Heath, R. Jowell, J. Curtice & B. Taylor (eds.) *Labour's Last Chance? The 1992 Election and Beyond*, (Dartmouth Publishing, Aldershot, 1994) p. 291

Patrick Dunleavy on the Labour Party is understandable, given the political climate and the electoral appeal of Thatcherism. Dunleavy stated: “There would be about a three per cent net gain of Labour support which is in excess of 1.25 million votes nationwide. If you looked at the change from the 1987 figure, you would be looking around 80 seats.”³¹² A poll for MORI conducted on behalf of the Electoral Reform Society suggested a fifth of centre party voters would switch their votes to the Labour Party if it committed itself to PR, a three per cent swing among the population at large. Backing PR would increase Labour support particularly among middle-class men living in the south-east, with ‘fairness’ and ‘increased democracy’ the main reasons given for supporting PR.³¹³ The opportunity to win over a considerable number of voters could not be passed up for a party seeking to return to office and would not have escaped the attention of Labour MPs.

The need to look for different ways of attracting support stemmed from the question of whether Labour could win again under FPTP. Three successive general election defeats, seemingly unable to make electoral advances against the popular appeal of Thatcherism, had dented the belief that the electoral pendulum would swing to Labour. There was a feeling that FPTP, according to Lord Rosser “wasn’t very friendly to the Labour Party... The prospect of returning to office were not necessarily that great.”³¹⁴ Others shared the pessimism of Labour’s electoral situation. Linton and Wintour, commenting in the *Guardian* argued “three successive election victories and dismay on the Left at the prospect at its impotence at preventing a fourth and even fifth Thatcher win.”³¹⁵ The prospect of Conservative hegemony, whether accurate or not, ratcheted up

³¹² *The Times*, 29th October 1989

³¹³ *Guardian*, 29th September 1989

³¹⁴ Interview with Lord Rosser, 28th March 2014

³¹⁵ *Guardian*, ‘A people’s bill of reform fare’, 30th November 1988

the pressure on the Labour Party to consider other methods of election if it was ever to have the opportunity of governing.

The Labour Party, even if it were to perform well at the next general election, still faced the possibility of a hung parliament with no party able to form a majority. Therefore, if a coalition was necessary, in all likelihood with the Liberal Democrats, the Labour Party would have to table an offer on electoral reform, the starting point for the negotiating with the Liberal Democrats. Consequently, to have a concrete proposal would show the Liberal Democrats that the Labour Party were serious about electoral reform, power-sharing and reforming the British constitution. The Liberal-SDP Alliance had performed well in terms of vote share in both 1983 and 1987 yet had been hindered by the workings of FPTP, receiving fewer seats than its national vote share warranted on a proportional basis. Observing two opposition parties to the Conservatives fuelled the 'progressive-left' thesis, overlapping in some policy areas, with a combined vote totalling more than the Conservatives leading some to conclude there was a progressive majority in Britain. The shame of British politics had been a disunited left according to Marquand³¹⁶, allowing the Conservative Party to dominate electoral politics in the twentieth century.

As the talk of a 'progressive left' grew John Evans MP for St Helens North, a leading ally of Neil Kinnock, argued in late 1988 for an electoral pact in sixty key marginal constituencies in an attempt to defeat the sitting Conservative MP. Evans had in mind thirty in which the Labour candidate would stand down and thirty seats where the 'centre' candidate would stand down. It was time, to quote

³¹⁶ See Thesis, pp. 32-33, 39-43

Evans, “to think the unthinkable”³¹⁷ and break with Labour’s historic fear of pacts and coalitions. Charles Clarke, Kinnock’s Chief of Staff from 1983-1992, accepted the view that Labour had to be more open to new ideas, potential strategic alliances, working with other individuals and political parties in a much more general way and to recognise other strands such as feminism and human rights. “Neil’s leadership was very much about being open to different forms of approach.”³¹⁸

The Labour Party’s adherence to bringing about a more equitable and fair society led some to question how a party committed to an equal society could support an electoral system where there is a clear disparity between votes cast and seats won. Where was the ‘equality’ and ‘fairness’ in supporting an electoral system that acted so unfairly towards the SDP-Liberal Alliance or to the millions of Labour voters in the south of England who repeatedly end up with Conservative MPs? Moreover, the issue of equality and fairness spread further than votes translating into seats. Baroness Gould states: “the issue of reform was part of a bigger wider movement outside of electoral politics. Charter 88 emerged along with the Labour Party’s Campaign for Electoral Reform. Equality and Fairness along with women’s representation were part of the deep societal changes happening in the 1980s”³¹⁹ emphasising the pluralistic changes Britain was experiencing.

³¹⁷ *Guardian*, ‘Leading Kinnock ally calls for Labour electoral pact with the Democrats’, 5th December 1988

³¹⁸ Interview with Charles Clarke, 21st May 2014

³¹⁹ Interview with Baroness Gould, 3rd March 2015

The 'Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform' and the build-up to Plant

The 'Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform' (LCER) – an internal Labour Party grouping – grew dramatically by 1993, gathering a following of over 2000 members and the sponsorship of over 60 Labour MPs. In spite of Labour riding high in the polls by 1993 the group became the largest campaigning group within the Labour Party.

LCER Membership, 1984-1993³²⁰

(Table 1)

Date	Number
1984	35
1985	50
1986	100
1987	200
1988	300
1989	700
1990	1000
1991	1,500
1992	1,700
1993	2,000

Dale Campbell-Savours, the Labour MP for Workington, announced in *The Times* that of 125 Labour MPs he personally interviewed over the past nine months, 108 were in favour of some change in the electoral system. The survey was dismissed by a party spokesman as "a series of informal discussion over a

³²⁰ Quoted in Linton, *Labour's Road to Electoral Reform?* p. 16

period.”³²¹ To further counter the poll conducted by Campbell-Savours, a survey by Market Access International consulted 35 MPs, of whom 25 said they did not support electoral reform.³²²

Despite the arguments for reform and the increasing popularity of PR amongst Labour MPs, the Labour leadership and the wider Labour movement was not yet ready to reverse its opposition to electoral reform. Table 2 shows how the Party leadership was under pressure by a succession of conference resolutions concerning electoral reform, although these were met by a strong retorts at the 1987 and 1989 Conferences by those who still favoured FPTP.

Labour Conference and Amendments on Electoral Reform, 1987-1991³²³

(Table 2)

1987 Brighton	25 Resolutions and Amendments
1988 Blackpool	7 Resolutions
1989 Brighton	37 Resolution and 6 Amendments
1990 Blackpool	31 Resolutions and 6 Amendments
1991 Brighton	35 Resolutions (30 for and 5 against)

At the 1987 Labour Party Conference in Brighton a representative from Mole Valley moved ‘Composite 27’ in favour of setting up a Working Party on Electoral Reform. Whilst the Composite was seconded by Chorley and did receive support from representatives from Watford, it was contested by Kevin Stephens (Gloucester CLP) arguing the electorate have “seen what the economic doctrine

³²¹ Quoted in *Guardian*, ‘Centre boost on PR for Labour’, *Financial Times*, ‘Labour Group Calls for Electoral Reform’; *The Times*, ‘MP claims support for voting system reform’, 29th September 1989

³²² *Guardian*, ‘Poll find Labour MPs reject PR’, 16th November 1989

³²³ M. Linton, & M. Southcott, *Making Votes Count, The Case for Electoral Reform*, (Profile Books, London, 1998) p. 98

of the Liberals and the Tories mean to them – it means redundancies. They need protection and they need jobs” along with a National Minimum Wage and only a “Labour government can deliver that.” Peter Hain (Putney CLP) offered a traditional defence of the British system of representative government asking “is it really a priority to tinker around with the electoral system when we confront much more important issues of democracy?” Siobhan McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden CLP) argued the Labour Party lost because “not enough people wanted to vote Labour” and Labour will win “fighting on the issues that people find important.”

The most vocal critic of electoral reform and PR was Hattersley who claimed supporting this composite would be “interpreted as, and in fact is, support for proportional representation” and would be “absolute folly.” Much to the enjoyment of the floor, Hattersley bashed the SDP asserting they are “united by only two principles: the first is a hatred of David Owen and the second is support for PR.” Furthermore, he went on to deliver a classical defence of FPTP; damaging our traditional system of democracy and eroding the rights of people to vote for the policies which they support – the manifesto and the mandate – and the unaccountable backroom deals and blunting of radical policies through “soggy compromise” associated with PR. Hattersley closed his speech affirming “the belief that we can win on our own, the certainty that we will win on our own, on our own policies, our own programme and our own philosophy. The only way forward for this party is to fight on its own policies and to win on its own policies. That is why we must defeat this resolution.”³²⁴

It became apparent that the issue of electoral reform would not disappear.

‘Democracy and the Individual’ headed by Hattersley was one of the groups in

³²⁴ Labour Party Conference Report, 1987 pp. 130 - 133

Labour's policy review. According to Hughes and Wintour in *Labour Rebuilt*, Hattersley realised he could side-line the most important issue in his remit – PR – by tying it to regional representation and reform of the House of Lords, an idea he first floated on 20th September 1988. It was attempting to “snare proportional representation in the lobster pot of constitutional reform.”³²⁵ No member of the group supported PR. Besides: “a scheme different from that by which Members of Parliament are elected” was possible as no minister would be drawn from the second chamber.³²⁶ This provided the opportunity for the final six paragraphs of its report to condemn proportional representation, citing reasons such as the confusion of coalition government, disproportionate influence over policy by smaller parties, the questioning of the “resolve of the Labour Party win outright” and PR would decrease democracy, through the watering down of manifesto commitments.³²⁷

Whilst electoral reform was not a key issue at the 1988 Labour Party Conference, one year later the issue had returned, with a motion – composite 29 – calling for ‘an urgent study on electoral reform in its widest sense’, in practice, a working party on electoral reform. Once again it was rejected, for it would have been a diversion from winning the next general election. Hattersley damned PR and its consequences for Westminster, claiming “proportional representation would diminish, not increase genuine democracy in the country” as it is in “the House of Commons that governments must build their majorities and introduce their legislation and for the House of Commons, PR would in consequence be a reduction, not an extension of democracy.” Furthermore, he attacked the smaller parties, believing at the “end of a week in which Labour had honed its policies the

³²⁵ C. Hughes, & P. Wintour, *Labour Rebuilt*, (Fourth Estate, London, 1990) p. 162

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.163

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 163

party was “going to contemplate bargaining that away in a smoke-filled room with Mr Paddy Ashdown, Dr David Owen or anybody else to bargain away our manifesto. It would be an act of historic folly.”³²⁸ The resolution was duly defeated 4,592,000 to 1,443,000 a majority of 3,149,000, a substantial majority of 3:1. However, the losing side drew comfort from the result, emphasising 1,443,000 votes had been cast in the cause of electoral reform, affirming the issue was here to stay. Benn notes in his diary that the Conference National Executive Committee (NEC) discussed PR, “which was supported by Robin Cook, Ken Livingstone, John Evans and Clare Short. Hattersley, Kinnock, Bryan Gould, Beckett and I spoke against it. In the end there was a vote, with 23 to 4 against even having an NEC inquiry into it.”³²⁹

The culmination of the policy review was *Meet the Challenge, Make the Change* published in 1989³³⁰. The document described FPTP as “the most honest, the most efficient and the most effective form of government.” Moreover, the document warned of the dangers to be associated with PR. “Talk of proportional representation or any alternative voting system would cause the electorate to question our resolve, our commitment, and our self-confidence.” Bryan Gould writing in *A Future for Socialism*³³¹ considered PR generally suffered on a number of counts against a socialist criterion of diffusing power: the loss of direct representation through multi-member constituencies, the elector’s uncertainty of the ultimate destination and purpose of his or her vote because of transferable votes, and a significant increase in the power of Party officials to determine who should be elected as a result of national or regional Party lists.

³²⁸ *The Times*, ‘Adopting PR ‘would constitute act of historic folly’’, 6th October 1989; *Guardian*, ‘Hattersley says PR reduces democracy’, 6th October 1989

³²⁹ T. Benn, *The End of an Era – Diaries 1980-90*, (Hutchinson, London, 1992) pp. 577-578

³³⁰ *Meet the Challenge, Make the Change*

³³¹ B. Gould, *A Future for Socialism*, (Cape, London, 1989) pp. 177-178

The Labour leadership was divided. Hattersley considered even the most minimal softening of the position on PR a sign of weakness on behalf of the Labour Party and a whim that would evaporate once poll ratings rose. Kinnock was more flexible viewing the issue as not yet fully discussed in Britain: “those people who are entirely defensive about the possibility of change are much more dynamic and forward looking than some politicians give them credit for.”³³² He thought debate was essential if widespread support was to be built. In addition, an open-minded approach had the potential to foster more votes for the Labour Party, attracting support from those leaning towards the centre parties. Kinnock and those around him, according to Lord Whitty, were “quite positive” towards electoral reform and although “Neil would never say he was completely convinced, he would say he was more favourably inclined than any leader before or since.”³³³ Beckett agrees with Whitty, yet implies that Kinnock was ‘got at’ by those around him, who had “convinced themselves that this was the only way Labour could win, who were very strong advocates, persuading Neil that this was a valuable modernisation reform.”³³⁴ Exactly who ‘got at’ Kinnock, Beckett was not prepared to say.

For the ‘modernisers’ within the Party, electoral reform was not only useful in distinguishing the present Party from its past but would result in a Labour government being pulled away from socialism towards the centre. Voters who perhaps did not yet ‘trust’ the Labour Party to govern would be reassured about a Labour government that was able to marginalise its more extreme elements. Philip Gould, a key strategist for the Labour Party, states “The drive towards

³³² BBC Radio, *The World This Week*, 5th January 1992. Quoted in Evans, *Charter 88*, p. 234

³³³ Interview with Lord Whitty, 31st March 2014

³³⁴ Interview with Margaret Beckett MP, 26th March 2014

proportional representation came from a belief that it was the only certain way to make Labour safe. If you have PR, Labour can never govern alone. It was always to be neutered, a consensus not an extreme government.”³³⁵ Butler and Kavanagh reflected that “Mr Kinnock’s flirtation with PR and his subsequent emphasis on a broad-based co-operative approach to government was designed to soften Labour’s image and allay fears about a Labour government.” Patricia Hewitt and Clive Hollick thought PR might provide reassurance that the Party sought consensus and would not give in to the unions or the left wing.³³⁶

However, ‘trust’, ‘modernisation’ and ‘centrism’ were only part of the rationale behind the increasing interest in electoral reform and PR in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The fate of the Party at the ballot box encouraged a reappraisal of attitudes and objections to PR, electoral reform and coalition. Successive defeats, of which 1983 and 1987 had been landslide victories for the Conservatives resulted in the Party engaging with ideas such as PR, emphasised by the votes at Labour Party Conference, the increased membership of LCER, a more prominent role for electoral reformers such as Robin Cook and Marjorie Mowlam – individuals willing to make the political, moral, social and economic case for reform – and the increasingly sympathetic tone adopted by Kinnock. Primarily, PR was the method that would broaden Labour’s electoral appeal and put it into a position where it would enter government, as a single party or in a coalition with the centre. Consequently, PR was part of a wider strategy for power.

³³⁵ P. Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party*, (Abacus, London, 1998) p. 150

³³⁶ D. Butler, & D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1992*, (MacMillan Press, London, 1992) pp. 89-90, 129

Meanwhile, the Scottish Labour Party was heavily involved with the Scottish Constitutional Convention also debating electoral systems for the prospective Scottish Parliament. As with the Labour Party south of the border, the need to keep the Liberal Democrats on board kept alive the option of electoral reform. It was decided at the Dunoon conference in March 1990 that it could not accept FPTP elections for the Scottish Parliament. As the Labour Party was the dominant party in Scottish politics in terms of votes and seats, Kinnock announced that “no one can claim that our party is examining the detail of methods of electing the Scottish Assembly from any position of weakness or supplication. We are doing it from a position of strength and in the interests of democracy.”³³⁷ Advocating an electoral system other than FPTP for a Scottish Parliament was an indication of the seriousness of the Labour Party’s commitment to a more pluralist and consensus-based politics.

The Labour Party produced a policy document titled *Looking to the Future* in May 1990, asserting “Labour (was) opposed to changing the electoral system for the House of Commons.” It reiterated how the House of Commons is the primary institution and, as such, a fundamentally different institution to all others. However, throughout 1990 the pressure for reform continued to grow, with Party leaders showing an increased willingness to consider PR for the European Parliament, a reformed second chamber, a Scottish Parliament and regional assemblies for England and Wales. A Working Party was to be set up by Labour Party Conference, as had been agreed by the NEC, without considering PR for the House of Commons. Gavin Laird, General Secretary of the powerful Amalgamated Engineering Union, questioned the logic stating it was “not credible then to say we are not going to look at the system, examine the system, for the

³³⁷ Linton, *Labour’s Road to Electoral Reform?*, p. 17

House of Commons.”³³⁸ Labour leaders believed that including the Commons in the Working Party’s remit would allow the Tories to claim Labour had abandoned hope of winning under the FPTP.³³⁹

The opposition to the consideration of PR for the House of Commons – the position of the leadership – was defeated at the 1990 Labour Conference. By 2,766,000 to 2,557,000 Conference approved a study on proportional representation, rebuking Hattersley who once again had promoted FPTP. Robin Cook argued “If you are to have a really thorough review of electoral reform, you cannot have no go areas.”³⁴⁰ It was, to quote Linton and Southcott, the moment when “Labour moved from outright opposition to an agnostic position on electoral reform”³⁴¹ signifying a considerable change of attitude towards the electoral system, not seen since the 1920s. It is noteworthy that the decision to include the House of Commons in the Working Party’s analysis may have been even closer, had the builders union, UCATT, which opposed electoral reform, not lost its 160,000 strong voting card; eventually forcing it to abstain. Laird argued that Labour would get an ‘even bigger’ majority at the next election if it committed itself to PR in advance of the poll, and raised questions of credibility if the Labour Party were to consider PR for other institutions but not the House of Commons. By contrast Ron Todd, the transport union leader, remained neutral on the issue, proposing only that it be debated.³⁴²

³³⁸ Labour Party Conference Report, 1990, p. 268

³³⁹ *The Sunday Times*, ‘Labour to woo Owen with electoral reform’, 10th June 1990

³⁴⁰ *Independent*, ‘PR tide is running our way’, 1st October 1990

³⁴¹ Linton & Southcott, *Making Votes Count*, p. 99

³⁴² See *Guardian*, ‘Hattersley beaten on voting reform’; *Financial Times*, ‘Leadership Resigned to Internal Debate on Proportional Representation’; *The Times*, ‘Kinnock welcomes electoral reform talks but warns against coalition government’, 5th October 1990

Pressure for reform of the electoral system came from a variety of sources and for a variety of reasons. Whereas the Labour Party had shown very little interest in electoral reform and PR during a prolonged period of opposition between 1951 and 1964, the situation in the 1980s was fundamentally different. The Conservative government had embarked on a socio-economic course committed to the free market and the undermining of the planks of social democracy. Conservative statecraft was perceived to be hegemonic, and the third party – now the Liberal Democrats – along with the nationalist parties had fractured British politics, in turn promoting the ‘progressive left’ thesis. This raised the possibility of a hung parliament and the need for coalition, encouraging thoughts that a commitment to electoral reform was an avenue back into government. Indeed, electoral reform was a prerequisite for realigning the British left. Constitutional reform had found favour and had been articulated by academics and had increased in popularity with certain section of the electorate.

As Neil Kinnock indicated, “What we are initiating is a formalised debate about electoral systems, not deciding in favour of PR – far from it.”³⁴³ Nonetheless, the enquiry, *Democracy, Representation and Elections* was the first serious study into the matter in the Labour Party since MacDonald, Anderson and Roberts investigated proportional representation prior to World War One. The Working Party was made up from different parts of the Labour Party; MPs Bryan Gould, Alistair Darling, Margaret Beckett, Hilary Armstrong, Geoff Hoon, John Evans; Peers Reg Underhill, Patricia Hollis and from 1992 Raymond Plant; MEP’s Geoff Hoon and Gary Titley; academics Raymond Plant and Ben Pimlott; trade union representatives Richard Rosser, Judith Church, Tom Burlison and members from the nations Murray Elder from Scotland, Ken Hopkins from Wales and Jack

³⁴³ *Financial Times*, 5th October 1990

McConnell as Scottish General Secretary of the Party. Thus, the committee contained a broad span of views and attitudes towards the electoral system due to variety of Labour backgrounds of the membership. The objective, according to Plant was to encourage a debate about the nature of representation and democracy.

All constituency parties were invited to present evidence, The Parliamentary Labour Party allowed MPs to respond as individuals, Labour Peers were canvassed and set up a Working Party to respond, along with a visit to the European Parliament to discuss with Labour MEPs and other socialist delegations elected by proportional representation.³⁴⁴ Dr Tim Lamport, Secretary of the Working Party considers, "It was slightly different from a normal Labour Party policy committee having more autonomy... It ultimately reported to the NEC who set it up and determined who was on it and did not report to the Home Policy committee."³⁴⁵ This increased freedom, particularly from the Home Policy committee, who would have had an explicit interest in the matter, allowed the committee to carry out its work free from direct interference from the leadership. However, with the Working Party involving individuals such as Beckett, meant a sceptical leadership could be assured that the committee would avoid advocating anything too radical.

Plant's original position

For those who sat on the committee, Plant's original stance on electoral reform is contested. Beckett believes "Plant changed his mind. When Plant was appointed

³⁴⁴ R. Plant, 'Criteria for Electoral Systems: The Labour Party and Electoral Reform', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 44: 4 (1991) p. 550

³⁴⁵ Interview with Dr Tim Lamport, 14th July 2014,

and one of the reasons Plant was appointed I suspect, was because he was a FPTP man.”³⁴⁶ Rosser disagrees along with Clarke and Lamport. Rosser always got the impression Plant was a “genuine agnostic on the issue. Therefore, he wasn’t starting out with a particular stance or position and looked at the issue openly” a view shared by Lamport.³⁴⁷ Clarke claims Plant “wasn’t particularly committed to any direction. He was certainly open minded, to put it mildly. He wasn’t an advocate and he wasn’t one of these liberal types who thought it was the most important thing in politics. I would say Raymond was more than open to it. He was certainly ready to give it a thorough investigation. On the other hand, in the event he looked at it properly and thought it wasn’t a starter, he would have been ready to say it wasn’t a starter.”³⁴⁸

Regardless of opinions on where Plant started, there is agreement Plant changed his mind as the Working Party progressed. Whether he started out as a FPTP supporter or an agnostic his finishing position was pro-reform, not only in coming out in favour of a different electoral system but by joining the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform. Beckett judges: “the arguments that convinced me against it, convinced him in favour of it. Now, whether he had pressure put on him by people around Neil who said this is increasingly what the leader wants, I have absolutely no idea. These things happen. Raymond will probably be outraged at any such suggestions. His view moved as the commission went on and he was trying to get something out of very divided views.”³⁴⁹ Rosser concurs, deeming Plant “became convinced of the need for change.”³⁵⁰

³⁴⁶ Interview with Margaret Beckett, 26th March 2014

³⁴⁷ Interview with Lord Rosser, 28th March 2014; Interview with Dr Tim Lamport, 14th July 2014

³⁴⁸ Interview with Charles Clarke, 21st May 2014,

³⁴⁹ Interview with Margaret Beckett, 26th March 2014

³⁵⁰ Interview with Richard Rosser, 28th March 2014

Hattersley chose Plant to be Chair, not wanting “some fashionable PR advocate to do it absent minded because it was the new idea of the day, we’ve got to change, modernisation.” Moreover, Plant was a “man you could trust, believe in his integrity” and perhaps most importantly given the attitude in the Party at the time, appeared to be “opposed to PR.” Hattersley “always believed, and I appointed him in the belief that he would come out strongly against. Indeed the day of the first meeting he told me he was strongly against.” The argument for Plant’s chairmanship was based on the belief that Plant was a “FPTP man” and he would not have been appointed “had I not thought him to be FPTP.” Hattersley is unequivocal and was in no doubt: “some months before he told me he was FPTP and he was appointed for that reason.”³⁵¹

Plant, when asked on his attitude towards electoral reform prior to chairing the Working Party, stated “I suppose I went into it, insofar as I thought about it at all, that I was in favour of FPTP.” When Hattersley asked for Plant’s view on the electoral system, Plant replied he had no views on the matter, the answer he wanted to hear, illustrating for Plant what Hattersley thought about PR. Yet Plant changed his mind due to the evidence the Working Party received and the result of going to Germany. “FPTP no longer really mapped accurately the range of interests in the country and you needed – not necessarily a more proportional – but more pluralistic kind of system.”³⁵² It was also alleged that Hattersley described Plant as a “political innocent”³⁵³, suggesting that Plant’s lack of political experience was also part of the reason why he was chosen, something Plant took as a compliment.

³⁵¹ Interview with Lord Hattersley, 17th November 2014

³⁵² Interview with Lord Plant, 14th September 2016

³⁵³ Quoted in K. Best, ‘Plant: A Conservative View’, *Representation*, Vol. 31, No 116 (1993) p. 80; C. Milton, ‘Knee deep in Mush’, in Potted Plant, *New Statesman & Society*, 18th June 1993, p. 3

Hattersley's decision to appoint his friend Plant as Chair meant that someone who supposedly had very little prior interest in electoral systems and electoral reform – a 'political innocent' – was leading Labour's first serious enquiry into electoral reform since prior to World War One. An academic from a background in political philosophy was chairing a group of individuals who were in the main politicians, resulting in the committee containing a range of opinions, some passionately held, with significant hostility to reform from elements of the leadership who did not wish to be seen as coming down in favour of reform. Yet, this neutrality would be vital in avoiding the perception of bias and allowed the Labour Party to argue it was starting with a blank sheet of paper, and as Charles Clarke affirms, it was important the conclusions carried weight.³⁵⁴ Plant's appointment also sidestepped a potentially damaging split in the Labour Party. Hattersley considered that at the time there was a majority in favour of FPTP so we "avoided a row by having someone who was regarded as agnostic."³⁵⁵

The Interim Reports

In 1991, the Interim Plant Report was released, stating two important caveats. Firstly, "the appropriateness of an electoral system is going to be governed to a large extent by our view about the nature of representation and by what we think that elections are actually for" drawing a distinction between a 'legislative' body and a 'deliberative' body.³⁵⁶ Consequently, if an individual considers the purpose of an electoral system is for the formation of a strong single party government then they are likely to support the simple plurality or majoritarian system, allowing the enacting of a legislative programme. However, if an individual considers the

³⁵⁴ Interview with Charles Clarke, 21st May 2014

³⁵⁵ Interview with Lord Hattersley, 17th November 2014

³⁵⁶ *Report of the Working Party on Electoral Systems (The Plant Report)*, Guardian Studies, London, 1991, p. 22

purpose of an election is to produce a parliament that is a microcosm of society – where all strands of thoughts and opinions gain representation – then they will support a more proportional system, allowing a range of views to gain representation and influence policy through negotiation and coalition.

Plant affirms “Those in favour of the first past the post or majoritarian systems tend to take the view that the House of Commons is the arena in which competing political philosophies or ideologies are locked in a constant combat and effectiveness depends to a large extent on parliament being able to continue to provide this kind of forum.”³⁵⁷ At Westminster, Labour and the Conservatives engage in a political battle with two competing visions of society. Consequently, it is undesirable for Parliament to consist of small single-issue parties, whose very existence threatens the capability and existence of a parliamentary majority committed to socialism. “In the view of the defender of FPTP it is more important to have the capacity to fight for a substantially fairer society than to superimpose some abstract and procedural idea of fairness and justice on a much less than fair society.”³⁵⁸ The electoral system might be considered to be ‘fair’ in relation to a pre-set criteria if the percentage of votes cast matches the number of seats won. Yet, as a counter to the ‘economic argument’ outlined above in the chapter, the society under PR might be very unequal and unjust, the opposite of which the Labour Party strives to create.

The traditional socialist response to those who advocate Parliament reflecting society at large – a microcosmic view – has been twofold. Initially, “such a view of the function of electoral systems is highly individualistic. It is concerned only with fairness to individual preferences and does not consider any other sorts of social

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52

values at all.” A socialist would concern themselves with the solidarity of a community voting for the socialist candidate; a bloc vote against the parties of capital. Even if the Labour candidate failed to win, the electors have shown unity in opposition to the parties of capital. Secondly, supporting an “electoral system purely on the grounds of a rather formal understanding of fairness, it might under a PR system introduced for such reasons, find it impossible to form a government which would be committed to securing greater social and economic justice or fairness.”³⁵⁹ The disparity between the percentage of votes and percentage of seats in the House of Commons may be undesirable, but the objective is to create a more equal society, something that can only be achieved by a parliamentary majority committed to socialism. Voting is not an end in itself but considered a means to an end, which is a more egalitarian society.

“Advocates of proportionality, on the other hand tend to stress the idea of Parliament as a deliberative assembly in which the range of opinions reflected in proportional membership are negotiated and to some extent blunted by the almost inevitable coalition building that goes on.”³⁶⁰ Finer in *Adversary Politics and Electoral Reform* argued electoral reform and coalition politics can produce moderate policies which are in touch with mainstream voters.³⁶¹ The majority of the British electorate are considered to be centrist and whereas FPTP gives disproportionate influence to extremists in both the Conservative and the Labour Party. As a result, the leadership of both the Conservative and Labour Party have to pander to the extremes, with the consequence of governmental policy being out of kilter and unrepresentative of the wishes of the majority of voters. However, depending on the political culture, the small parties in the political

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38

³⁶¹ Finer, ‘Introduction’, in Finer, *Adversary Politics and Electoral Reform*, pp. 3-32

system are not necessarily 'centrist', whereas the two large parties may be considered 'centrist', with the more extreme wings of the respective parties sidelined. Furthermore, the nature of the coalition depends on the parties involved and the overarching ideology that binds them together, conceivably resulting in the larger 'centrist' party being pulled away from the centre.

Describing parliaments and assemblies as either 'legislative' or 'deliberative' did draw criticism, for failing to acknowledge that a legislative body has a deliberative function and a deliberative body has a legislative function; legislation must be debated and requires a parliamentary majority for it to be passed into law, emphasising that an institution such as the House of Commons has a dual function. Furthermore, in the British political system with the executive emerging from the legislature, the executive must have the consent of a majority of the legislature. A response was offered in the *Second Interim Report* admitting that the House of Commons is both a "legislative and deliberative chamber" and institutions are "not necessarily static." However, this was qualified by reiterating a distinction, at least in terms of emphasis between the House of Commons and that of other institutions envisaged by Labour's constitutional reform agenda. The committee maintained "that this distinction has a central although not necessarily a determining role to play in selecting an electoral system."³⁶²

The second caveat mentioned by Plant affirms "no voting system can simultaneously satisfy a set of obvious conditions for social choice in a democratic society."³⁶³ This is a result of the idea of 'fairness' and to whom we are seeking to be fair – electors, political parties, minorities, women and

³⁶² *Second Interim Report of the Working Party on Electoral Systems* (The Plant Report), London, 1992, p. 3

³⁶³ *Report of the Working Party on Electoral Systems*, 1991, p. 22

geographical regions – and the ‘hierarchy of fairness’ in which one puts them, are shaped by values. As Plant notes: “The important point is that the claim to fairness does not stand on its own, it is, rather, fairness given a particular assumption about the nature of representation,”³⁶⁴ going on to state in *Parliamentary Affairs* “Electoral mechanisms cannot be assessed in a wholly neutral way, as it were giving them points against a set of neutral criteria.”³⁶⁵ Indeed there are cases where by seeking to be ‘fair’ to one group you may hinder another, and returns to Plant’s original assertion that what you consider to be fair is dependent upon what you consider elections to be for. Moreover, different forms of Proportional Representation contain different assumptions about some of the central features of representation, the role of parties and the nature of accountability.³⁶⁶

Importantly, given the Labour Party’s commitment to devolved assemblies, it was agreed that different electoral systems can be used for different institutions, as the role and function of the institution varies depending on its powers and remit, a key factor in light of the Labour Party’s constitutional reform agenda. There is, as both caveats suggest, no perfect electoral system and therefore a case can be made for using more than one system in different areas of government. “The nature of representation in an institution” claims Plant, “has to be linked to the function of that institution rather than determined on abstract and contested ideas like ‘fairness.’ What we should be looking for is fairness in relation to function.”³⁶⁷ Therefore, the argument is entwined due to different electoral systems fostering different views of the nature of representation, and the type of representation might be more suitable for one sort of institution than another.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26

³⁶⁵ Plant, ‘Criteria for Electoral Systems’, p. 552

³⁶⁶ *Second Interim Report of the Working Party on Electoral Systems*, 1992, p. 2

³⁶⁷ *Report of the Working Party on Electoral Systems*, 1991, p. 99

The Single Transferable Vote (STV) was rejected by the Working Party, deeming it to suffer from several pitfalls. There are issues over whether the electorate would understand, for example, how the divisor is worked out or how the preferences are redistributed, with the process much more complex than simply marking '1', '2', '3' on a ballot paper. Whilst none of the interviewees were prepared to state the British electorate were not capable of understanding how votes were translated into seats under STV, Plant wrote "We do believe it is important for citizens to be able to understand the electoral system in which their democratic rights are exercised."³⁶⁸ Understanding the system is a vital principle in a democratic society and the Irish, along with other countries, appear to have understood STV. It is easy to assume that the workings of FPTP are widely understood, whereas the workings of STV are likely to be a different case. The 'fairness' of STV is consequently open to scrutiny if the electorate cannot understand how it works.

A critique of STV offered by Dummett – noted by the Working Party in the Second Interim Report – was the results under STV are "devoid of equity, either to the candidates or to the voters," as the outcome "depends on the accident of which candidates fail at early stages to avoid elimination." Consequently, the voter can never know whether by voting or listing their choices in a specific manner they may actually harm their preferred candidate's chance of winning. "STV ought never to be contemplated." As AV is also a preferential system, it too can be critiqued in the same manner.³⁶⁹ Additionally, the size of the constituencies under STV in terms of electors would be in the region of 350,000,

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100

³⁶⁹ M. Dummett, 'Toward a More Representative Voting System: *The Plant Report*', *New Left Review*, Jul / Aug, Vol. 194 (1992) pp. 109-113, (Acknowledged in *Second Interim Report of the Working Party on Electoral Systems*, 1992, p. 4)

therefore resulting in some constituencies being vast geographical areas, further diluting the constituency link in a multi-member region. STV, at the time of writing the Plant Report posed specific problems for the Labour Party. Having just emerged from years of in-fighting the idea, to quote Plant, “of setting up an electoral system that actually encouraged people to stand against one another wasn’t going to be something they were going to embrace very fondly.”³⁷⁰

For the House of Commons, the Plant committee recognised the legislative function of the House of Commons and considered there was a “powerful case” for leaving untouched the central elements of the representative and electoral system. This included clear accountability through a constituency base, thus ruling out multi-member constituencies as in STV as well as national or regional List System. Furthermore, it questioned the role of top-up MPs under the Additional Member System (AMS) / Mixed Member System (MMS). Lord Whitty, a supporter of AMS considered that the Labour Party could not back an electoral system that did not maintain a constituency link, believing “MPs do really identify with their constituents, either in a negative sense that they’re causing trouble, or in terms of the next election – the accountability. The trouble with a too broad electoral system is you lose that accountability.”³⁷¹

Rosser, also a supporter of AMS, attempted to dispel the argument that electors would question who the top-up MPs represent. “Most people would feel they still have a constituency representative, namely the person who won the constituency.” More interesting would be how the constituency MP would feel about the top-up MP. “Having someone who could claim legitimacy in the same

³⁷⁰ Interview with Lord Plant, 14th September 2016

³⁷¹ Interview with Lord Whitty, 31st March 2014

constituency...could be quite a distasteful prospect (for the constituency MP).³⁷² Although it would be interesting to see how the constituency MP would react to a top-up MP claiming legitimacy within his or her constituency, the question of who the top-up MP represents remains. It is possible to argue that AMS is one of the few electoral systems where you are voting for a coalition, at an individual level with the voter expressing their preference for coalition partners. However, at an elite level, where coalition negotiations take place, the individual voter's preference counts for very little as it will be party leaders who decide the makeup of the next government. It could also be argued that it is illogical and contradictory to have an electoral system whereby a voter can openly vote and express a desire for two parties to form a coalition. The two parties may have fundamental differences on the economy or direction in which to take the country, and there is no guarantee that if the situation arises whereby the two parties could work together, that they will form a coalition.

Plant considered the constituency link to be key, ensuring a direct link between constituents and legislators which would be weakened in a multi-member constituency. "In relation to predominantly legislative bodies" noted Plant, "we do believe that the constituency basis of representation is very important in terms of securing the accountability of an elected person to a clearly identifiable group of people."³⁷³ Maintaining the direct constituency link was criticised from some quarters prompting a response in the *Second Interim Report* arguing that the direct constituency link keeps the MP in touch with grassroots feeling about policy and its implementation, rather than becoming preoccupied with Westminster politics. Furthermore, given the Labour Party's historic commitment to community it would be paradoxical for the party to commit to diminishing the

³⁷² Interview with Lord Rosser, 28th March 2014

³⁷³ *Report of the Working Party on Electoral Systems*, 1991, pp. 99-100

role of communities in electoral terms.³⁷⁴ Bryan Gould, considering himself 'something of a romantic' on the history of British parliamentary democracy "liked the thought that each MP was sent to Westminster primarily to serve his or her constituency rather than a particular party." When challenged in the House of Commons by a Liberal MP on the grounds he had only received 37% of the vote and could therefore not claim to represent his constituents, Gould replied rhetorically, "Who would you replace me with – someone who got only 19%?"³⁷⁵

Beetham refuted the importance of the constituency link as "In matters of national policy and legislation" whether in government or opposition "the MP represents, in the sense of act for, only those who voted for them... Anything else would undermine the idea of a mandate, and the conception of an election as a choice between competing party programmes." As such an MP follows the party line rather than those of his or her constituents. A consequence "is to leave a large part, even a majority, of the national electorate without an MP to represent them, in the sense of acting on their behalf on the basic issues of national policy and legislation which elections are supposedly about."³⁷⁶ However, Beetham's explanation does not take into account the role of an MP, who has a duty to take up the concern of the constituent and seek redress at the highest level regardless of who the constituent voted for. To do so is in the MPs interests, for they do not know whether the constituent has voted for them due to the secret ballot, and to aid with re-election an MP should seek to resolve all constituency matters. As Finer noted, the single-member constituency results in a Member of Parliament being a representative, not a delegate. "It allows the individual member a latitude of personal discretion and initiative outside the party programme... which makes

³⁷⁴ *Second Interim Report of the Working Party on Electoral Systems*, 1992, pp. 6-7

³⁷⁵ Bryan Gould, Personal Correspondence, 26th February 2014

³⁷⁶ D. Beetham, 'The Plant Report and the Theory of Political Representation', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 63: 4, p. 463

for good government... This personal system produces an intense responsibility and responsiveness to the electorate on one side, *i.e.*, the system is of a highly representative quality: and on the other, a *predictable* sphere of independence of the member.”³⁷⁷

Beetham emphasises that keeping abreast of the geographical spread of the population ensures under FPTP “the lower house is a mirror image of the electorate according to its geographical distribution...From a geographical point of view, you could hardly have a system that could produce a more representative, or microcosmic assembly.” Yet, Beetham affirms that “when the electorate is primarily choosing between competing programmes for national legislation, not someone to represent their local interests, it is hard to see why the national assembly should be proportionate to the geographical distribution of the electorate, and not to the distribution of the party vote in the country.”³⁷⁸ Consequently, Westminster as a national assembly, should not be based on geographical representation but a national system, legitimising the national mandate.

The LCER claimed in 1987 that “although 10 million voted Labour, only three million were needed to elect 229 Labour MPs. The other seven million were either wasted on a losing candidate or were used to boost the majorities of winning candidates.”³⁷⁹ The Plant Report refutes the ‘wasted vote’ argument – votes above and below the ‘winning post’ figure – namely the runner-up’s total plus one or votes cast for losing candidates – acknowledging “It would be better to call them surplus votes and then to consider whether there is a plausible

³⁷⁷ *Finer, The Case Against Proportional Representation*, p. 5

³⁷⁸ Beetham, ‘The Plant Report’, pp. 464-465

³⁷⁹ *Report of the Working Party on Electoral Systems*, 1991, p. 27

reason for regarding such votes as wasted.”³⁸⁰ As mentioned earlier, voting in solidarity with others, expressing an opinion in terms of class, family interests, ethnicity, gender or religion, is the way an individual is expressing their opinion, a point made by Rose and McAllister. Which votes are the wasted votes? The concept of a ‘wasted vote’ is as Dummett explains, “not merely vague, but incapable of being made precise.”³⁸¹

Furthermore, Plant thought it undesirable that there has been a decline in FPTP ability to closely equate share of the vote and share of seats. “While the First Past the Post system does not directly aim at proportionality, nevertheless a decline in some kind of predictable relationship between votes and seats would actually undermine the concept of representation and the function of Parliament held by defenders of First Past the Post. There has to be some rational and predictable relation between votes and seats if there is to be a defence of First Past the Post as a legitimate system even on its own assumptions.”³⁸² Therefore, if the chief virtue of FPTP – single-party government – could be achieved on a percentage vote share in the low thirties then this would bring into question the legitimacy of the system, particularly if the winning party in terms of seats continually polled fewer votes across Great Britain.

The Interim Reports were the building blocks for the committee to move on to the Final Report where it would go on to make firm recommendations, and therefore the two interim reports did not clarify the Labour Party’s policy on PR for Westminster. They were more concerned with electoral theory – unsurprising given Plant’s academic background in political philosophy – with the interim

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27

³⁸¹ Dummett, ‘*The Plant Report*’, p. 112

³⁸² *Report of the Working Party on Electoral Systems*, 1991, p. 46 & 51

report making clear there is no such thing as a perfect electoral system and the assertion of fairness does not stand on its own but to the criteria by which one is judging fairness. Importantly given Labour's constitutional reform agenda, different institutions can use different electoral systems. Indeed, Plant acknowledged that the House of Commons was still going to be the primary legislature even within the devolved settlement, resulting in a "powerful case for leaving the central elements of the representative and electoral system...of vital importance to the legislative function of the place." Indeed, it would still be advantageous to maintain an electoral system that produces majorities and therefore the power to elect a government which will initiate legislation. Importantly, the power of making and unmaking government should be in the hands of electors, not politicians in 'smoke-filled rooms' who cobble together coalitions after the election.³⁸³ Consequently, the interim report does hint that the options available to reformers were limited to AV, SV or a variation of AMS, a system that involves multi-member constituencies, rather than STV or regional or national list systems.

The 1992 General Election, Labour and Proportional Representation

The polls in the lead up to the 1992 General Election placed the Labour Party ahead of the Conservatives, on course to be at least the largest party. However, the lead in the polls evaporated in the final few days and the election held on 9th April 1992 gave the Conservative Party under John Major their fourth successive general election victory achieving just short of 14.1 million, the highest poll in a British general election. However, rather than the commanding lead in popular vote translating into a third successive landslide for the Conservatives, FPTP had

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 96

only given the Conservatives 336 MPs, a slim majority of 21. The Labour Party had won 271 MPs on 11.5 million votes, an improved showing on 1987. The FPTP 'pendulum' had started to swing towards the Labour Party, with the vote becoming more efficient in terms of translating votes into seats.

During the final few days of election campaign the issue of proportional representation emerged. The Labour Party manifesto – *It's Time to Get Britain Working Again* – stated, "We will continue to encourage a wide and well-informed public debate on the electoral system. The Working Party on electoral systems which we established in opposition under the distinguished chairmanship of Professor Raymond Plant will continue its work with an extended membership and enhanced authority and report to the next Labour government." Contingent on a Labour Party victory, Kinnock elaborated on the function of the Working Party suggesting it could be converted into a formal government inquiry reporting to the Prime Minister, possibly even a Royal Commission, and its membership would be widened to include members from outside the Labour Party, including business, trade unions, churches and members of other political parties. Consequently, the Labour Party had gone further than it had before in endorsing PR and the Liberal Democrats were invited to join the Plant Committee. According to Blackburn, the Labour government would respond by determining its own policy on the matter, which would then be laid before the electorate at the next general election.³⁸⁴

Charter 88, under the guidance of Anthony Barnett, arranged 'Democracy Day' on 2nd April 1992, the moment in which the Labour Party would announce its support for PR. It was according to Beckett "Such a sign of lack of confidence"

³⁸⁴ Labour Party Press Conference, 2nd April 1992 Quoted in Blackburn, *The Electoral System in Britain*, p. 389

feeding the view “which was untrue, that we didn’t stand for anything and we’d say anything to try and get elected, desperate to get the Liberal vote, saying something we probably didn’t mean.”³⁸⁵ It also ensured the newspaper headlines would focus on hung parliaments, coalition, the Liberal Democrats and the nationalists, away from the more salient economic issues. Clarke considers that the issue of PR and the shadow budget were the two big issues that had not been fully thought through by the party, “manifesting uncertainty about what we were going to do” resulting in the Labour Party looking “untrustworthy” and as such was a “weakness.” Accordingly, “The electorate were not clear whether we would do something or would not do something, and this was exposed in the last few days before polling.”³⁸⁶

Kinnock faced difficulties on the *Granada 500* programme on April 6th, failing to provide a direct answer to the question of whether he was in favour of PR, responding “Yes, sure – well, quite no, it is not quite so simple”, saying that he was waiting for the Labour Party’s Working Party to report. Kinnock’s position was understandable for in public he had attempted to remain neutral on the issue, to avoid being drawn on either side of the argument. An open declaration of support had the potential to be interpreted as a loss in faith in Labour’s ability to win.³⁸⁷ In an attempt to balance the views of defenders of FPTP and reformers, along with his own preference which was becoming increasingly sympathetic to PR, Kinnock had to do so without providing the Conservative Party the opportunity to attack him for appearing to fudge the issue, a lack of principle and a lack of confidence in the Labour Party’s ability to win. Kinnock’s view was that in any event an electoral mandate would be required to make such an

³⁸⁵ Interview with Margaret Beckett MP, 26th March 2014

³⁸⁶ Interview with Charles Clarke, 21st May 2014

³⁸⁷ M. Westlake, *Kinnock: The Biography*, (Little, Brown and Company, London, 2001) p.522

“irreversible and significant” change to the future of our political democracy.³⁸⁸ A general election manifesto commitment would be the traditional and constitutional manner for the change to be agreed.

Butler and Kavanagh conducted a post-election survey amongst Labour candidates, with many quick to condemn PR, believing it showed weakness, distracted from the National Health Service and taxation or they were opposed to PR.³⁸⁹ Clarke is of the view that in 1992 “we couldn’t win unless we reassured electors that it was safe to come back to Labour, for all sorts of reasons; winter of discontent and other points in between”, with the issue of PR as noted hampering Labour’s chances of success.³⁹⁰ However, Hattersley disagrees believing it had no effect. “If you wanted PR passionately you would have voted Liberal” as it was a “niche issue.”³⁹¹ Hattersley reflected:

“Labour certainly wanted to poach Liberal votes. We wanted to poach Tory votes as well, but we were less successful in that endeavour. Unfortunately, we actually lost support by what appeared to be a sudden conversion to constitutional reform. The proposals set out during two press conferences (exactly a week before polling day) had been official party policy for years. But the unexpected enthusiasm with which the plans were advocated appeared to be the product of sudden panic.”³⁹²

³⁸⁸ *Newsnight*, BBC2, 3rd April 1992

³⁸⁹ Butler & Kavanagh, *The British General Election*, pp. 253-253

³⁹⁰ Interview with Charles Clarke, 21st May 2014

³⁹¹ Interview with Lord Hattersley, 17th November 2014

³⁹² *Guardian*, ‘Love Affairs of the State’, 10th January 1997

Post-election research, detailed in the table below, demonstrates how different election systems would have affected the 1992 General Election result.³⁹³

Number of MPs and percentage of seats in the House of Commons

(Table 3)

Party and Vote share	Result and % of seats	AV	SV	STV	AMS
Conservative 41.9%	336 MPs 51.6%	325 MPs 49.9%	304 MPs 46.7%	256 MPs 39.3%	268 MPs 41.1%
Labour 34.4%	271 MPs 41.6%	270 MPs 41.5%	271 MPs 41.6%	250 MPs 38.4%	232 MPs 35.6%
Liberal Democrat 17.8%	20 MPs 3.1%	30 MPs 4.6%	49 MPs 7.5%	102 MPs 15.7%	116 MPs 17.8%
SNP/PC 3.5%	7 MPs 1.1%	9 MPs 1.4%	10 MPs 1.5%	20 MPs 3.1%	18 MPs 2.8%

A different majoritarian system would have resulted in the Labour Party standing still or decreasing, and therefore would have provided little or no electoral benefit, refuting the argument that a different electoral system would have been beneficial in 1992. Indeed, the only party that stood to benefit in 1992 was the Liberal Democrats, with a swelled number of MPs, increasing the likelihood of coalition. Under a proportional system the Labour Party would have had fewer seats and been reliant on the parliamentary support of the Liberal Democrats. Moreover,

³⁹³ Based on the calculations of P. Dunleavy, H. Margetts and S. Weir, *Replaying the 1992 General Election*, (LSE Public Policy Paper No. 3, 1992) and (on SV) of Dale Campbell-Savours, *Independent*, 21st April 1993

the Conservatives would still have been the biggest party and as the sitting party would be, constitutional right have had first opportunity at forming a government or coalition.

Evans offered an analysis of tactical voting in the 1992 general election. Contrary to the 'progressive-left' thesis – a belief that Labour and the Liberal Democrats are on the same side of politics – the Conservative Party would have been the main beneficiary of tactical voting in 1992. Indeed, a *Sunday Telegraph*/Gallup poll, published only four days before polling day, showed that if minor parties were to hold the balance of power, 45 per cent of Liberal Democrat supporters favoured keeping the Tories in power compared to 41 per cent who preferred the Liberal Democrats leverage being used in favour of the Labour Party.³⁹⁴

Whatever electoral benefits had been advocated by reformers prior to the election – whether backing PR or electoral pacts – were not borne out in the post-election study. Thus Healey's assertion that "the non-Labour majority is probably as large as the non-Conservative majority; there is no guarantee that members of the Centre parties would vote Labour if their own candidates stood down – or vice-versa"³⁹⁵ was vindicated. The Conservatives could in 1992 equally have argued that there is a split on the Right of British politics, that a vote for the Liberal Democrats was a vote against the Labour Party. Rather than the overtures towards the Liberal Democrats resulting in a broadening of Labour's electoral appeal, it encouraged wavering Liberal Democrats and those instinctively anti-Labour into the arms of the Conservatives, therefore having the opposite effect.

³⁹⁴ See G. Evans, 'Tactical Voting and Labour's Prospects', in A. Heath, R. Jowell, J. Curtice & B. Taylor (eds.) *Labour's Last Chance? The 1992 Election and Beyond*, (Dartmouth Publishing, Aldershot, 1994) pp. 68-69; *Sunday Telegraph*, 5th April 1992

³⁹⁵ Healey, *The Time of My Life*, pp. 582-583

Kinnock stood down as leader of the Labour Party, replaced by John Smith, with Margaret Beckett becoming his deputy. Smith's proposals for constitutional reform included incorporating the European Convention on Human Rights into British law, devolution for Scotland and Wales, House of Lords reform, a freedom of information bill and regional government. He had attacked the "relentless centralisation of power" under the Conservatives that had rendered Westminster "dictatorial and remote".³⁹⁶ However, electoral reform at Westminster entailed different issues compared to the electoral systems for the proposed devolved assemblies, considering it "more complicated" than other aspects of constitutional change. Moreover, "There's a good and healthy debate going in within the Party and I don't want to prejudge it."³⁹⁷

According to Smith's biographer, Andy McSmith, in 1991 Smith discussed with Ashdown in a taxi the possibility of PR. Smith's version of the conversation was that "we did not talk specifics"³⁹⁸, but according to Ashdown's office, the gist of it was that Smith was ready to concede proportional representation for the Commons, the Scottish Parliament and regional assemblies, in return for Liberal Democrat support for a minority Labour government, should there be a hung parliament. The *Ashdown Diaries* record during a gathering of the Bilderberg Group in Spain in May 1989, Ashdown and Smith drank copious amounts of brandy, yet the shadow Chancellor rejected the idea of electoral pacts, believing that Labour would win in its own right. Consequently, the leadership of the party was, in relation to reform of the Westminster system, at best sceptical, as Smith,

³⁹⁶ *Tribune*, 5th March 1993. Quoted in M. Stuart, *John Smith, A Life*, (Politico's Publishing, London, 2005) p. 293

³⁹⁷ *Tribune*, 'Easy does it?', 19th June 1992. Quoted in Stuart, *John Smith*, p. 294

³⁹⁸ *Scotland on Sunday*, 10th March 1991 Quoted in A. McSmith, *John Smith*, (Verso, London, 1993) p. 240

from the Right of the party, was unenthusiastic, and Beckett originally from the Left of the party was outright hostile.

The account of events in late 1992 by Whitty emphasises the hostility of the Labour leadership to reform, how the problems facing Labour had not changed – Labour trailed the Conservatives by 7% and despite gaining forty more seats, the Party had received a lower percentage of the vote than Callaghan had in 1979, immediately after the ‘winter of discontent’ – yet the prevalent view was one more general election would see Labour back in government.

“In one of the meetings, in late 1992, John sent Margaret to tell the committee that the leadership will not support, if you go for electoral reform. It poured cold water on the work they’d been doing for the last eighteen months... In some ways the politics had not changed. The Labour Party had failed to win another general election... So if anything the arguments after 1992 were stronger for looking at electoral reform. John and Margaret and the high command in general were far more hostile after 1992. One more heave was the attitude, on both policy and the electoral system.”³⁹⁹

The Final Report 1993 – ‘Report of the working party on electoral systems’

Having met on twenty-eight occasions; taken advice from both those inside and outside the Labour Party, interested individuals and groups and academics; visited Europe, including Germany to gain an understanding of the German Additional Member System; the Final Report was published in April 1993. Whereas the Interim Report was interested in assessing the criteria by which

³⁹⁹ Interview with Lord Whitty, 31st March 2014

electoral systems can be judged, the Final Report sought to make recommendations for the House of Commons, as well as the Second Chamber and the European Parliament. The arguments put forward in Chapter One – *The Case for Reform* – and Chapter Three -*The Case for First Past the Post* – are of interest given they set out the arguments in favour and against reforming the Westminster electoral system, which is set against the background of the Labour Party's wider commitment and enquiries into constitutional reform. David Butler claimed that "The Plant Report is a revolutionary document"⁴⁰⁰ as it attempted to move Labour away from electoral conservatism.

The Case for Reform acknowledges Labour's constitutional reform package is, in part, recognition of the growing pluralism in British society, whether it be individualism, particular groups, or the distinctive identities found across the United Kingdom. For Plant, FPTP fails to recognise the growing pluralism in British life in terms of party representation, as there are regions of Great Britain where substantial support for a political party does not return MPs. In order to be consistent with Labour's wider constitutional reform agenda an electoral system should be adopted that reflects and provides opportunities for new voices to be heard. If one party dominates in a particular part of Britain it could lead to alienation and frustrations, excluding the representation of others, particularly with the growing north-south political divide.

Secondly, the issue of having more women in Parliament was considered, as in the Interim Report; and the same conclusion was reached that the electoral system has little impact on the number of women MPs as it was a matter of social context. Changing social attitudes towards minority and ethnic groups along with

⁴⁰⁰ D. Butler, 'The Plant Report 1993: The Third Report of Labour's Working Party on Electoral Systems', *Representation*, Vol. 31: 116, (1993) p. 77

positive discrimination in the form of all-women shortlists, was the preferred method. Thirdly, the suitability of FPTP must be questioned in relation to devolution and its inability to be sympathetic to local and regional issues, with the potential for devolved assemblies to claim more legitimacy as they are elected under an alternative electoral system, based on increased proportionality. For those who favoured electoral reform it was necessary for the Commons and central government to have enhanced legitimacy, even if they have a diminished sphere of power within Labour's proposed programme of constitutional reform. Plant claimed: "This can only be achieved by a change in the electoral system which makes central government more sensitive to local and regional issues and interests, as represented and expressed in the House of Commons."⁴⁰¹

Whilst Maurice Duverger maintained "The simple majority single-ballot system favours the two-party system"⁴⁰² the *Case for Reform* considered that due to a decline in 'Cube Law', FPTP is likely to lead to more hung parliaments, and therefore part of its rationale, namely single party government, would cease. In a multi-national state like the United Kingdom, with strong regional identities and a separate ethnic-based politics in Northern Ireland, the two-party system comes under pressure from the forces of pluralism. It is also claimed that the geographical concentration of the vote leads to areas of the country becoming 'no go' areas for political parties. Lord Whitty stated FPTP exaggerates the "perceived geographical divide in the UK. The Thatcher government, and to some extent the present government, govern from the South-East. By and large Labour governments govern from London and the north, the industrial heartlands and Scotland."⁴⁰³ Robin Cook showed how Labour, in the 1992 general election

⁴⁰¹ *Report of the Working Party on Electoral Systems* (The Plant Report), Guardian Studies, London, 1993, p. 10

⁴⁰² M. Duverger, *Political Parties*, 3rd Edition, (Methuen, London, 1992) p. 205

⁴⁰³ Interview with Lord Whitty, 31st March 2014

produced its second highest number of votes in southern England, more than in the North, Yorkshire or Scotland but returned only three Labour MPs.

Proportionally, the Labour Party was entitled to an MP from Dorset and even from Berkshire.⁴⁰⁴

Consequently, the claim a government receives a 'national mandate' from the electorate is problematic when the winning party's support is concentrated in particular regions of Great Britain. The recent experience of the policies pursued by the Thatcher government and the landslide victories in 1983 and 1987 would have been fresh in the mind. Not since 1935 and the National Government has the government received over 50% of the vote, thus implicating the notion of the 'mandate' and the legitimacy this provides. A government, as suggested by Plant, can win a "substantial majority on the basis of a percentage of the vote in the low forties...It is important that fundamental changes are very widely supported, if they are to be seen as legitimate and not undone by some incoming government with a different ideological perspective."⁴⁰⁵ When interviewed, Plant considered the idea of the 'mandate' to be "laughable." A party having to do something because it's in the election manifesto even though the policy is "outmoded" is awkward. "Only a minority of the voters who have read the manifesto to start with and more importantly a minority of voters have voted for the manifesto under whatever favourable electoral considerations... You've always got to go outside the box of Labour interests and Labour values... to enable the Party to galvanise enough support to form a government." More importantly, is "how you can write a manifesto that has sufficient flexibility if you like, to make it possible for people outside of the Labour movement to vote for you."⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰⁴ *New Statesman & Society*, 8th January 1993

⁴⁰⁵ *Report of the Working Party on Electoral Systems*, 1993, p. 12

⁴⁰⁶ Interview with Lord Plant, 14th September 2016

During the height of the two-party system in the post-World War Two era neither Labour nor the Conservatives managed to win over 50% of the vote. Rosser shared Plant's rejection of the mandate, claiming the "issue is a mandate from 35-40% of the electorate rather than a mandate from the electorate as a whole is an argument against FPTP."⁴⁰⁷ Winning a mandate on a popular vote of less than 50% may be undesirable, yet as Whitty stated "I'm not sure why and at what level between 35 and 50 it becomes an issue". However, he qualified his opinion that if "the majority voted against the government, I do think it's a problem"⁴⁰⁸ suggesting anything less than 50% for the winning party is problematic for the mandate. As such the policies introduced by the government are not necessarily in the interests of the whole nation but designed to appease the constituency base. Yet this does raise the matter of how one judges what is and is not in the national interest, and by what scale this is measured.

The ability of FPTP to deliver pure ideological values – a vision and introduction of democratic socialism – is questioned and cannot be defended on the grounds that it is in the electoral interests of the Labour Party. At the time of the Plant Report, only in 1945 and 1966 had FPTP provided Labour with significant parliamentary majority. In 1964 Labour had a parliamentary majority of four and in October 1974 a majority of three. "If the achievement of democratic socialist values has to depend on First Past the Post and the strong and effective government this is supposed to produce, then its contribution to the achievement of these values has historically been extremely intermittent."⁴⁰⁹ Although the Labour Party won four out of five elections between 1964 and 1979, only in 1966

⁴⁰⁷ Interview with Lord Rosser, 28th March 2014

⁴⁰⁸ Interview with Lord Whitty, 31st March 2014

⁴⁰⁹ *Report of the Working Party on Electoral Systems*, 1993, p. 13

was this with a working majority. Given that the Labour Party has a unique social and economic agenda, FPTP is unlikely to be the vehicle for the introduction of a Democratic Socialist Great Britain.

Secondly, FPTP encourages parties to move towards the centre, as this is where both the beliefs of the median voter reside and the bulk of the electorate. This argument was put forward by Anthony Downs, and used in the Interim Report. Downs claims voting is a rational act and political parties are rational actors and both will maximise their own interests. The government will utilise the 'Majority Principle' subjecting each decision to a "hypothetical poll" always choosing the "alternative which the majority of voters prefer. It must do so because if it adopts any other course, the opposition party can defeat it...Thus to avoid defeat, the government must support the majority on every issue."⁴¹⁰ Consequently, "The critic of PR cannot claim that First Past the Post provides an unalloyed opportunity for parties to preserve ideological purity"⁴¹¹ as internal compromise on policy in political parties must take place in an attempt to win as many votes as possible.

Consequently, the Plant Report suggests that coalition government may be preferable to single party government. "It is surely better to be able to carry out a very substantial part of a programme, rather than be left in a position powerless to make a difference to the lives of those who have suffered the depredations of a Conservative government elected with just over 40 percent of the vote." Hitherto, single party government had always been seen as superior. The reasoning was based on the work of Max Weber who put forward a distinction between the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility, the latter being a

⁴¹⁰ A. Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, (Harper & Row, New York, 1957) pp. 54-55

⁴¹¹ *Report of the Working Party on Electoral Systems*, 1993, p. 13

willingness to compromise in order to gain a particular electoral benefit. Coalition was justified on the basis that “adherents of the ethic of responsibility who are concerned to achieve something, if not everything, of what we stand for are in a more defensible position, mainly because we have to be concerned about the needs of those who depend on a strong Labour input into government, rather than maintaining a high level of ideological purity at the cost of political impotence.”⁴¹²

The ability of FPTP to continue to deliver strong government is brought into doubt by the fragmentation of the party system, with smaller parties winning and holding on to seats. Moreover, strong government is not necessarily a desirable criterion, as “strength has to be linked to effectiveness to produce a reasonable criterion of judgement.”⁴¹³ Indeed, an “effective government is one which has policies to meet the needs of the country and the political will and capacity to implement them... More likely to be produced by a system other than First Past the Post, because it will embody a wider degree of consent and legitimacy. Under a reformed system, a government will have a greater incentive to seek wide consent and thus greater legitimacy for its policies with Parliament.” The ensuing change to the British political tradition that would follow a change to the electoral system would correct “some of the most intractable British problems, impeding the possibility of our development into a modern democratic society and of a successful economy.”⁴¹⁴

Plant continues: “Labour would be the biggest party in any coalition and as such would have the democratic legitimacy to enact the bulk share of its manifesto

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, p. 13

⁴¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 14-15

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15

whilst making minimal concessions to the junior coalition partner. A changed electoral system would “provide incentives to see greater legitimacy and consent within parliament” changing “the behaviour of parties” making more likely a “climate for greater collaboration within British politics...Maintaining such a tribal approach to politics is likely to make parties seem more and more irrelevant, given the more pluralistic and instrumental approach to politics in the modern world.” Those in favour of reform wondered whether “defenders of First Past the Post would seriously argue that Labour should not seek power, because it could not possibly countenance the possibility of political negotiation with other parties because of what such critics regard as its undemocratic nature.”⁴¹⁵

Should hung parliaments and coalition result from a change in the electoral system no party can claim the democratic case for formulating a programme of government without wider consent. The legitimacy of the mandate is doubtful in a hung parliament meaning a party has to seek wider consent for its programme of government. Negotiations which follow do not have to be in ‘smoke-filled rooms’ but “informed by the political judgement and sensitivity of party leaders”⁴¹⁶ to MPs, party officials, peers and the electorate, implying a wide range interests will be taken into account. Yet, the first three groupings are to some extent detached from the electorate, who although directly accountable to the electorate in the case of MPs, could go against the wishes of their constituents due to the lure of ministerial roles, enacting policies and being in government. Another consideration is the internal party structure, which could affect who and how many individuals hold influence on the direction of coalition talks and entering a coalition.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16

Lampport recalls spending a whole afternoon going through *The Case for First Past the Post* with Beckett, agreeing with her on what it could say.⁴¹⁷ The Labour Party should be committed to pluralism but rather than seeing pluralism within the House of Commons, defenders of FPTP who see pluralism as valuable to the Labour Party suggest pluralism between institutions is more worthy – inter over intra institutional pluralism – with decentralisation and devolution of power a key part of the Labour’s commitment to constitutional reform. The basis of this argument lies in the House of Commons producing the executive while all other institutions, although important, do not carry the same legislative function. Different electoral systems for the devolved institutions, rather than undermining the legitimacy of the House of Commons, is perfectly compatible with FPTP for the House of Commons, for checks and balances would be provided by the devolved institutions.

FPTP is defended on the basis it “secures a clearer form of accountability to the electorate via the manifesto and mandate”, two essential ingredients of parliamentary democracy, whilst avoiding “taking the election of the government out of the hands of the electorate and into the hands of those making behind-the-scenes inter-party deals.”⁴¹⁸ The diagnosis offered in the *Case for Reform* that the vote share of the two main parties is decreasing and hung parliaments are likely to occur more often is rejected: it is “entirely speculative” and is “not a good basis on which to embark a fundamental reform of the electoral system.” Even if it were accepted to be correct, the “development of policies with a strong national and regional appeal and by improved organisation”⁴¹⁹ was required for electoral victory. Pressure for reform had arisen from a prolonged period in opposition, but

⁴¹⁷ Interview with Dr Tim Lampport, 14th July 2014

⁴¹⁸ *Report of the Working Party on Electoral Systems*, 1993, p. 24

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25

the possibility of “single party government” was not going to be traded away “for an electoral system which seeks to incorporate regional differentiation at the cost of permanent coalition” and having to rely on support from other parties.⁴²⁰

The failure of the Labour Party to win elections is down to the policies it puts forward and “If its policies have not been found to be acceptable in certain areas and regions of the country or, say, in rural constituencies, then it is to our policies, our organisation and our presentation that we should turn for an examination, rather than to an alteration of the electoral system.”⁴²¹ Labour is a nationally-based party and consequently should have broad-based policies that appeal across the country, and the pursuit of power relies on creating converts not the “artificial device of changing the electoral system.”⁴²² In the past the Labour Party had representation in the South West and East Anglia and we see no reason why Labour cannot win again in these areas. It is not “right to resort to manipulating the electoral system for the House of Commons to combat regional concentration of party support. Rather, the Labour Party should develop ever more relevant policies that can appeal to voters in Hampshire and Sussex, as much as in Strathclyde or Wales.”⁴²³

The *Case for First Past the Post* makes a traditional defence of the ‘mandate and the manifesto’, something that is argued to be crucial to democratic accountability. Political parties are by their nature coalitions of left and right, and therefore policies have already been discussed and compromised between diverse interests. Under a different system, manifesto commitments would be traded away post-election. Therefore, “the electorate has no way of expressing a

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26

⁴²² *Ibid.*, p. 26

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, p. 26

view about the policies which emerge from such negotiations” and is in fact undemocratic, for the electorate can exert no influence at that stage. FPTP “enables the electorate to have a clear choice of government.” The question asked when the electorate go to the polls is ““which government do you want?’... making government accountable to the electorate in a way that no other system can.”⁴²⁴ The electorate in 1992 were not “cheated” through the electoral system failing to give expression to the anti-Tory majority. Instead, the electorate through their actions of voting for political parties other than Labour acquiesced to the return of a Conservative government. Only by retaining “a sense of integrity in relation to their own values and retaining a sense of honesty, fair dealing in relation to the electorate and a proper sense of accountability”⁴²⁵ will the Labour Party win an election. Although there is concern about a strong executive elected on a national vote share in the low forties, “under PR, smaller parties could exercise pivotal power with a much lower percentage vote.”⁴²⁶

Recommendation, reaction and impact

For a legislative body it was considered the electoral system should ensure as far as possible “direct accountability to the electorate” and, therefore, the Working Party was “not prepared to endorse an electoral system for the Commons in which individual representatives do not face the electorate directly and in which direct accountability to the electorate is diminished.”⁴²⁷ Consequently, both regional and national list systems were rejected along with STV for both are based on multi-member constituencies, leaving the Alternative Vote (AV), Supplementary Vote (SV) and MMS, devised by Rooker, with 500 seats won

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18

under FPTP and the remaining 150 'top-up' seats won by candidates who had stood in a constituency. The system shared similarities with the system recommended by the Hansard Society in 1976, who advocated three quarters of the House of Commons to be elected in single-member constituencies under FPTP and one quarter regionally according to a more proportional system, with those elected on the top-up having to stand for direct election.⁴²⁸

None of the interviewees who sat on the committee were prepared to say who supported which system, claiming they could not remember given the length of intervening time. Whilst entirely plausible it could cynically be described as a 'vow of silence', unwilling to divulge the way the Committee divided, and as the votes were not recorded it makes it difficult to know how each individual voted. Two reports appeared in the press firstly in the *Financial Times* and secondly in *The Times*. Combining the two articles suggests the working party voted 10 votes to 6 in favour of reforming the electoral system, deciding 11 votes to 4 that any new system had to be based on MPs representing individual constituencies rather than being elected in strict proportion to the number of votes a party wins nationally. In deciding which electoral system to recommend, the committee agreed by 9 votes to 7 SV.⁴²⁹ The numbers put forward coincide with Plant's comments that MMS was "rejected by a majority on the Working Party" whilst there was also a "majority on the Working Party which favoured moving away from First Past the Post." The position was best summarised as a "clear majority in favour of a single-member constituency majoritarian system."⁴³⁰

⁴²⁸ *The Report of Hansard Society Commission on Electoral Reform, June 1976 pp. 37-40*

⁴²⁹ *Financial Times*, 'Labour Moves to Support Change in Voting System' 1st April 1993; *The Times*, 'Enquiry puts Smith under pressure on electoral reform', 2nd April 1993

⁴³⁰ *Report of the Working Party on Electoral Systems, 1993, p. 4*

Yet the decision that was reached came as somewhat of a shock to Plant and Lamport. Plant wrote it appeared to him to be a “small majority in favour of an additional member system but between these straw polls and the final meeting of the Working Party at which final recommendations were made some change came about in the intimated voting intentions of certain members of the Working Party.”⁴³¹ The shift was a result of Smith ‘getting at’ members of the Committee – “certainly the MPs” - having “everyone in separately telling them which way they should be voting. I think Alistair (Darling) particularly was quite strongly in favour of some move away from FPTP but after he had the interview with John Smith he wasn’t... I think a lot of people were got at but they won’t let you know they were got at.”⁴³²

Lamport shares Plant’s view, recollecting some on the Working Party “changed their position a bit”, wanting “to be seen as going the way the leadership wanted it to go”, leading Lamport to be “surprised” because “one or two didn’t take the same position they had indicated previously.” As such, “Either they were leaned on or felt this is the side the bread is buttered and I’m going to do what the leadership want me to do...I think there was less support for the proportional system than there probably had been, people didn’t want to be seen to be going for that.”⁴³³ Indeed, Plant found himself voting in favour of an electoral system he didn’t support, in an attempt to ensure the Working Party would recommend reform. “I didn’t want the Supplementary Vote” stated Plant, however “I did in fact vote for it or else otherwise the majority would have gone for FPTP which I didn’t want. To keep the issue alive it seemed to me best to vote for the Supplementary Vote.” According to Plant, Rooker when he realised MMS was going to be

⁴³¹ R. Plant, ‘Proportional Representation’, in R. Blackburn & R. Plant (etds.), *Constitutional Reform, The Labour Government’s Constitutional Reform Agenda*, (Longman, London, 1999) p. 71

⁴³² Interview with Lord Plant, 14th September 2016

⁴³³ Interview with Dr Tim Lamport, 14th July 2014

rejected voted for FPTP as opting for SV was worse than retaining FPTP.⁴³⁴

Stuart claims Rooker had unsuccessfully argued for a top-up of about 100-150 members to make SV more proportional.⁴³⁵

Regardless of the role Smith played in encouraging the Committee to reject PR and come out in favour of FPTP, some members took it upon themselves to make the workings of the Committee as difficult as possible. Prior to the Working Party voting on which system to recommend, according to the *Financial Times*, Beckett attempted to deliver a 'Minority Report', containing only a menu of options and not making any firm recommendations to the NEC, a position that was rejected by Plant. Beckett wanted to "try and make it absolutely plain that we didn't all go along with this aim of changing the electoral system and to put the argument across for FPTP, which otherwise were not going to be put."⁴³⁶ *The Times* reports that Beckett was so angered after the working party had opted for SV, she walked out the meeting and continued to demand a minority report.⁴³⁷ Bryan Gould saw himself in a "spoiling role", not wanting to "provoke an outright split", contenting himself with "trying to ensure it arrived at no meaningful conclusion."⁴³⁸ Baroness Armstrong who at the time was Smith's Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS), replaced Jo Richardson when she fell ill, chosen in effect to 'spy' on the Working Party. "John felt that he could not get a hold of what was going on in there. And he didn't want a surprise. So he put me on so I could tell him what, politically, the issues were coming out."⁴³⁹

⁴³⁴ Interview with Plant, 14th September 2016

⁴³⁵ Stuart, *John Smith*, p. 294

⁴³⁶ Interview with Margaret Beckett MP, 26th March 2014

⁴³⁷ *The Financial Times*, 'Beckett's Vote Reform Move is Disallowed', 18th March 1993; *The Times*, 'Beckett threatens to oppose PR report', 20th April 1993; Plant recalls Beckett, in one of her "rhetorical flights" suddenly said to Plant "you're a fucking wanker." Ben Pimlott retorted: "isn't that a contradiction in terms?" Interview with Lord Plant, 14th September 2016

⁴³⁸ Bryan Gould, Personal Correspondence, 26th February 2014

⁴³⁹ Interview with Baroness Armstrong, 16th July 2014

“In a sense” wrote Lamport when reflecting on the Plant Report “SV was perhaps the lowest common denominator or 'least worst' option. Some may have backed it on the basis that, if there were to be change, this represented the minimum.”⁴⁴⁰ Lamport later reflected “there were some people on the working party who thought that we’re not going to get away with supporting FPTP, although that’s what we’d like to say and SV is the minimum change we can get away with.”⁴⁴¹ Armstrong considered it was “alright at the time but it was a fudge.”⁴⁴² Whitty thought it was an attempt to keep everyone happy but rejected it was a ‘fudge’ as the working party had “gone through the system of exhaustive ballot, so it was never the majority view of the committee. It was the one that people had the least objections towards, which is one of the problems.”⁴⁴³ The recommendation of a not very proportional system was a fudge, Plant deemed in the *New Statesman & Society*, along with the committee’s decision to emphasise the function of voting systems rather than their fairness. “The political dynamics of the working party made it rather difficult to have entirely sharp priorities without risking the whole thing.”⁴⁴⁴

Advocacy of change was always likely to meet resistance. In January 1993, Beckett is supposed to have told colleagues on the Working Party at a two-day meeting, “if you lot carry on like this there’s going to be a fucking great row in the party.”⁴⁴⁵ David Hill, Labour’s communication director, told the final meeting of the

⁴⁴⁰ T. Lamport, ‘The Plant Report two years on – some reflections’, *Representation*, Vol. 33:3 (1995) p. 19

⁴⁴¹ Interview with Dr Tim Lamport, 14th July 2014

⁴⁴² Interview with Baroness Armstrong, 16th July 2014

⁴⁴³ Interview with Lord Whitty, 31st March 2014

⁴⁴⁴ Milton, ‘Knee deep in Mush’, p. 3

⁴⁴⁵ G. Smyth, ‘If you lot carry on like this...’ Potted Plant, *New Statesman and Society*, 18th June 1993, p. 13

working party on 31st March 1993 “I’ve come to put a lid on all of this.”⁴⁴⁶ The response of Smith and Beckett to the recommendations was, perhaps given their known positions, unsurprising. Smith and Plant had already had an argument at the 1992 Conference over whether the Working Party should be allowed to make recommendations on the House of Commons rather than arriving at conclusions of BBC-like impartiality.⁴⁴⁷ Plant considered that the working party must deliver a firm recommendation to the NEC as not making a fixed recommendation after two and half years of work would have made a mockery of the working party and undone all the work hitherto completed. Smith and Beckett considered it to be a diversion from vital modernisations required to make the Labour Party electable, particularly One Member One Vote (OMOV). A commitment to changing the electoral system was an unnecessary diversion from winning the next general election.

On 19th May 1993 Smith released a press statement thanking the Working Party for all its efforts but going no further and stating his own position and that of the Labour Party. “Most electors” Smith affirmed, “vote for a party with the intention that with their support it should form a government. That is not a relevant consideration to, for example, the European Parliament which does not have the obligation to produce and sustain a Government.”⁴⁴⁸ MMS was rejected due to the dilution of the constituency link and having two classes of MP. Secondly, “it would make a coalition government the most likely outcome of an election” and the electorate according to Smith were entitled to vote for a “set of distinctive policies and for a government which will carry them through.”⁴⁴⁹ The course of

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13

⁴⁴⁷ Plant, ‘Proportional Representation’, p. 70

⁴⁴⁸ Labour Party Archive, Press Release, The Rt Hon. John Smith, 19th May 1993, Working Party on Electoral Reform, Labour History and Archive Study (LHASC)

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*,

action given its “constitutional significance” was, for Smith, pledging a referendum.

“It should be for the people to decide...That is why I firmly believe that the final decision on this issue must be taken by means of a referendum and why I propose that such a referendum be held during the first Parliament of the next Labour government. It would be held at a time when the Labour Government had begun the most radical programme of constitutional reform this century. There could be no more appropriate time for the public to be given the opportunity to settle the long-standing debate on the future of our electoral systems.”⁴⁵⁰

When Plant floated the referendum at a meeting of the Working Party he found little support.⁴⁵¹ Yet Smith’s decision to refer whether to reform the Westminster electoral system to the British electorate kept both reformers and traditionalists happy, for it did not fully close the door on reform nor come down in favour of reform. The referendum was also a device that prevented the Labour Party splitting in the run up to the next general election, and although it meant the issue did not go away, it was side-lined. In effect, pledging to hold a referendum was a party management device.

According to Beckett “John was a great believer in getting rid of things that cause division and problems because the voters don’t like a party that’s divided. He was no great enthusiast for this type of constitutional reform, thinking one of the ways to curtail the issue was to say, ‘well you think the British people demand this, but

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*,

⁴⁵¹ John Smith’s lecture, on 1st March 1993, was entitled ‘A Citizens’ Democracy’ (Charter 88, 1993), *Guardian*, 3rd March 1993

no one has ever asked the British people. Why don't we ask the British people?"⁴⁵² However, Beckett may have been understating the role she played in convincing Smith to commit to a referendum. In an interview in 1994 with *The Times* Beckett affirmed she had persuaded Smith to make the offer. A referendum was the right answer affirmed Beckett, as "The British people are being sold a pup" based on a "snare and delusion... that if they had PR it would be easier to influence and change the decision of government. I think it would be more difficult... Speaking as a practical politician, there is only one way to put to bed this constant clamour."⁴⁵³

The Plant Report received a variety of praise and criticism from both within and outside the Labour Party. At a meeting of the PLP, MPs passed judgement. Dr Tony Wright, the academic and Labour MP in Birmingham argued "to retreat now from the point we have reached – that first-past-the-post is no longer good enough – would be an act of electoral suicide." Others such as Derek Fatchett, chairman of Labour's FPTP group warned of "coalition by stealth" whereas Gerald Kaufman deemed the Party "was spending too much time on irrelevancies such as this", questioning "Who is going to volunteer to be replaced in a Labour Cabinet to make way for coalition partners?" John Spellar and Bruce Grocott condemned PR, the former stating "it is not our job to prop up the Liberals", while the latter desired the Labour Party to "kill the debate stone dead."⁴⁵⁴

Outside of Labour, David Butler called it a "revolutionary document" although considered SV a "silly answer" which "has probably set back the cause of

⁴⁵² Interview with Margaret Beckett MP, 26th March 2014

⁴⁵³ *The Times*, 'One of my women colleagues said to me: They buried you with John', 21st June 1994

⁴⁵⁴ Minutes of the party meeting held on Wednesday 12th May 1993 at 11:30am in Committee Room 14. Quoted in Stuart, *John Smith*, p. 295

electoral reform” as SV “happens to be a bad one (electoral system).”⁴⁵⁵ Given the strong opposition to reform from within both the Labour and Conservative parties and the wider British establishment it seems rather harsh to suggest such a thorough examination of electoral reform had set back the cause of reform. Others of the left and right variously described it as a “half-baked compromise” and “the worst option.”⁴⁵⁶ Georghiou deemed it would encourage tactical voting⁴⁵⁷ and Wainwright thought SV could actually produce more disproportionate results than First-Past-the-Post⁴⁵⁸ as can happen under redistributive majoritarian systems due to the distorting effects of the second and, under AV, lower preferences.

Those who were willing to partake in the research offered a range of views on its impact on the Labour Party. Beckett considered that it did have “quite a big impact on Labour MPs because they were also going through the same arguments. Nothing excites MPs quite like a change which might affect their own circumstances.”⁴⁵⁹ After all, a Labour MP in a marginal constituency may consider that under a different electoral system it becomes much more difficult to hold the constituency. Rosser deemed that the impact of the report was “not as much as one might have hoped. Within the Labour Party outside the commission, there were still very polarised views. The majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party and probably the membership outside, still wanted FPTP... It is not a Report that has led to radical change across the democratic system in this country.”⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁵ Butler, ‘The Plant Report 1993’, pp. 77-79

⁴⁵⁶ *Guardian*, ‘The pros and cons of Plant: A fairer way to vote that will concentrate the mind of the punter’, 2nd April 1993

⁴⁵⁷ M. Georghiou, ‘Labour Responses to Plant’, *Representation*, Vol. 31:116, (1993) p. 82

⁴⁵⁸ R. Wainwright, ‘Liberal Democrat Reaction to Plant’, *Representation*, Vol. 31:116 (1993) p.79

⁴⁵⁹ Interview with Margaret Beckett MP, 26th March 2014

⁴⁶⁰ Interview with Lord Rosser, 28th March 2014

The most damning account of the response to Plant Report from within the Labour Party came from Whitty, claiming most Labour MPs “couldn’t understand why we were bothering, which I thought was a bit short-sighted at the time. I had a few arguments at the time, but it was never going to receive an easy ride in the PLP, as they prefer the majoritarian system.” Moreover, “Given that the Leader and the Deputy Leader were adamantly opposed to electoral reform, it wasn’t going to get anywhere anyway. The bulk of MPs were against it, and by and large the Unions were against it so it was regarded as an intellectual exercise.” Had the Leader had the will and political capital to follow through with electoral reform for the House of Commons “there would have been tensions and they would not have been able to get away with it.” It had also become apparent by the time the final report had been released that John Major’s Conservative government were deeply unpopular and there was a feeling in the Labour Party of “‘well what’s all this about?’ ‘We’re going to win.’”⁴⁶¹

Summary

The issue of electoral reform and PR became important within the Labour Party in the late 1980s. The dominance of Conservative statecraft had prompted people to look at the economic, moral and political case for constitutional reform, coinciding with sections of the Labour Party losing confidence in FPTP, searching for other avenues to return to office, one being proportional representation. Reformers argued FPTP was the vehicle that delivered aggressive free-market policies, with negative social effects. Electoral reform and PR became fashionable as a device, it was believed, that could taper the excesses of

⁴⁶¹ Interview with Lord Whitty, 31st March 2014

Thatcherism and put the Labour Party back in touch with centre voters thus offering a route back into power.

External factors, mainly those of electoral failure, thus created the internal pressure within Labour, leading to pressure groups such as the LCER, conference votes and a more prominent role for those sympathetic to reform. Appearing to be unable to escape the demands for an enquiry, the leadership acquiesced, agreeing to hold an enquiry but omitting the House of Commons, yet were subsequently defeated at the 1990 Labour Party Conference when the widest possible remit to the enquiry was awarded. Hattersley duly appointed his friend, the academic Raymond Plant – someone Hattersley could trust and thought would deliver the answer he wanted to hear – to Chair a Working Party looking at a wide range of constitutional issues. For three years the Working Party, consisting of individuals from all parts of the Labour movement and with a wide range of views, met and debated the vices and virtues of the arguments for reform and different electoral systems, taking evidence from academics, interest groups, trade unions and Labour politicians, ultimately producing three reports.

The first report was theoretical – unsurprising given Plant’s academic interests – outlining the issues of electoral reform and proportional representation, the second was an update on the work of the committee, and the third and final report stated the case for reform, the case for retaining FPTP and made specific recommendations. Consequently, the Working Party moved from predominantly theoretical arguments of democracy and representation to issues of party politics, specifically relating to the Labour Party. Key ideas are outlined across all three reports: there is no such thing as a perfect electoral system, with opinions based on what individuals consider to be the purpose of elections, and ‘fairness’ does not stand on its own and must be ‘fairness’ in relation to a pre-set criteria.

Importantly, given Labour's commitment to altering Britain's constitutional settlement, institutions entail different purposes and therefore a different electoral system can be adopted. The constituency link was key, maintaining a direct link between legislator and elector, and therefore electoral systems involving multi-member constituencies were ruled out as the dilution of the constituency link was contrary to Labour's historic emphasis on community. Moreover, a system such as STV contained the prospect of Labour Party candidates from different wings of the Party competing against one another.

The Final Report sought to reconcile a range of views, made more difficult by the actions of the leadership particularly once the leadership had been assumed by Smith and Beckett who both sought in different ways to disrupt the Working Party. Furthermore, with Bryan Gould openly admitting that he sought to prevent the committee arriving at any meaningful conclusions and Baroness Armstrong openly divulging she was sent on the committee to report back to John Smith, the report was unlikely to receive an easy ride from both those on and those outside the committee. The steadfastness of the FPTP cohort led Bryan Gould to affirm: "The pro-PR people weren't strong or committed enough to overcome the determination of the FPTP people to let the exercise just run into the sand."⁴⁶²

When it came to the recommendation for the House of Commons the leadership was successful, discouraging the Committee from coming out in favour of the more proportional and pluralist MMS. Instead their actions made SV the only viable system for reformers; otherwise the Working Party could have come out in favour of the status quo. SV was therefore the 'least worst' option, significantly less proportional, maintaining many of the features of FPTP. Plant became

⁴⁶² Gould, Personal Correspondence, 26th February 2014

convinced of the need for reform, originally starting out as pro-FPTP, but ultimately considering the Labour Party had little to fear from coalition, as Labour would be the biggest party, and would be able to implement considerable parts of its manifesto, a bold and controversial statement in light of Labour's aversion to coalition.

Far from the 1992 General Election emphasising the need for electoral reform it, if anything, had the opposite effect. When the issue of PR emerged in the final days of polling the Labour Party looked unprincipled, unable to say whether it supported the present system or favoured reform, putting off potential voters. This uncertainty was duly apportioned blame for contributing to Labour losing the election. When John Smith replaced Neil Kinnock – who was becoming increasingly sympathetic to reform – as leader and Beckett became his Deputy, the two top positions in the Labour Party were held by individuals hostile to this type of constitutional reform. The Working Party was closed down in Autumn 1993, not allowing time for the committee to look at Local Government. With the next Labour government committed to holding a referendum on the electoral system, and the increasing unpopularity of the Conservative government the Labour Party continued with its internal party and policy reforms, focusing on the next general election.

Chapter 4 - Realigning the British left and the Jenkins Commission

Focusing on the *Independent Commission on the Voting System*, commonly known as the 'Jenkins Commission', the chapter charts Labour's interest in proportional representation (PR) between 1994, with Blair winning the leadership, and the end of Labour's first term in office in 2001. Consequently, the chapter establishes and explores the personal view of Blair and other leading figures who rose to prominence under 'New Labour'; the relationship between Labour and the Liberal Democrats and the desire, or lack thereof for coalition; the general election result and its impact on the introduction of electoral reform at Westminster and a coalition with the Liberal Democrats; and the arguments put forward by the Jenkins Commission and the reaction to its recommendations within the Labour government and Parliamentary Labour Party. A variety of sources will be utilised including interviews with those who sat on the Jenkins Commission and who were prominent in the New Labour era, memoirs and diaries, newspaper articles, journal articles, and secondary literature.

The Plant process and subsequent referendum commitment by Smith, had to some degree, contained the matter, although it was far from settled. Yet, the more pertinent question remained, namely whether the Labour Party would be able to win a parliamentary majority at the next general election and form a government or whether they would have to rely on the parliamentary votes of Liberal Democrats. With the death of Smith in 1994, a leadership contest was fought between Margaret Beckett, John Prescott and Tony Blair, with the last of these emerging victorious, ensuring the 'modernisation' process would continue. All three had committed to upholding Smith's referendum pledge on reforming the

Westminster electoral system during the leadership contest⁴⁶³, likely wishing not to be seen to be going against a policy pledge made by Smith and accepting the party management benefits the referendum commitment entailed. Given the views of the candidates, it was far from an endorsement of PR.

Blair and Proportional Representation

Blair's views carried significant weight due to his position and had the ability to direct Labour Party policy. Publicly, Blair would be non-committal, remaining 'unpersuaded' of the case for PR, a remark he would return to throughout his time as leader. Writing in the *New Statesman* after Thatcher's second landslide victory in 1987, in which Labour's vote had increased for the first time since October 1974, Blair stated that PR was not the answer to the electoral problems facing the Labour Party. It would instead lull the Party and electoral reformers into a false sense of security about Labour's electoral prospects, rather than tackling the big and necessary issue of modernising the Labour Party in order to win.

"Labour's new enthusiasts for PR put their case not primarily on grounds of constitutional principle, but as a strategy for power. The implications of their case are fundamental: that Labour cannot ever again win a majority of seats in parliament; and that what cannot be achieved through the front door of majority government can be bundled in by the back door of coalition and electoral pacts... The real question for the Labour Party is why it is not achieving sufficient electoral support. It must face this question irrespective of whether we retain the present electoral system or change it, whether we stand

⁴⁶³ *Financial Times*, 'Reform leading to effective government', 15th August 1995

for election alone or in a pact. The campaign for PR is just the latest excuse for avoiding decisive choices about the party's future."⁴⁶⁴

Blair would, after a fourth successive general election defeat in 1992, affirm the need for continued modernisation. "The issue for Labour today," he told journalists, "is not change or no change but what type of change. Nobody should be under any illusion that the route back to power can be achieved without fundamental reform of ideas and organisation"⁴⁶⁵, an attempt, claim Mandelson and Liddle, to ensure there was no rolling back of the reforms enacted by Kinnock "but also at others – including, they thought, Kinnock himself – who might now advocate an immediate commitment to reform of the electoral system."⁴⁶⁶ Whatever view Blair and Brown held about PR "they argued that you do not win elections by changing the rules." What mattered was building upon Kinnock's achievements, turning the Labour Party into a "broad-based party of the left and centre, rather than watch it turn into a minority left-wing party that would have to rely on electoral reform to unseat the Tories."⁴⁶⁷ Consequently, the Labour Party could not escape its policy and organisational problems through electoral reform and PR. If the Party did avoid the difficult decision it would not be in a position to win an election.

Blair returned to the issue in the *New Statesman* in 1996, reiterating his thought that electoral reform was a way of avoiding making difficult decisions. Yet, Blair's reasoning went further than PR resulting in reluctance to modernise. When asked whether he was against PR Blair said "Yes. I have never been convinced that

⁴⁶⁴ T. Blair, 'Electoral Reform ain't the answer', *New Statesman*, 4th September 1987, pp. 5-6

⁴⁶⁵ P. Mandelson, & R. Liddle, *The Blair Revolution, Can New Labour Deliver?*, (Faber and Faber, London, 1996) p. 44

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45

small parties do not then get disproportionate power.” Emphasising social and economic factors as greater priorities for the electorate than constitutional reform, Blair considered “Whether you change the voting system or not the hard decisions still remain and people want to know where you are on the economy and jobs, health and education”, all areas “Labour has to get right... My worry is more about what I used to call the unilateralist and PR option for the Labour Party. You carry on with policies the electorate won’t support, change the voting system and hope you can somehow gain power by joining forces with other political parties. It doesn’t work.”⁴⁶⁸

Paddy Ashdown notes a discussion with Blair at the start of August 1995, “much of it on PR.” He told Ashdown that “intellectually he had serious reservations about PR and didn’t believe that the public would want it.” The fear of upsetting the written press made Blair uneasy – a theme he would return to at different times – not wanting the “whole of the Tory media deployed against me... If the tabloid newspapers really take against it, we could lose and find the public opposed.”⁴⁶⁹ Blair would make the same argument in November 1995, believing the Tory press to be “reasonably well disposed towards me... They believe that, since I am hostile to PR, I can provide an interregnum between the current Conservative Government and a future right-wing one...But if I support PR they will think they are out not only this time, but for good. And then they will throw their lot behind the Tories again.”⁴⁷⁰ Again, in January 1996, Blair expressed that he understood the power and influence of the press wishing not to upset Rupert Murdoch and Conrad Black who were “prepared” to let Blair have a go at

⁴⁶⁸ *New Statesman*, 5th July 1996, p. 15

⁴⁶⁹ P. Ashdown, *The Ashdown Diaries, Volume One, 1988-1997*, (Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, London, 2000) p. 336, Tuesday 1st August 1995

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 357, Monday 6th November 1995

government; but “they will change to a terrible opposition if they believe I will keep them out for ever. It’s the one thing that could unite the Tories.”⁴⁷¹

In September 1996 Blair wrote a special piece for the *Economist* on the constitution. Commenting on the House of Commons, Blair deemed “effective democracy was dependent on, above all, quality”, going on to state “Electoral reform for the Commons has a totemic status among some of Britain’s constitutional reformers. I appreciate the reasons for this, not least 17 years of ‘elective dictatorship’ by Tory governments returned on minority votes, pushing through divisive and destructive policies such as the poll tax and rail privatisation, which is why I have confirmed John Smith’s pledge to hold a referendum on the issue.” However, Blair affirmed he was still ‘unpersuaded’ on the merits of PR and stressed the purpose of the House of Commons is to form and uphold a government.

“It is not, as some claim, a simple question of moving from an ‘unfair’ to a ‘fair’ voting system. An electoral system must meet two democratic tests: it needs to reflect opinion, but it must also aggregate opinion without giving disproportionate influence to splinter groups. Aggregation is particularly important for a parliament whose job is to create and sustain a single, mainstream government.”⁴⁷²

In relation to the wider constitutional reform programme proposed by New Labour, Blair rejected the argument that Labour governments “should be concerned with delivering jobs, growth and economic equality, not with airy-fairy notions such as democracy and participation” and focusing on constitutional

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 522. Monday 10th February 1996.

⁴⁷² T. Blair, ‘Blair on the Constitution’, *The Economist*, 14th September 1996, pp. 35-36

matters was a “distraction.” Such a statement was inconsistent with his earlier remark where he emphasised socio-economic factors. Indeed, Blair added, “the role of left-of-centre parties around the world and down the ages has been to extend democratic power”⁴⁷³ highlighting Blair’s pluralist credentials.

By January 1997, Blair’s position had supposedly shifted and his opposition to reform had softened. In the course of a meeting with Ashdown, Blair is quoted as saying: “I have told you privately I am in favour of a change to the voting system provided we retain the single-member system” implying the Alternative Vote (AV) or the Supplementary Vote (SV). Blair had “become convinced of the need for electoral reform in Britain”, qualifying, “I don’t see it as fundamental”, only putting the matter on the agenda as “it will open the way to a relationship with you.” Blair could not go further than saying he was “not convinced” as he “did not want to be seen to be being pushed around” by Ashdown and only when an electoral commission had produced its findings could he announce he was in favour, something that will happen “after the election, not before.”⁴⁷⁴ Therefore, the motivating factor for Blair was the desire to keep alive the prospect of a relationship with the Liberal Democrats. Far from being convinced on an intellectual level, Blair’s rationale was tactical.

Labour Party Conference 1995

At the 1995 Labour Party Conference an attempt was made for the Labour Party to drop the commitment to the referendum on electoral reform. The General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trade Union (GMB), which had supported a referendum two years prior, came out in favour of FPTP. “We were in favour of a

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36

⁴⁷⁴ Ashdown, *Ashdown Diaries, Volume One*, pp. 507–508, Tuesday 14th January 1997.

referendum in 1993 because it was a compromise that got us out of having proportional representation” GMB said. “If we were presented with a situation where the FPTP campaign has greater support we would go for that.” Rumours were abounding Blair was looking for ways to ditch the pledge, and such a move would provide him with the excuse to do so. “He would be able to drop the referendum and then blame it on the Neanderthals in the party” said one unnamed opponent of electoral reform in the *Financial Times*. If the pledge had been dropped Blair could have claimed that his hands were tied by his party and absolve himself of responsibility. John Denham deemed PR was part of Labour’s modernisation programme: “It is impossible to consider modernising the Labour Party without changing the voting system. Tony Blair has made a commitment to a referendum and I expect him to stick to that.”⁴⁷⁵

The *Labour Party Conference Report* charts how Composite 37 was moved by Nigel Guy (Sheffield Central CLP). “Reaffirming the party’s pledge to let the British people decide how they elect their government” was judged “not to be a distraction from bread and butter issues.” David Bloyce (Sheffield Hillsborough CLP) seconded the composite believing this to be about “keeping promises” and that “A referendum does not divide pro-and anti-electoral reformers but separates those who think MPs and parties with a vested interest are the right people to make this decision.” Alistair Watson (Glasgow Pollock CLP) moved Composite 38 rejecting the need for a referendum, stating a poll would be unnecessary and damaging, asking Conference “What benefit is a referendum to the people of this country?” The Labour Party would win the next election because it is seen to be “fit to govern” and Labour policies “have convinced the electorate” not because of the “offer of a referendum.” PR would result in coalition and “To depend on the

⁴⁷⁵ *Financial Times*, ‘GMB ready to oppose electoral reform’, 14th August 1995; *Financial Times*, ‘Reform leading to effective government’, 15th August 1995

Liberals is to dance with the devil.” Composite 38 was seconded by Toni Bennett (Bolsover CLP). “It is not the electoral system that wants reforming” she considered, “it is the capitalist system... It was the treachery of the Liberal Democrats that closed our pits” and it was “ridiculous” to blame FPTP.

On a show of hands, delegates voted heavily in favour of retaining the party’s pledge to hold a referendum and Composite 38 was withdrawn. Jack Straw, a known supporter of FPTP, urged conference to stand by Smith’s pledge. He said:

“I strongly believe that for Westminster elections by first-past-the-post is best: but there are many in this party, and outside, who take a different view; the result is that the very legitimacy of this, the most basic feature of our democracy has been called into question. It is now time to resolve this matter. Two years ago, John Smith gave a pledge to the British people that his Labour government would give them the final word. I ask you today to ensure that his pledge is reaffirmed.”⁴⁷⁶

Straw’s decision to back the referendum pledge – likely to have been agreed after consultation with Blair – was, in the main, designed to ensure good relations with the Liberal Democrats in the upcoming general election rather than the emotive reason of Smith’s pledge. Apparent in 1995 was the Labour Party’s hope of keeping open the option of a deal with the Liberal Democrats should the situation arise whereby the Labour Party required the parliamentary support of the Liberal Democrats.

⁴⁷⁶ Labour Party Conference Report, Brighton, 1995, pp. 219 – 222; *Guardian*, ‘Referendum policy stays’, 6th October 1995

Blair and the Liberal Democrats

In spite of the strong showing in the polls Blair remained sceptical of Labour's electoral chances, remembering what had happened in 1992 when the lead in the polls had evaporated in the final few days of the election campaign. Whitty, who was Labour's European coordinator whilst Blair was leader of the opposition, recalls "When Tony took over he wasn't convinced we were going to win the election, right up until the day, so he actually wanted something to offer Paddy Ashdown... everyone thought 'what are you talking about Tony? We're going to win', it was game over."⁴⁷⁷ Lipsey concurred with Whitty, finding Blair to be "extremely pessimistic about the chances he would get, he kept thinking he would lose the 1997 general election when there was never any chance of him losing it, and the two subsequent elections every time he thought he might lose."⁴⁷⁸ According to Ashdown, Blair was "absolutely obsessed with the thought that the Tories could recover"⁴⁷⁹, as they had done in 1992, condemning the Labour Party to another parliament in opposition, a belief he maintained till the day before the general election.⁴⁸⁰ The long period of opposition had caused doubt to emerge in the Labour Party and Blair's mind as to whether it would be able to form a government, either as a minority or in an alliance with the Liberal Democrats.

The basis of a coalition between Labour and the Liberal Democrats was a commitment to the introduction of PR. The likeliest way for this to come about was a hung parliament in which Labour required parliamentary support from the

⁴⁷⁷ Interview with Lord Whitty, 31st March 2014

⁴⁷⁸ Interview with Lord Lipsey, 21st January 2015

⁴⁷⁹ Ashdown, *Ashdown Diaries, Volume One*, p. 357 Diary entry Sunday 12th November 1995

⁴⁸⁰ Quoted in D. Oliver, 'The Progressive Coalition that never was – lessons from the Ashdown-Blair 'project'', *Journal of Liberal History*, Vol. 83, Summer 2014, p. 45

Liberal Democrats. For Beckett, Blair and Ashdown's relationship "was all tied up with whether Labour could ever win again" recalling saying to Blair when he was flirting with the idea of coalition with the Liberal Democrats, "look Tony, don't take my word for it but ask Jim Callaghan', though he probably wouldn't have done... Tony confided those issues to a close inner circle. He never had that conversation with me because he knew what answer he would get."⁴⁸¹ Beckett had staunchly defended FPTP during the Plant process and was known to have very little time for the Liberal Democrats. Like so many politicians of her generation, Beckett would have witnessed first-hand the Lib-Lab Pact 1977-1978 – hence her reference to Callaghan – and because of that experience was sceptical of any arrangement with the Liberal Democrats, in spite of its utility should a hung parliament have arisen in 1997.

However, at play were factors beyond crude political necessity. It is beyond doubt that Blair desired a relationship with the Liberal Democrats, reportedly telling Roy Jenkins "three or four times that he intends, even if he gets a majority, to have a coalition with two or three Lib Dems in it."⁴⁸² Indeed, Mandelson affirmed: "The truth was that Tony did want that realignment. He did want to bring the two parties together. He was happy to see Lib Dem Ministers in his Cabinet but he wanted all these things without changing the electoral system."⁴⁸³ A range of sources utilised throughout this chapter confirm Blair's desire for a realignment of the left, and importantly how it differed from the Marquand view as outlined in Chapter One. Bartle writes that the "period from July 1994 to June 2001 witnessed one of the most fascinating experiments in British politics for a century", as Blair and Ashdown, "followed a sustained strategy of co-operation

⁴⁸¹ Interview with Margaret Beckett MP, 26th March 2014

⁴⁸² Ashdown, *Ashdown Diaries, Volume One*, p. 424, Thursday 2nd May 1996

⁴⁸³ Interview with Lord Mandelson, 31st March 2015

although there was no immediate need for it.”⁴⁸⁴ A detailed account appears in the *Ashdown Diaries* of the secret talks between Blair, himself and other leading figures from both political parties. Ashdown records a private discussion with Blair in October 1994, regarding cooperation in the next parliament, emphasising how negotiations between the two men had begun early in Blair’s leadership.

“PA: If we had a hung parliament would you see us working together in government?

TB: Yes.

PA: Good, now let me go a stage further. If you got a majority do you still see us working together in government?

TB: (after a three second pause) Yes

PA: In which case I think we have the opportunity to do something really historic in politics. Lib Dems will abandon equidistance in the expectation that you will make it clear that you see us partners in a hung parliament. That leaves us with three options. The clearer we are the bigger the dividends. The three options for us are:

1. *Independence* i.e., sitting on the Opposition benches and taking things on a case-by-case basis (We both agreed that this was not the best way forward)
2. *The love that dares not speak its name* We create the expectation that we will work together on the broad outlines of an assumed programme, but without being clear about it.
3. *Full open partnership* In this we would say quite openly that we would work together in the next government, whether you have a majority or not. And we would do so on an agreed programme which we would get both parties to agree before the election.

⁴⁸⁴ J. Bartle, ‘Labour and Liberal Democrat Relations after 7th June 2001’, *Representation*, Vol. 38: 3, (2001) p. 231-241

TB: That's a very big step and one I will have to think about. But broadly, I am in favour of doing something along those lines if possible. We will need, in particular, to look at opinion polls."⁴⁸⁵

Bartle affirms the relationship between Labour and the Liberal Democrats can be divided into six phases: firstly, agreements on an *ad hoc* basis such as the Scottish Constitutional Convention in 1989 and the Liberal Democrats giving evidence to Smith's Social Justice Commission. Secondly, the election of Blair as leader resulted in the continued modernisation of the Labour Party into 'New Labour', its move towards the political centre ground and Liberal Democrat territory. In 1994 in an interview with the *Observer*, soon after becoming leader of the Labour Party, Blair had made pluralist overtures towards the Liberal Democrats.

"It is foolish for us to pretend that the left of centre is solely occupied by the Labour Party, and it is only Labour that ever has good ideas... it would be absurd of me to say that my views and Charles Kennedy's are a million miles apart, they're not. But this has to happen through a process of developing ideas, not in pacts or deals or working out who sits in what position. I try not to be tribal in my thinking. Indeed, there are Liberal Democrats and Labour people cooperating at a local level. The most important thing is that the left of centre develops a political philosophy with a meaning for the modern world and the Liberal Democrats clearly have a place in that."⁴⁸⁶

At the 1995 Labour Party Conference Blair listed his political heroes as Lloyd George, Keynes and Beveridge as well as Attlee, Bevin and Hardie. Publicly,

⁴⁸⁵ Ashdown, *Ashdown Diaries, Volume One*, pp. 286-287 Diary entry Wednesday 12th October 1994

⁴⁸⁶ *Observer*, 2nd October 1994

Blair was making inclusive statements designed to bring the Liberal Democrats into his 'big tent', both electorally in terms of voters and on a personal level, as Blair found many Liberal Democrats from their social-democrat wing much more collegial than many Labour colleagues. Importantly, Blair's conference speech suggested the Labour Party did not have a monopoly on good ideas, and the Liberal Democrats had valid policies. John Edmonds, then leader of the GMB Union, thought this an "incredible" and "extraordinary" speech, not for its brilliance but for "a leader of the Labour Party openly regretting the foundation of his Party, because it splits the left... He had this deeply held belief that what we need to do is reunite the progressive forces that are always in a majority in this country."⁴⁸⁷ Plant thought many former Labour leaders and Cabinet Ministers would have recoiled in horror at such a suggestion, especially Healey. "No doubt there was quite a few Labour prima donnas who found it almost impossible to think they had such terrific intellect that there was something they might have overlooked. Healey... would never think that a Lib Dem would have anything worth saying, anything whatsoever because Healey knew what needed saying and whoever disagreed with Healey, well they were just thick basically"⁴⁸⁸, emphasising the belief within elements of the Labour Party that the Liberal Democrats are politically inferior.

The Liberal Democrats abandoned 'equidistance' in May 1995, the third phase, aligning themselves politically with Labour. Blair considered this to be important, wanting an agreed approach on the constitution because it would help politically, both in opposition and government, negating the possibility of the Lib Dems

⁴⁸⁷ Interview with John Edmonds, 9th April 2015

⁴⁸⁸ Interview with Lord Plant, 14th September 2016

opposing as a matter of course should Labour only achieve a small majority.⁴⁸⁹

Foley writes cooperation with the Liberal Democrats “Would act as a mutual defence alliance against Conservative attempts to divide and rule the centre left”, protecting “the coherence and integrity of Labour’s own constitutional agenda from ambush with the Liberal Democrats”, and thus preventing “the issue itself from becoming defined by the Liberal Democrats.” Labour would “be afforded something of an amnesty from Liberal Democrat assaults” resulting in Liberal Democrats targeting, almost exclusively, the Conservatives.⁴⁹⁰

In the summer of 1996, Blair and Ashdown asked Robin Cook and Robert Maclennan “to explore the possibility of co-operation between the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties in relation to constitutional reform.” Cook invited Plant to contribute to Cook-Maclennan, and for Plant it gave expression to what he had outlined in his Report, namely broadening Labour’s appeal by attempting to put into the public arena the idea that people could vote Labour knowing that the Lib Dems still supported part of Labour’s manifesto.⁴⁹¹ Both parties had for some time been committed to a programme of constitutional change and shared a common view of the need to reform our democratic institutions and to renew the relationship between politics and the people. Following progress in the initial discussion the two parties agreed in October 1996 to establish a Joint Consultative Committee (JCC), with the following terms of reference:

‘To examine the current proposals of the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties for constitutional reform: to consider whether there might be sufficient

⁴⁸⁹ A. Campbell, *Volume One, Prelude to Power 1994-1997*, (Arrow Books, London, 2010) p. 193, Wednesday 3rd May 1995. See Ashdown, *Ashdown Diaries, Volume One*, pp. 595-597 for the public statement on abandoning equidistance.

⁴⁹⁰ M. Foley, *The Politics of the British Constitution*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1999) pp. 210-211

⁴⁹¹ Plant, Personal Interview, Houses of Parliament, 14th September 2016

common ground to enable the parties to reach agreement on a legislative programme for constitutional reform; to consider means by which such a programme might best be implemented and to make recommendations.⁴⁹²

On the matter of PR, on which the entire constitutional reform agenda could well have foundered, the JCC resolved it in time for the election:

(Paragraph 56.) Both parties believe that a referendum on the system for elections to the House of Commons should be held within the first term of a new Parliament.

(Paragraph 57.) Both parties are also agreed that the referendum should be a single question offering a straight choice between first-past-the-post and one specific proportional alternative.

(Paragraph 58.) A commission on voting systems for the Westminster Parliament should be appointed early in the next parliament to recommend the appropriate proportional alternative to the first-past-the-post system. Among the factors to be considered by the commission would be the likelihood that the system proposed would command broad consensus among proponents of proportional representation. The commission would be asked to report within twelve months of its establishment.

(Paragraph 59.) Legislation to hold the referendum would then be proposed and the choice placed before the people. This proposal would allow the crucial

⁴⁹² Report of the Joint (Labour Party – Liberal Democrats) Consultative Committee on Constitutional Reform (1997) quoted in Blackburn & Plant, *Constitutional Reform*, pp. 468-480.

question of how our government is elected to be decided by the people themselves.⁴⁹³

The fourth stage of cooperation involved the targeting of Conservative seats in an attempt to unseat the sitting Conservative MP and involved the sharing of campaign information. Had a uniform movement of votes across the country taken place since 1992, the general election result would, the research suggests, have been different. Labour's majority would have been 131 rather than 179. The Liberal Democrats would have won 28 seats meaning the Conservatives would have returned to Westminster with 208 MPs, highlighting how a small number of tactical voters can have a big effect on the election result. Curtice and Steed estimate that at least 15 and as many as 21 seats were won by Labour through tactical voting. The Liberal Democrats also benefitted, gaining between 10 and 20. The Conservatives lost at least 25 and potentially 35 seats because of tactical voting. Norris, using a different method, suggests 24 seats were lost.⁴⁹⁴ Indeed, in the constituency of Tatton both the Labour and Liberal Democrat candidate stood down in favour of an independent candidate.

The fifth phase of cooperation was the Liberal Democrats embarking on 'constructive opposition', ensuring the constitutional reform programme was implemented and also partaking in the JCC. The sixth phase was the extension of the JCC's remit to cover Europe, welfare, health and education. However, in both parties some felt they had been 'bounced' into an arrangement they didn't

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 468-480.

⁴⁹⁴ See G. Evans, J. Curtice, & P. Norris, 'New Labour, New Tactical Voting? The causes and consequences of Tactical Voting in the 1997 General Election', in J. Fisher et al (eds.), *British Elections & Parties Review, Vol. 8, The 1997 General Election*, (Frank Cass, London, 1998) pp. 65 – 70; J. Curtice, & M. Steed, 'The results analysed', in D. Butler, & D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1997*, (MacMillan, Basingstoke 1997) p. 313; P. Norris, 'Anatomy of a Labour landslide', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 50, (1997) pp. 509-532

want to be in, and that the 'project' was only conducted by the leadership with little influence given to the backbenchers. Rawnsley dismisses the importance of the JCC: "No secrets of any substance were ever going to be shared around the Cabinet table – a fairly redundant item of furniture in the Blair government. The joint committee was a decorative addition, a presentation token of his often voiced desire to embrace a more inclusive, more pluralistic style of politics."⁴⁹⁵ By the beginning of 2001, Charles Kennedy had replaced Ashdown as leader, revealing the JCC and 'Lab-Lib' relations – 'the project' – were in a 'coma', waiting to be revived if people wish. Kennedy's aide stated "We haven't held a meeting of the cabinet committee since the summer because we can't see the point of poncing up Downing Street if we aren't going to get something out of it."⁴⁹⁶ In September 2001, the Liberal Democrats withdrew from the JCC having only met twice in the last two years.

Blair, in the April of 1997, asked Campbell, his Press Secretary, "How would you feel if I gave Paddy a place in the Cabinet and started merger talks?" something Blair allegedly had mentioned previously, the rationale being "We could put the Tories out of business for a generation."⁴⁹⁷ In the days after the 1997 general election, according to Ashdown, Blair mentioned 'a merger' of the two parties, an idea that left Ashdown cold, preferring positions for Liberal Democrats on cabinet committees.⁴⁹⁸ Derek Draper wrote an account of Blair's first one hundred days in office, also mentioning the potential for a merger.⁴⁹⁹ Lipsey shared a lunch with Pat McFadden, one of Blair's special advisors, in March 1998. According to

⁴⁹⁵ Rawnsley, *Servants of the People*, pp. 193-194

⁴⁹⁶ *Guardian*, 4th January 2001

⁴⁹⁷ A. Campbell, *The Blair Years, Extracts from the Alastair Campbell Diaries*, (Hutchinson, London, 2007) p. 179. Saturday 26th April 1997 & p. 201. Thursday 8th May 1997

⁴⁹⁸ P. Ashdown, *The Ashdown Diaries, Volume Two, 1997-1999*, (Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, London, 2001) p. 6. Tuesday 6th May 1997 and p. 15. Thursday 15th May 1997

⁴⁹⁹ D. Draper, *Blair's Hundred Days*, (Faber and Faber, London, 1997) pp. 113-116

McFadden Blair was “instinctively against PR” considering “governments that win as big as in 45, 79, 97 should have overall majorities. He is happy with AV.”

Although AV would not satisfy the Liberal Democrats, Blair “does want to do something with the Lib Dems, and recognises that Paddy may need more than just AV.” Moreover, there was the problem of Party management. Fraser Kemp and Jim Murphy, both Labour MPs in Scotland, were planning speeches on the subject at the Scottish Labour Conference. “Their theme is ‘enough is enough’ after Scotland, Wales, London and Europe.”⁵⁰⁰

Blair continued to state his desire to reshape British politics around two progressive parties and, in August 1998, sent a fax to Ashdown believing it could be achieved “without electoral reform.” Whilst Blair did acknowledge this was an important issue for Liberal Democrats, the Jenkins Commission “will provide the means, but not the end in this process. Our task will be to convince our parties, and the country, of what we are trying to do.” The best option was either FPTP or AV with top-up although “it will be very difficult to get through parliament in the face of such a heavy programme of legislation on schools, hospitals and other measures of constitutional change.” Additionally, the boundary changes legislation would not be passed in time to take effect for the next general election. Consequently, the best time for the referendum would be at the same time as the next election.⁵⁰¹ Blair would, a month later, send another fax through to Ashdown further explaining his position on electoral reform, repeating many of the same points made in the earlier fax, whilst also suggesting compromises to appease the Liberal Democrats. Furthermore, it was “clear that if it were to be pushed, we

⁵⁰⁰ LIPSEY/2/1, ‘Lunch with Pat McFadden’, 4/3/98, Accessed London School of Economics Lipsey Collection, 5th January 2015

⁵⁰¹ Ashdown, *Ashdown Diaries, Volume Two*, pp. 240-241. Tuesday 18th August 1998.

would be fighting a referendum with a Labour Party badly divided (possibly with a majority anti)... the real danger then would be *losing* the referendum.”⁵⁰²

Blair was pressed by Ashdown to go for a coalition in November 1998, after Jenkins had published his report, creating a window of enthusiasm for the Liberal Democrats towards the Labour Party. However, no coalition materialised then or over the course of thirteen years of government, and the JCC was as close as the Labour Party and Liberal Democrats came to forming a coalition. During Labour’s first term in office those individuals who were willing to pursue ‘the project’ left government; Peter Mandelson, supposedly an advocate of Lab-Lib relations left the government over the ‘home loan affair’ and Ashdown stood down as Leader of the Liberal Democrats in 1999. The lack of voices at the top of each party willing to make the case for cooperation naturally meant the merits of the argument were not made or heard in significant number, as Cabinet Ministers focused on their own department and the concerns of practical politics.

Mandelson records in *The Third Man* secret talks revolving around “negotiating a policy agreement with the Liberal Democrats” and to “bring some Lib Dems into the cabinet” – Alan Beith and Menzies Campbell – with the process beginning shortly after Blair had become leader. The Labour Party was unsure of winning, let alone winning a landslide victory. “With Lib Dem support, we would be able to form a stable government.” Blair “saw a governing arrangement with them as a way of diluting the power of the old-left Labour MPs and the trade unions.” Key to any agreement was “changing the first-past-the-post system of electing MPs, in favour of proportional representation.” The result of the general election “killed

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 257-256, Friday 11th September 1998. Blair suggested that if a change were to take place then the best option would be the Jenkins system, the strengthening of joint co-operation and private support for Lib Dem MPs most in danger of losing their seat.

(or) at least was sure to delay it” as not only had Labour won a landslide, the Lib Dems were up from twenty seats to forty-six seats. Furthermore, “For many in the Labour Party, especially those who still seethed over the SDP split, the idea of offering the rebels’ successors a place in government was unpalatable, to say the least.”⁵⁰³

Blair’s account, *A Journey*, gives no mention of electoral reform or PR, yet he admits from the outset he wanted the Liberal Democrats “in the big tent” as “their leadership was sound” and “some outstanding people in their ranks” politically aligned with New Labour. With Blair ideologically closer to many in the Liberal Democrats than in his own party, “It made sense to try to draw them in” to government and Blair “was certainly willing to give it a try.” In the hours after the election, Blair and Ashdown agreed it would be “premature to put them into Cabinet” yet agreeing a process of cooperation with an official committee that would try to draw up an agreed programme of constitutional reform.” The project failed as the Liberal Democrats lacked the “necessary fibre to govern” suggesting they were not of the same quality as Labour politicians and were capable of “breath-taking opportunism”, and although agreement was found on issues “that didn’t touch voters immediate lives” they opposed the “necessary” public sector reforms “which most directly touched people’s lives.”⁵⁰⁴

McFadden concurred with Blair’s analysis, stating that “Whilst PR was an area of common interest, it was not a strong enough ‘subject matter’ in itself and there was a lack of common purpose in other areas that New Labour felt were important: public services, pensions and other domestic issues.” Blair’s faith in the Liberal Democrats withered, “a suspicion that grew in the years of

⁵⁰³ P. Mandelson, *The Third Man*, (Harper Press, London, 2010) pp. 254-256.

⁵⁰⁴ T. Blair, *A Journey*, (Hutchinson, London, 2010) pp. 117-122

government as, under Ashdown and later Kennedy, the Lib Dems opposed reform to Higher Education and initiatives to provide greater administrative autonomy for schools and hospitals.”⁵⁰⁵ Charles Clarke confessed that when he was Chair of the Labour Party in 2001 there were late night meetings with the Liberal Democrats at County Hall going through various policy issues. Yet, Labour – Liberal Democrat relations between 1997 and 2001 were “very much a minority pursuit around Number 10 and a few of his (Blair’s) very close people. Nobody thought this was really where you want to go, partly for the reason that the ‘why do you need it?’ factor was so deep.”⁵⁰⁶ Hattersley, a critic of Blair and ‘New Labour’ maintains the purpose of the ‘project’ was to allow Blair to “keep his more radical members in check. He wanted to demonstrate he was a centrist and he talked all the time of being centre-left or left centre, indeed sometimes just as a centrist...And this gesture was demonstrating his centrism or making it more real by having alliances.” However, “He couldn’t in conscience have done it with a majority that size. He wanted that partnership.”⁵⁰⁷

Philip Cowley and Mark Stuart analysed Liberal Democrat voting in the House of Commons from 1992-2003. Although voting in the House of Commons is binary, Table 4 below stresses how Liberal Democrat voting behaviour changed, shifting “from being almost undisguisable from Labour in their behaviour to their becoming a *bona fide* party of opposition.”⁵⁰⁸ The Liberal Democrats tendency to vote with the Conservatives grew from 27% in the first session of the 1997 Parliament, to 40% in the second session, 44% in the third, 47% in the fourth, then reaching 54% in the first session of Labour’s second term. During the 2002-

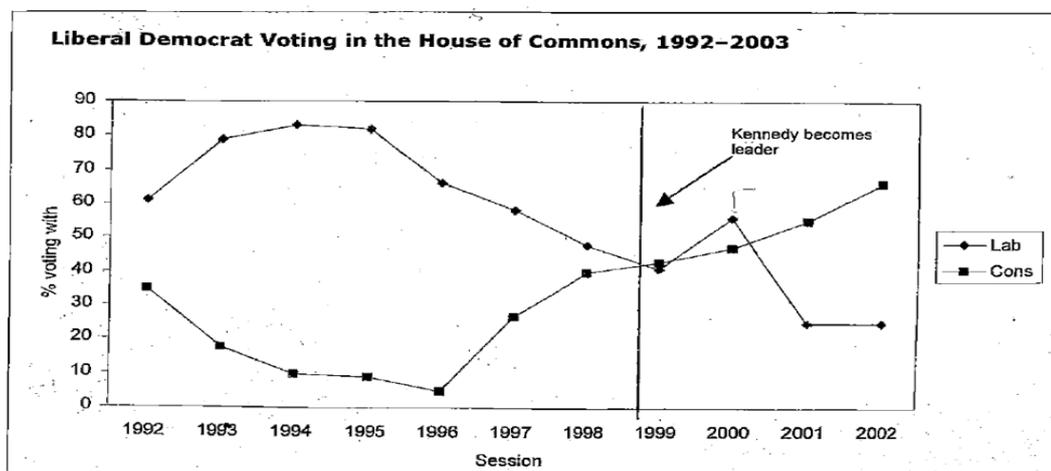
⁵⁰⁵ Oliver, ‘The Progressive Coalition that never was’, p. 47

⁵⁰⁶ Clarke, Personal Interview, 21st May 2014, St Ermins Hotel, London

⁵⁰⁷ Interview with Lord Hattersley, 17th November 2014

⁵⁰⁸ P. Cowley, & M. Stuart, ‘From Labour Love-In to Bona Fide Party of Opposition’, *Journal of Liberal History*, Vol. 43, Summer 2004, pp. 18-19.

2003 session, Liberal Democrat MPs voted against Labour in 251 of the 352 Commons whipped votes in which they participated, meaning they opposed the Government in 75% of the votes.⁵⁰⁹ The move away from Labour during the course of the parliament would have done little to convince Labour politicians that the Liberal Democrats would be reliable in coalition, particularly as the “objective was to get them, a couple of years down the track when we were established, as being more supportive.”⁵¹⁰



Labour's landslide - the 1997 general election

The opinion polls since 1994 gave the Labour Party considerable leads, fluctuating between the high forties and low fifties and the Conservatives down between the high twenties and low thirties.⁵¹¹ All the indicators were pointing to a big electoral victory for the Labour Party. John Major and the Conservative Party were increasingly unpopular, with Worcester and Mortimore attributing five significant reasons: 'Black Wednesday' and the loss of economic credibility;

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19

⁵¹⁰ Campbell, *Volume One, Prelude to Power*, pp. 20-21, Thursday 15th May 1997

⁵¹¹ See <http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/historical-polls/voting-intention-1992-1997> (Accessed 5th December 2014)

divisions over Europe; image management, particularly concerning MPs sex lives; the leadership of the Conservative Party by John Major compared to Tony Blair's leadership of the Labour Party; and 'New Labour no danger' as the Labour Party had become 'safe', watering down its socialist commitments, as emphasised by the re-writing of Clause IV.⁵¹² Many of the issues that the Conservatives could use to warn of the perceived dangers of a Labour government – nationalisation, public spending, higher taxes and strong trade unions – had all been diluted or abandoned. The Conservative slogan 'New Labour new danger' simply did not resonate with the electorate.

By May 1997 the Labour Party had concluded that electoral reform at Westminster was conditional on an electoral commission and a referendum. The 1997 Labour Party Manifesto stated:

"We are committed to a referendum on the voting system for the House of Commons. An independent commission on voting will be appointed early on to recommend a proportional alternative to the first-past-the-post system."⁵¹³

The Labour Party had committed to a raft of constitutional reforms: devolution in Scotland – first emerging during the *Scottish Constitutional Convention* when the Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, trade unions and churches backed a 'Claim of Right for Scotland' – and an assembly in Wales; a continuation of the peace-process with a power-sharing executive in Northern Ireland; an elected second chamber replacing the House of Lords; regional assemblies in England; locally elected mayors across England's towns and cities; and a Freedom of Information

⁵¹² R. Worcester, & R. Mortimore, *Explaining Labour's Landslide*, (Politico's Publishing, London, 1999) pp. 62-99

⁵¹³ Labour Party Manifesto, 1997, p. 33

Act. The closed regional list (d'Hondt) system was adopted for the European Parliament – although it faced considerable opposition in the House of Lords – bringing Great Britain in line with the rest of the European Union, with Northern Ireland using the STV. Matt Cole writes “One MP attributed Straw’s introduction of a closed list system for European elections to a cynical desire to discredit PR, commending him on ‘playing a blinder’”⁵¹⁴, thus negating PR becoming the ‘thin end of the wedge’ for FPTP elections to Westminster. Indeed, all the elected devolved bodies introduced by the Labour Government were committed to using something other than FPTP.

According to Worcester and Mortimore in Great Britain as a whole, constitutional reform came sixteenth out of sixteenth in the concerns of voters during the 1997 election campaign.⁵¹⁵ It was not a ‘bread and butter’ issue and clearly lacked saliency with the British electorate in 1997. Indeed, anecdotally, it was often said Blair’s eyes glazed over when the topic of constitutional reform was raised, not thinking it was of concern to the ‘man and woman’ on the street, a position shared according to Rawnsley, by Blair’s closest aides.⁵¹⁶ In spite of its lack of resonance with the electorate, constitutional reform was an attempt to transform the relationship of the state and its citizens. *A New Agenda for Democracy* mentioned three related principles underlying the desire for constitutional reform. The first was a desire to strengthen ‘checks and balances’, guarding against untrammelled executive power. The second was to introduce greater ‘pluralism’,

⁵¹⁴ M. Cole, ‘Party Policy and Electoral Reform: A survey of Developments, Motives and Prospects’, in Fisher, *British Elections & Parties Review*, Vol. 9, p. 79

⁵¹⁵ Quoted in Worcester & Mortimore, *Explaining Labour’s Landslide*, p. 112; A poll for the *Independent on Sunday* and Ipsos Mori found constitutional reform, specifically devolution, came “bottom of the first 15 issues that (would) affect the outcome of the election.” Only 10% of respondents described the issue as very important. Among DE social class the figure dropped to 6-7%. Foley, *The Politics of the Constitution*, pp. 240-241

⁵¹⁶ *Observer*, ‘The great democrat must keep his PR pledge’, 13th July 1997 Rawnsley writes: “Some of (Blair’s)... closest aides do not and never did give much of a toss about constitutional reform”, dismissed as “an anal obsession of *Guardian* and *Observer* readers.”

moving towards greater consensus in decision making. The third was to 'decentralise' policy making.⁵¹⁷ Conservative 'misrule' and constitutional impropriety had prompted the Labour movement to reassess the constitutional settlement of the United Kingdom. Therefore, its purpose was not so much about electoral appeal but to ensure that a reformed constitution would prevent a repeat of the Thatcher experience.

Whilst the aforementioned can be termed the 'principled' argument, constitutional reform also provided a political benefit, offering clear policy differentiation between Labour and the Conservatives. Labour, having embraced Conservative spending plans for the first two years of government in an attempt to avoid the accusation of 'tax and spend', was therefore indistinguishable from the Conservatives on a number of policies. For Mitchell, focusing on Conservative misrule and utilising the constitution to their benefit, allowed the Labour Party to concentrate on "how politics was conducted rather than on policies" allowing "Labour to side-step the awkward matter of the converging policy agendas of the two parties."⁵¹⁸ Burch and Holliday concur: "Constitutional reform was one of the few areas in which Labour made radical manifesto promises distinguishing it from its Conservative opponents and its old Labour inheritance."⁵¹⁹ Constitutional reform was a useful electoral tool, emphasising different policy agenda, allowing Labour to appear 'radical', whilst leaving many of the social and economic changes of the past two decades intact.

⁵¹⁷ Quoted in M. Russell, 'Democracy', in A. Harvey, *Transforming Britain, Labour's Second Term*, (Fabian Society, London, 2001) p. 29

⁵¹⁸ J. Mitchell, 'The battle for Britain? Constitutional reform and the election', in A. Geddes, & J. Tonge, (eds.) *Labour's Landslide*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1997) p. 136

⁵¹⁹ M. Burch, & I. Holliday, 'New Labour and the constitution', in D. Coates, & P. Lawler, (eds.), *New Labour in power*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000) p. 80

The 1st May 1997 witnessed the greatest Labour Party victory in history, winning 419 seats, giving the party a 179 seat majority in the House of Commons and a majority of 255 over the Conservatives. The result was dramatic and had a direct impact on the necessity of reforming FPTP and working with the Liberal Democrats. The electoral system that had worked against Labour during Conservative victories had now swung in favour of the Labour Party, partly down to Labour targeting key marginal constituencies and the collapse of the Conservative vote. Labour had learnt how to make FPTP work in its favour. It was possible to walk from Lands End to John O' Groats without passing through a Conservative constituency. In Scotland and Wales the Conservatives had no parliamentary representation, whereas the Labour Party had managed to win seats in areas that even in previous landslide victories they had not, and delivered the 'Portillo Moment' in Enfield Southgate. The Conservative Party would return to Parliament with 165 MPs, the lowest since 1906, and the smallest vote share it had received since 1831. The Liberal Democrats, with 46 MPs, was the highest for a third party since its forbearer the Liberal Party in 1929, although on a smaller vote share than in 1992. The election result was an emphatic victory for 'New Labour' - a 'new dawn' had broken – resulting in Blair becoming the first Labour Prime Minister since James Callaghan left office in 1979.

Table 5 below estimates how different electoral systems would have affected the general election result. With all projections it is not definitive as it cannot categorically be known how electors will vote. However, whilst the 1997 projection gave the Labour Party an even bigger majority in 1997 under AV or SV, the main beneficiary under all alternative electoral systems was the Liberal Democrats – a point made by opponents of reform after Jenkins had published his report – increasing the likelihood of coalition. After an election “The enthusiasm does tail off when the results are examined” stated Joyce Gould as

politicians look at the figures and consider how it impacts on their situation.

“People say if we had this electoral system, how would we have done then? And if it looks as if you might not have done as well as you had done you will say ‘no, we’re not going to go down that road’.”⁵²⁰

1997 general election result conducted under different electoral systems⁵²¹

(Table 5)

	Con	Lab	LD	SNP/PC	OTHERS
% of national vote	30.7	43.2	16.8	2.5	6.8
Electoral Systems					
FPTP	165	419	46	10	19
AV	110	436	84	10	19
SV	110	436	84	10	19
STV	144	342	131	24	18
AMS (50:50)	202	296	118	21	18
AV+	168	368	89	15	19

Independent Commission on Voting System, 1998

To fulfil the manifesto commitment and to ensure ‘the project’ remained on course, the Labour government announced a commission with a remit to recommend an alternative electoral system to be put before the British electorate in a referendum. Holding the enquiry into reforming FPTP conveniently deferred

⁵²⁰ Interview with Baroness Gould, 3rd March 2015

⁵²¹ *Making Votes Count 2*, Dunleavy et al., Democratic Audit, 1998. Quoted in O. Gay, *Voting Systems: The Jenkins Report*, Research Paper 98/112, 10th December 1998, Home Affairs Sections, House of Commons Library

a pronouncement on the matter, pushing the date back before a decision had to be made. The prominent 'centrist' Roy Jenkins was chosen as chair, an individual who had a chequered history with the Labour Party. The former Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, President of the European Commission, member of the 'Gang of Four' who founded the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and President of the Liberal Democrats had sought to 'break the mould' of British politics, the means to the end being proportional representation. As such, not all in the Labour Party viewed Jenkins as benevolently as Blair, considering him now charged with the task of concocting an electoral system that had the potential to reduce Labour representation and ensure that the Labour Party would never govern as a single party again.

Ashdown records a meeting between himself, Blair, Mandelson and Jenkins in June 1997, when Ashdown out of earshot of the others said to Blair "the obvious person to chair the Electoral Reform Commission is Roy", with Blair acknowledging that he would think about it.⁵²² According to Rawnsley, in July, Blair held a dinner with his wife Cherie, Ashdown, Jenkins and Mandelson in attendance. In a pre-agreed plan with Mandelson, the topic of who should chair the commission into recommending a new voting system arose. "Mandelson suddenly said: 'I know, why doesn't Roy do it? There's no one better qualified.'" This could well have been a staged intervention flattering Jenkins into ready acceptance of the task.⁵²³ The choice of Jenkins as Chair was, for Edmonds, a gesture not just to the right of the Labour Party, but mainly, a gesture of reaching out beyond Labour, leaving 'tribal' Labour such as himself, questioning where it was leading. Moreover, Jenkins was a "political move in a way that Plant wasn't.

⁵²² Ashdown, *Ashdown Diaries, Volume Two*, p. 44, Thursday 12th June 1997.

⁵²³ Rawnsley, *Servants of the People*, pp. 195-196

Plant was party management, Jenkins was completely different.”⁵²⁴ Tribal Labour ‘questioning where it was all going’ is exemplified by the anecdote of Blair informing Prescott of his decision to appoint Jenkins as chair: “it was a very good thing he (Prescott) was sitting down, because he exploded.”⁵²⁵

A five-strong commission was announced in December 1997. Jenkins was joined by Lord Alexander of Weedon, a Conservative Peer with a career in law and banking; Baroness Gould of Potternewton, a former national organiser for the Labour Party and member of the Plant Report; the civil servant Sir John Chilcot, former permanent secretary at the Northern Ireland Office; and David Lipsey, a special advisor to Tony Crosland and political editor of the *Economist*. For Gould, she and Lipsey were chosen by Blair and Straw as they understood we would take into account the electoral consequences for the party of any proposed system. Gould affirmed: “David and I were very clear that we could only come up with something that didn’t do any damage to the Labour Party.”⁵²⁶ The *Economist* considered four of the commission to be declared reformers. Jenkins had long promoted electoral reform, whilst suggesting he would accept something less than STV, the favoured system of the Liberal Democrats. Lord Alexander had in his book, *The Voice of the People*, announced his ‘tentative personal preference’ for STV. Lipsey had argued for at least AV and Baroness Gould had sat on the Plant Commission and backed the majority vote for SV.⁵²⁷ Chilcot had not publicly declared his personal view, although in his role as permanent secretary at the Northern Ireland Office he would have witnessed the workings of STV first-hand.

⁵²⁴ Interview with John Edmonds, 9th April 2015.

⁵²⁵ Ashdown, *Ashdown Diaries, Volume Two*, p. 107, Tuesday 21st October 1997 & P. 117. Friday 31st October 1997

⁵²⁶ Interview with Baroness Gould, 3rd March 2015

⁵²⁷ *The Economist*, ‘Jenkins’ ear’, 6th December 1997, p. 39; *Guardian*, ‘Poll commission leans to reform’, 2nd December 1997

The remit for the enquiry was given by Straw, the then Home Secretary, in a written parliamentary answer. The commission will be “free to consider and recommend an appropriate system or combination of systems in recommending an alternative to the present system” and was given one year to report. Four requirements were outlined: “(i) broad proportionality; (ii) the need for stable government; (iii) an extension of voter choice; and (iv) the maintenance of a link between MPs and geographical constituencies.” Dunleavy and Margetts suggest the brief included two ‘Labour’ criteria – keeping the link to constituencies and stable government – and two ‘Liberal Democrat’ criteria proportionality, and extending voter choice. However, proportionality was modified to broad proportionality by Labour.⁵²⁸ Jenkins added three further criteria: the system should be “intellectually acceptable”, represent “a significant change” from the existing system and it should have a “reasonable chance of coming about politically.”⁵²⁹ The additional criteria added by Jenkins suggest the original criteria as outlined by Straw were going to play only a minimal role in influencing the decision finally reached by the Commission.

On October 29th 1998 Jenkins published his report, proposing a new system to be put to the country in a referendum. It was noted by the Commission that the four requirements were “not entirely compatible.” Jenkins considered none of the requirements were “absolute.” Otherwise the task of the Commission “would have been not merely difficult (which it certainly has been) but impossible” due to the irreconcilable terms of reference. “Proportionality may be ‘broad’ not strict.”

⁵²⁸ P. Dunleavy, & H. Margetts, ‘Mixed electoral systems in Britain and the Jenkins Commission on electoral reform’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 1: 1, (April 1999) p. 17

⁵²⁹ Lord Jenkins in the LSE Democratic Audit Seminar, 20th November 1998, Quoted in H. Margetts, & P. Dunleavy, ‘Reforming the Westminster Electoral System: Evaluating the Jenkins Commission Proposals’, in J. Fisher, *British Elections & Parties Review*, Vol. 9, p. 47

“‘Stable government’” was deemed to be a relative term, “for the only way to ensure it absolutely (or at least until the regime blows up) would be by avoiding elections altogether, which would make our inquiry otiose. Voter choice is at once important and imprecise. And it is ‘a link’ and not ‘the link’ between MPs’ geographical constituencies which has to be respected. This semi-flexibility has made it possible for us to aim at a point which comes near to reconciling all four criteria.”⁵³⁰

The terms of reference were all open to interpretation. Broad proportionality is dependent on how ‘broadness’ is defined: does stable government entail effective government and does this require single party government or coalition; to what extent should voter choice be extended and the importance attached to a direct constituency link? Whether this was the intention of the Labour leadership to create a situation for the commission which ruled little out, whilst also not ruling anything in, is a possibility. Mclean considered, reading between the lines, the terms of reference were an attempt by Blair to “find something which satisfies reformers just enough to count as barely acceptable to them, while comforting conservatives that it is the minimum you could offer.”⁵³¹

Lipsey stated: “The terms of reference we were given were absolutely brilliant and completely contradictory” and “enabled us to do whatever we wanted to do because of the contradictions within them... They were brilliantly drafted to be completely impossible to fulfil.”⁵³² Furthermore, the members of the Commission – perhaps bar Jenkins – had not been consulted on the terms of reference and

⁵³⁰ The Report of the Independent Commission on the Voting System, (The Stationery Office, London, 1998) p. 1

⁵³¹ I. Mclean, ‘The Jenkins Commission and the Implications of Electoral Reform for the UK Constitution’, *Government and Opposition*, Vol 34:2, (1999) p. 153

⁵³² Lipsey, Personal Interview, 21st January 2015, Houses of Parliament.

once the Commission had started its work little attention was paid to them. “If we’d tried to take the terms of reference seriously we would have had to ‘square the circle’. In a sense what we ended up doing was providing a system which offered an appropriate balance of the contradictory requirements within the terms of reference.”⁵³³ Interestingly, the overriding concern of the Commission was putting forward an electoral system that had the potential to be introduced. Lipsey affirmed: “The driving force wasn’t the terms of reference or the intellectual puzzle of solving them, the driving force was to find a change that was big enough to be worthwhile which nevertheless had some chance of success.”⁵³⁴

Jenkins, in less detail than Plant, briefly attempts to deal with the issue of ‘fairness’ being an “important but imprecise concept” linking the idea to electoral outcomes and voters, status of political parties within the political system and the role of MPs. Lipsey, when asked why little attention was paid to the concept of ‘fairness’, considered it was in part a result of the different backgrounds of the two men. “We were all keen to have a fairer system but I don’t think that was a dominant theme. If you have a political philosopher like Raymond Plant running an enquiry it’s obviously going to play a stronger part than if you have a commission made up of men and women of the world.”⁵³⁵ Whitty, on the other hand, was fairly critical of Jenkins: “At least Raymond delivered a report that analysed some of the principles.”⁵³⁶ The differing objectives of the reports meant Plant sought to address questions of representation and democracy, whereas Jenkins was concerned with arriving at a political end, namely an alternative electoral system.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*,

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*,

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*,

⁵³⁶ Interview with Lord Whitty, 31st March 2014

Jenkins affirmed: “A primary duty of an electoral system is to represent the wishes of the electorate as effectively as possible”; something FPTP, the Commission argued, distorts. Voters not receiving the “representation they want is more important than that the parties do not get the seats to which they think they are entitled.” The unfairness manifests itself upon various groups, of which some (women and ethnic minorities) are not specifically political, but with parties nonetheless being the principal beneficiaries or losers.” However, this was qualified by ‘proportionality of power’; arguing it would be “undesirable” for a minority party to be perpetually in government, resulting in a “permanent hold upon hinge power that neither of the larger groupings could ever exercise independent power without the permission of the minority.”⁵³⁷

It was hoped that a reformed electoral system would promote more independence and concentration upon the legislative process, thus increasing the effectiveness of the House of Commons and leading to better quality social and economic legislation. This is in light of controversial legislation – the poll tax under the Conservative government and, previously, in the 1970s, nationalisation of the ports and aircraft industry by the Labour government – with governments elected on a vote share in the high thirties or low forties. The fundamental role of MPs was to hold the executive to account but this was made difficult by the whipping system, loyalty to the leader and desire to further ones political career. Devolution would also impact upon the role of MPs in the principalities, blurring the lines for the representative who is responsible for specific policy matters.

The Commission deemed the virtues of FPTP to be its incumbency and therefore known by the public, simplicity in casting and counting votes, the lack of demand

⁵³⁷ Report of the Independent Commission on the Voting System, pp. 2-3

for reform and a tendency to deliver one-party majority governments.

Consequently, electors “while nominally voting only for a local representative, in fact to choose the party they wish to form a government” leaving “each member of Parliament with a direct relationship with a particular geographical area” based on “nominal equality in the sense that they are all elected in the same way. It also enables the electorate to sharply and clearly rid itself of an unwanted government.” MPs are encouraged due to their unique position in their constituency to serve all their constituents, a single-party government can make quick decisions, an unpopular government can be punished by the electorate, parties are encouraged to be broad-based and unorthodox MPs have a degree of independence from party control provided they can retain local support.⁵³⁸

Yet the objective of the commission was not to write a defence of FPTP but to arrive at an alternative, believing the arguments in favour of FPTP would be made in the referendum campaign. FPTP has a “natural tendency... to disunite rather than to unite the country” leading to a “new form of Disraeli’s two nations.” Jenkins claimed the research conducted by the Commission showed “landslide majorities...are regarded with considerable suspicion by the wider public, perhaps more so even than coalitions.” In part, this is a result of the increased vote share of the third party, which is much higher than the proportion of seats held in the House of Commons. In comparison the Scottish and Welsh nationalists benefit from an ‘intense beam’ of support, its representation is more approximate to its strength. “This is perverse, for a party’s breadth of appeal is surely a favourable factor from the point of view of national cohesion, and its discouragement a count against an electoral system which heavily under-rewards it.”⁵³⁹

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8

A further criticism of FPTP was its perceived inability to “allow the elector to exercise a free choice in both the selection of a constituency representative and the determination of the government of the country. It forces the voter to give priority to one or the other, and the evidence is that in the great majority of cases he or she deems it more important who is Prime Minister than who is member for their local constituency.” Accordingly, the result of who becomes MP “effectively rests not with the electorate but with the selecting body of whichever party is dominant in the area.”⁵⁴⁰ Germany’s AMS and the Republic of Ireland STV system “allow the voter to combine influencing the choice of government and expressing a preference between individuals as local representative.”⁵⁴¹

The succeeding criticism was the tendency of FPTP to lead to ‘safe seats’ and the lack of ‘marginal constituencies’, resulting in political parties pumping resources only into ‘at most 150 (out of 659) swingable constituencies.’ However, as mentioned in Chapter One, the number of ‘marginal constituencies’ has no bearing on the ability of FPTP to deliver majority government and the Scottish National Party surge in 2015 highlights there is no such thing as a ‘safe seat’. “The semi-corollary of a high proportion of the constituencies being in ‘safe seat’ territory is not merely that many voters pass their entire adult lives without ever voting for a winning candidate but that they also do so without any realistic hope of influencing a result.”⁵⁴² However, this is not to say that individual voters within the constituencies which are considered ‘safe’ do not get the party in government for whom they voted even if the representative is from a different political party. Still, “In the four elections of the 1950s an average of only 86 or 13.5 per cent of

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8-9

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp.14-17

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 9

MPs were elected without having the support of a majority of those voting in their constituency. In the two elections of the 1990s these figures have risen to an average of 286 or 44 per cent.” The Commission considered it was a heavy count against FPTP that the chosen representative “in the case of nearly half of them, more electors voted against than for them.”⁵⁴³

FPTP can also deliver governments based on perverse results: 1951 when the Labour Party polled over 250,000 more votes but the Conservatives had a majority of 17, and February 1974 when the Conservatives polled 100,000 more votes but the Labour Party won 4 more seats. This was deemed by Jenkins to be “not at all bad”, with 13 of the 15 general elections at the time of writing giving victory to the party with more votes. Yet, the report claims, if 2 out of every 15 plane journeys ended in a crash, it would be unacceptable. However, other majoritarian electoral systems based in single member constituencies could equally result in ‘perverse’ results, as the piling up of votes in electoral strongholds is not ‘corrected’ by a proportional element. The final criticism was FPTP’s ability to produce a bias against one of the political parties, thus leading one party to be better rewarded by the electoral system than the other. Although this could “be argued to display a certain impartiality” it was a count against the system. Moreover, bias would “not by definition occur in a fully proportional system and which would be reduced by any significant move in that direction.”⁵⁴⁴

Jenkins attempts to refute the arguments that FPTP leads to single-party majority governments, often used by defenders of FPTP, by analysing the past 150 years of British history. For 43 of the 150 years there has been overt coalition, a further 34 years in which the government of the day was dependent on the

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 10

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-12

parliamentary votes of another party, plus another 9 years when the government of the day's majority had been so slim it had no certain command of the House of Commons. "It is therefore the case that in only 64 of the past 150 years has there prevailed the alleged principal benefit of the FPTP system, the production of a single-party government with an undisputed command over the House of Commons."⁵⁴⁵ Robert Wareing, in the Commons debate on the report of the Jenkins Commission, reputed the assertion. "How many times did those Governments (Attlee 1950-1951 and Wilson 1964-1966) lose in the Division Lobby? The answer is that they never did."⁵⁴⁶ Jenkins was hardly comparing like with like with the reference to aeroplane journeys and also the past 150 years of general elections, as this includes a period before the universal franchise. Since 1928, when men and women had the vote on the same basis, single party majority government has been the norm.

As alternative electoral systems SV, the Second Ballot and 'Weighted Vote' were considered unsuitable. AV fulfilled three out of the four terms of reference; AV maintained the constituency link, increased voter choice through the use of preferential voting and was unlikely to lead to unstable government. Yet it would fail to address the 'electoral deserts' for major parties in parts of Great Britain and AV, as the table below suggests, can be more disproportional than FPTP.

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14

⁵⁴⁶ House of Commons Debates, 6th Series, Vol. 318, cols. 1083-1085, 5th November 1998

The 1997 general election result 'best guess' AV projection⁵⁴⁷

(Table 6)

	1997 General Election Result FPTP	1997 General Election two 'best guess' Prediction AV
Labour	419	452 or 436
Conservatives	165	96 or 110
Lib Dems	46	82 or 84
Others	29	29 (both)

For the remit to be met there had to be some modification to the maintenance of the constituency link.⁵⁴⁸ This led to the exploration of the suitability of STV, believing it “maximises voter choice, giving the elector power to express preference not only between parties but between different candidates of the same party” achieving a “significantly greater degree of proportionality.” Furthermore, “It avoids the problem of having two classes of member, as is the case with the Additional Member System.”⁵⁴⁹ However, as with Plant, STV was unfeasible, even as part of a hybrid scheme. Constituencies under STV would contain circa 350,000 electors entailing a “very long ballot paper and a degree of choice which might be deemed oppressive rather than liberating.”⁵⁵⁰ Additionally, it was deemed unlikely that electors would know significant differences between candidates from the same party and there was little evidence to suggest STV encourages participation. Furthermore, it would be difficult to reconcile using STV as part of a hybrid system, explaining to electors why in different parts of the country voters are using a different method for the same institution.⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴⁷ Report of the Independent Commission on the Voting System, pp. 25-26

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-28

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-33

Consequently, a mixed system was recommended – AV+, a variation of AMS, based on 80% of MPs representing parliamentary constituencies elected under AV, and the remaining 20% elected from county top-up areas – chosen “essentially from the British constituency tradition and proceeds by limited modification to render it less haphazard, less unfair to minority parties, and less nationally divisive in the sense of avoiding large areas of electoral desert for each of the two major parties.”⁵⁵² It was also argued to be the system that came closest to fulfilling the terms of reference, increasing, due to the AV element, choice, creating a more inclusive and consensual politics. Jenkins notes “AV counters one important objection to electoral reform. This is the tendency to transfer power from voters to the subsequent deals of politicians”⁵⁵³ due to AV’s ability to avoid coalitions and deliver majority governments. The accusation of two types of MP was considered unproblematic as in the nineteenth century there was a difference between borough and county MPs. However, the British electorate would have become normalised to single-member constituencies during the course of the twentieth century, having not experienced voting for borough and county MPs for a considerable period of time.

In the same fashion as Plant, Jenkins did “not recoil with horror from the very idea of coalitions, regarding them, on the basis both of British and of some foreign experience, as capable of providing effective and decisive governments” with the quality of the coalition depending on whether it was “honest.”⁵⁵⁴ Honest was defined by agreeing more with each other than those outside. Whether this is perceived as honest in the eyes of the electorate was not discussed. This was

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 34

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 38

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37

qualified by distancing from permanent coalition, preferring and regarding it more compatible with the terms of reference, as “when there is a strong surge in one political direction or the other, single-party governments, even if with somewhat under 50 per cent of the vote.”⁵⁵⁵ However, it was considered unacceptable to have a ‘hinge party’ – similar to that of the FDP in Germany which had a perpetual grip on power even switching sides, or the New Zealand First Party – and it was not believed “there is anything inherent in an additional member/top-up system which make it do so.”⁵⁵⁶ A substantial degree of proportionality could be attained with a top-up of 15-20%, elected through an ‘open list’ using the D’hondt method.⁵⁵⁷

The ‘top-up’ system, it was deemed by the Commission, would be unable to have a by-election. Instead, the next candidate on the list should be elected or, failing that, the position would remain unfilled until the next general election. Gerald Bermingham MP asked “How are the electorate to overturn a Government in the middle of their term of office if they cannot boot out the Government party at a by-election?”⁵⁵⁸ No threshold was to be imposed, unlike in Germany, but in order to win top-up MPs a party had to contest fifty per cent of the constituencies in the top-up region. Lipsey maintained the reason for a relatively small top-up element – a smaller percentage than either the Scottish Parliament or Welsh Assembly – was an attempt to avoid spooking MPs into thinking they will lose their seat and their own prospects.

“If you got rid of all constituencies you’re going to make every MP think that their seat is in danger and this is one of the big obstacles to electoral reform.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45

⁵⁵⁸ House of Commons Debates, 6th Series, Vol. 318, cols. 1068-1069, 5th November 1998

Never mind whether people think it will be good for their party, they want to know whether they'll keep their seat under it. We were proposing a 20 per cent change in electorates enough to make MPs nervous but most constituencies would have remained recognisable. If we'd recommended half the number of constituencies they would have asked 'am I going to get one?' 'How do I know I'll be on the List?' It wasn't very attractive to them and that was another factor in making the List element small and also making the List element not very proportional."⁵⁵⁹

The Note of Reservation

Alexander dissented from the view of the rest of the Commission, arguing that FPTP should be used in the constituencies rather than AV as it suffered from a number of defects: votes are cast for parties not individuals, MPs represent all constituents, it is undesirable to have a less confrontational style of politics, AV has the potential to heighten tactical voting, a lack of support for AV amongst political parties and pressure groups, Alexander recalled the Plant Report, and how the Labour Party did not endorse SV, Plant's suggestion. Indeed, Labour's submission only "highlighted criteria which pointed ambiguously towards either FPTP or AV." Moreover, FPTP was to be used in the constituency element for the devolved assemblies and the workings of AV entail only the second preferences or lower of the least successful candidates are counted, the haphazard impact of ranking candidates and its disproportionality towards unpopular party.⁵⁶⁰

Alexander's reservation was leaked to the *Financial Times* prior to the Commission's publication, at the behest of Lipsey, in an attempt to avoid the

⁵⁵⁹ Interview with Lord Lipsey, 21st January 2015

⁵⁶⁰ Report of the Independent Commission on the Voting System, pp. 53-55. Had the Commission opted for Alexander's preferred system of FPTP with top-up then Lipsey would not have signed the report. D. Lipsey, 'Keeping the plus in AV+', *Representation*, Vol. 37:3-4, (2000) p. 233

accusation 'Jenkins divided'. Lipsey did not consider that Alexander's dissent had undermined the argument proposed by the Commission.⁵⁶¹

Labour Party Submission to the Commission on Voting System

Labour's ruling National Executive Committee (NEC) submitted a document to the Commission on 6th July 1998, asking to "bear in mind the need for a system which sustains, open, stable and accountable Government."⁵⁶² The constituency link was and should continue to be the "bedrock of the parliamentary system...ensuring MPs are clearly representative of and answerable to a clearly defined group of electors"⁵⁶³ therefore making the retention of the constituency link vital in any alternative electoral system. Stable government was considered "a government which is generally able to last its full electoral term and which is also able to carry through its manifesto pledges"; deemed a "vital consideration" as in the United Kingdom it was expected the House of Commons would sustain a government with a clear mandate and also a strong opposition.⁵⁶⁴ Over the last fifty years Great Britain had enjoyed stable and representative government, aided by "the preponderance of single-party majority administrations." Crucial in a democracy, was the "power to throw out an unpopular government" and the submission deemed it should be maintained in any alternative to FPTP.⁵⁶⁵

The submission judged there to be a "trade-off between stable government and proportionality" with pure proportionality most likely to lead to coalition. Coalitions

⁵⁶¹ *Financial Times*, 'Jenkins vote reform proposals hit by split', Monday 26th October 1998; Interview with Lord Lipsey, 21st January 2015

⁵⁶² Labour Party Submission to the Commission on Voting System, 6th July 1998, Accessed LIPSEY/2/2, London School of Economics Special Collection, 05th January 2015

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*,

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*,

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*,

are “not by definition unstable” claimed the submission, but the process of forming a government can be “consuming and divisive, and small parties can gain a pivotal position where they wield power which is disproportionate to their degree of electoral support.”⁵⁶⁶ Additionally, the document declared “We do not believe the electoral system should result in perpetual coalition” nor “was a government illegitimate if it received less than fifty per cent of the vote.”⁵⁶⁷ In relation to broad proportionality, the submission desired the Commission to look into proportionality of representation and proportionality of power, for the two were deemed not to be the same. “It would be a mistake to place so much stress on pure proportionality of representation that small parties are given disproportionate power compared to the level of support in the country.”⁵⁶⁸

On the matter of voter choice, the document reasoned on two aspects: the choice of the individual voter and whether the overall result in terms of the Government supported by the House of Commons can be said to reflect the broad choice of the electorate as a whole. “Systems capable of producing clear winners help to ensure that governments are held to account between elections...Systems which inevitably lead to coalition can undermine the direct accountability which other systems produce” an “excuse for non-delivery of manifesto promises.” Post-election deals result in voters not knowing until “after they have voted the precise programme to which the resulting government will be committed.”⁵⁶⁹ The document highlighted the strength of opposition towards PR and, moreover, a satisfaction with FPTP emphasising many of its perceived benefits. The only vote

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*,

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*,

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*,

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*,

against the NEC document, according to the *Guardian*, was by Dennis Skinner, Labour MP for Bolsover, who totally opposes PR.⁵⁷⁰

Was the Commission Independent?

In light of the known views of the members of the Commission, it could be argued that it lacked 'independence', and therefore was disingenuous to call the Commission 'independent' given the sympathetic views towards electoral reform of those who sat on the committee. Baroness Gould thought "The Jenkins Commission was fundamentally different to the Plant Report. Whereas Jenkins started from the premise of change, Plant did not."⁵⁷¹ Lipsey considered that those who thought the Commission lacked independence were incorrect. "It was not our job to propose a system that we thought was superior to the existing system. Our job was to decide on what was the best of the alternatives to the existing system to put in front of the British people to decide in a referendum. There was no point having a FPTP chapter as that argument was to be put in the referendum campaign. We were just deciding the best alternative for the referendum."⁵⁷²

Where the Commission may have lacked independence is contact between members of the commission and the Prime Minister. Lipsey rejected claims that the recommendation was hatched in private between Blair and Jenkins: "Any suspicion that our conclusion resulted from secret negotiations between Lord Jenkins, Tony Blair and Paddy Ashdown... is unfounded."⁵⁷³ Yet Blair is reported to have met with Jenkins during the lifetime of the commission, which included

⁵⁷⁰ *Guardian*, 'Labour leaders sceptical of PR', 10th August 1998,

⁵⁷¹ Interview with Baroness Gould, 3rd March 2015

⁵⁷² Interview with Lord Lipsey, 21st January 2015

⁵⁷³ D. Lipsey, 'How we made up our minds', *The Economist*, 31st October 1998, p. 31

discussing how it was progressing. Jenkins informed Ashdown that Blair listened to the suggestion of a decentralised AMS-based system. Blair and Ashdown also debated in private this issue of thresholds – a party that won 45% of the vote or more should win over 50% of the seats, with Ashdown claiming the “Jenkins Commission proposals fell somewhat short of that.” Blair did not think it was “acceptable”, as only one post-war government would have been able to form a majority.⁵⁷⁴

However, for a political operator with a longstanding commitment to ‘breaking the mould’ of British politics through electoral reform, it would have been in the interests of Jenkins to keep Blair informed in the hope that he would be sympathetic to the recommendations. This consequently raises the question of whether it was pre-arranged that the commission would recommend AV+? Margetts and Dunleavy claim there is evidence that at Easter 1998 Jenkins and Blair met to discuss the interim ideas of the Commission. At the time the mixed system was to consist of two thirds constituency and one third top up. However, Blair is supposed to have rejected this possibility, on advice given by Mandelson and Number 10 staff, who warned the PLP would not accept such a radical change. Consequently, Blair allegedly asked Jenkins to look again at a system with more constituency MPs, as this had greater feasibility.⁵⁷⁵

Lipsey wrote an article titled ‘How we made up our minds’, stating the public influenced the commission’s decision by showing antipathy towards strengthening the influence of the party in placing candidates on the top-up lists. Consequently, top-up members were to be chosen locally for ‘smallish’ areas.

⁵⁷⁴ Ashdown, *Ashdown Diaries, Volume Two*, pp. 230-231, Wednesday 22nd July 1998; p. 235, Thursday 23rd July 1998

⁵⁷⁵ Margetts & Dunleavy, ‘Reforming the Westminster Electoral System’, in Fisher, *British Elections & Parties Review*, Vol. 9, p. 51

Additionally, voters would be able to decide between themselves which of each party's candidates they prefer. Importantly, and implying that the Commission was keen on receiving the backing of the three major political parties Lipsey wrote that the position of the major parties were taken into account. "Not wanting our report to join the ranks of previous reports on this subject gathering dust on library shelves, we did establish the parameters of Mr Blair's and Mr Ashdown's thinking as well as that of the Conservative Party." However, it was agreed the recommendation should not be what was most "expedient but what was right."⁵⁷⁶

The *Ashdown Diaries* suggest Blair, prior to the formation of the Commission, suggested one possibility would be "AV for the next election; the second, full proportionality after that. The Commission could recommend the ultimate destination but ought in our view to recommend the intervening staging-post of AV as well using the phrase 'The government may want to do this in two stages'.⁵⁷⁷ Stating categorically that this was the case is very difficult to substantiate. Regardless, this was the course of action promoted by Lipsey who pressed the matter with Jenkins. "The trick we missed was we should have recommended moving to AV and then considered the introduction of top-up lists as a second stage later on and then we might just have got AV through. This was a tremendous tussle within in the Commission as we had people who were more keen on proportionality, namely Bob Alexander."⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷⁶ Lipsey, 'How we made up our minds', *The Economist*, pp. 30-31

⁵⁷⁷ Ashdown, *The Ashdown Diaries, Volume Two*, p. 106, Tuesday 21st October 1997.

⁵⁷⁸ Interview with Lord Lipsey, 21st January 2015

Labour divisions over PR and the 1998 Labour Party Conference

In April 1998 the Labour government insisted the AV would fulfil the remit of the Jenkins Commission. Straw considered AV to be 'broadly proportional', adding the government planned to hold a referendum on PR well before the next general election. Yet, the government was not bound by the Commission's recommendations, which would have to be subject to Cabinet consideration, and if a referendum were to be held it could choose an alternative to FPTP of its own liking.⁵⁷⁹ In public, Blair remained 'unpersuaded' on the merits of PR, and his personal doubts may have been supplemented by the strength of feeling within the PLP. Around eighty Labour MPs had joined 'Keep the Link', an anti-PR campaign group. As the name implies, the group wished to 'retain the all-important constituency link' between MPs and voters. The backbench group, was led by Martin Salter, Labour MP for Reading West and included Dale Campbell-Savours – who devised SV advocated by the Plant Report – and Patricia Hewitt.⁵⁸⁰ If change were to take place then the greatest concession should be the AV.

The Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU), led by the General Secretary Ken Jackson, sought to lead a trade union and grass-root revolt against PR and as a result place increased strain on Labour – Liberal Democrat relations. "The campaign for PR is confined to the chattering classes and dining clubs of London" claimed Jackson. "PR is largely a metropolitan issue and one which working-class people have little sympathy for... Ordinary people voted

⁵⁷⁹ *Financial Times*, 'Electoral reform move will anger Lib Dems', 27th April 1998

⁵⁸⁰ See *Financial Times*, 'Blair sanctions support for diluted PR plan', 20th February 1998; 'Jockeying starts in race to replace First past Post', 9th June 1998. For more details on 'Keep the Link' see M. Cole, 'Party Policy and Electoral Reform: A survey of Developments, Motives and Prospects', in Fisher, *British Elections & Parties Review*, Vol. 9, pp. 79-80

Labour to improve schools, create jobs and rebuild the NHS, not to change the way we vote. PR would give more power to minorities, undermining our ability to govern.” £10,000 was to be provided for the circulation of Labour’s FPTP group leaflet stating “No serious Labour party member could countenance a change which would take the party from majority government to a situation where it might be frozen out of government or to a situation where Labour could be held hostage by minority parties.”⁵⁸¹ Stuart Bell, Chairman of the FPTP group, went further citing Labour’s past sense of betrayal at the hands of the Liberals; the 1924 Labour government and David Steel withdrawing from the Lab-Lib Pact.⁵⁸²

Gordon Brown held significant influence in the Cabinet and wider PLP, but had kept his views on electoral reform private. However, Robert Peston writing in the *Financial Times* affirmed Brown was strongly opposed to PR. Blair would on several occasions cite Brown as an impasse to electoral reform as Brown was in favour of FPTP and generally, bar Menzies Campbell and other individuals, the Liberal Democrats “were not to be trusted.”⁵⁸³ Brown did have a private meeting with Ashdown, stating that whilst he was not opposed to PR, the matter raised doubts and problems. “I am really frightened about factionalism in politics and really frightened about running a Cabinet in which individuals would have to run back to their own sections or groups to get validation for what they are doing.” Brown’s focus on ‘running a Cabinet’ suggests he was considering the implications of being Prime Minister in the late 1990s, long before he assumed the leadership. “There are those in the Labour Party” continued Brown, “who push for PR because they believe it will enable them to push Labour back on to a

⁵⁸¹ *Observer*, ‘Union declares war on Blair’s coalition dream’, 23rd August 1998; *Financial Times*, ‘Unions to fund move opposing electoral reform’, 11th September 1998

⁵⁸² *The Times*, ‘PR puts pressure on Lib Dems’, 25th September 1998

⁵⁸³ *Financial Times*, ‘Brown salvo may scupper Ashdown pact’, 30th July 1998; Ashdown, *The Ashdown Diaries, Volume One*, p. 426. Wednesday 8th May 1996; p. 436. Wednesday 6th June 1996; P. 484. Tuesday 3rd December 1996.

conventional left-wing agenda.”⁵⁸⁴ For Blair to go against a political heavyweight within the Labour Party in an attempt to appease a politician from another political party would have weakened his own position. Interestingly, Blair and Brown’s thoughts on electoral reform differ on means but arrive at the same ends. For Blair PR was the method that would permit a reuniting of the centre left, allowing him to marginalise the left wing of the Labour Party. Brown considered that FPTP was the best method of pursuing a centrist agenda, forcing the Labour Party to abandon a left-wing agenda by appealing to the median voter.

Whilst Blair is often viewed as a Prime Minister who by-passed Cabinet, utilising special advisors and those in his inner circle to discuss policy, the same tactic on this matter posed difficulties. To risk Cabinet divisions over PR in order to keep alive the ‘project’, with no political necessity would have entailed Blair exercising his authority on a matter not deemed a priority, thus damaging his position and the standing of his government. In addition Blair had to keep Prescott onside, understanding that whilst from different backgrounds and representing different wings of the Labour Party, he could only push his Deputy so far. On the matter of PR for Westminster and coalition with the Liberal Democrats Prescott was immovable, reportedly telling one campaigner for constitutional change “I’m not in fucking favour of fucking PR for anything.”⁵⁸⁵ In a meeting with Ashdown Prescott expanded on his reservations, being a “Labour man to the core”, not sharing Blair’s and Ashdown’s analysis of a schism on the political left, believing that it would “break up my party... I have no qualms about the Labour Party being in power time and time again, and in between taking our turn at defeat, too...I would not be prepared to support PR for the constituencies (Westminster). Under these

⁵⁸⁴ Ashdown, *Ashdown Diaries, Volume One*, p. 488. Wednesday 4th December 1996

⁵⁸⁵ *Sunday Telegraph*, ‘There’s more to PR than Public Relations’, 27th July 1997

circumstances I would oppose him privately and publicly.” Prescott claims that “he had told Tony that another no-go point for me would be if he had you lot in Cabinet...I don’t believe that Tony can carry our party on it either.”⁵⁸⁶ Prescott told Blair: “If Ashdown walks in the back door and gets a Cabinet job, I’m straight out the front door. It’s not a negotiable issue for me.” Prescott could see what Blair was attempting to do; creating “a party of the centre including the Liberal Democrats that would destroy the Tories and keep us in power for ever... I was totally against it. Prescott told Ashdown “(a) You’re a Lib, so I’d never join forces with you and (b) we don’t need you. We’ve got a massive majority and I don’t like Big Tents... It was a bloody stupid idea.”⁵⁸⁷

The 1998 Labour Party Conference saw the issue of electoral reform take centre stage. Edmonds, who had earlier in 1998 orchestrated a grassroots campaign to defend FPTP, considered “arms had been twisted” and the Labour Party leadership had conducted a “shabby little deal” to avoid a debate and vote on PR, which had been postponed as the NEC believed it would be “premature” to force a vote before Jenkins had reported. AEEU leader, Jackson, had also been involved in the FPTP campaign but bowed to pressure from the party leadership and had withdrawn a motion calling for FPTP to be retained. Jackson considered: “There is genuine diversity of opinion in our party. PR cannot become Labour’s EMU – a force for division, an excuse for open warfare.” Jackson then added a staunch defence of FPTP: “We can only go on serving our people if we keep the system that delivered that historic (1997) victory. PR would mean permanent Liberal coalitions.” “Think about the nightmare of Liberal Democrats calling the shots, and minority parties being able to veto parties on the back of a whim.”

⁵⁸⁶ Ashdown, *Ashdown Diaries, Volume Two*, pp. 168–169. Wednesday 18th February 1998

⁵⁸⁷ J. Prescott, *Prezza, My Story: Pulling No punches*, (Headline Publishing Group, London, 2008) p. 219

Stuart Bell, chairman of the FPTP Group of MPs won loud applause when he asked delegates to “Imagine, under PR, a deal with the Liberals, coalition government, Paddy standing in front of you speaking as Chancellor – that is not going to happen because under PR he could be at the Conservative party conference.”⁵⁸⁸

Prescott told *Breakfast with Frost* that he had never been a fan of PR. “I think the country is not very happy about it. We’ve said that we’ll have a look at it.” On whether Ashdown could survive as leader of the Liberal Democrats without a change of the electoral system, Prescott said “I’m not really interested in whether Paddy Ashdown survives or not. I’m talking about Labour Party policy.”⁵⁸⁹

Prescott would quip in Cabinet after Ashdown had stood down as Leader of the Liberal Democrats that he wanted “to hold a minutes silence for Paddy’s career.”⁵⁹⁰ Blair delivered a riposte to those within Labour who opposed closer links with the Liberal Democrats, returning to a theme he had outlined in opposition. “My message to my own party is in a sense there is a longer-term, bigger picture here which is about people who basically agree”, declaring “We’re all modern social democrats, a large part of the Liberal Democrats are in that position and where we do agree we should be working together. Let’s not be tribal about all this.” Echoing his belief in reuniting the centre-left Blair considered, “What is important is to recognise that politics has undergone a huge change, here and round the world, and I just believe in doing what is sensible. If people do agree then why not try to work together?”⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁸ See *Guardian*, ‘Row over scrapped PR vote’, 2nd October 1998; *Daily Mail*, ‘Paddy’s PR dream is shelved’, 2nd October 1998; *Financial Times*, ‘Leaders accused of ‘shabby deals’ on PR vote’, 2nd October 1998

⁵⁸⁹ *The Times*, ‘Ministers gang up against proportional representation’, 28th September 1998

⁵⁹⁰ A. Campbell, *Volume 2, Power and the Peoples, 1997-1999*, (Arrow Books, London, 2011) p. 638 Thursday 21st January 1999

⁵⁹¹ *Guardian*, ‘PM warning on electoral reform delay is problem for Ashdown’, 28th September 1998

During his afternoon question and answer session, Blair took a more conciliatory approach: “I understand it is an important issue, but frankly schools, hospitals, crime, industry and jobs – these are also very, very important.” Blair went on to say “There will be no decision taken on this unless the party is fully and completely involved. It is far too important a decision to be done in any other way. We will proceed with care once this report is published.”⁵⁹² Minimising divisions amongst Cabinet ministers and the wider PLP was the priority of the leadership, whilst also avoiding accusations of renegeing on its commitment to hold a referendum on electoral reform. A conference vote against PR and in favour of FPTP would have been a repeat situation of 1995, allowing Blair to have his hands tied by conference, permitting him to drop a commitment which threatened to split his party and cabinet. Yet the bigger picture for Blair was keeping open the option of bringing Liberal Democrats into government, which would have been derailed if the referendum commitment had been dropped.

Reaction to the publication of Jenkins

Margaret Beckett, the Leader of the House and therefore in control of the Government’s legislative programme, a week before the publication of Jenkins poured cold water on the Commission and the wider ‘project’. Manifesto commitments were simply a “declaration of intent and goodwill”, not a list of what the Government would deliver in Parliament. “One cannot take manifestos as being a list for the Queen’s speeches.”⁵⁹³ Following the publication of Jenkins it was reported that Blair told the Cabinet, “We’ve got to manage this process and manage it well”, issuing a statement: “I welcome it warmly. The report makes a

⁵⁹² *Ibid.*,

⁵⁹³ *Guardian*, ‘Beckett plays down early PR referendum’, 23rd October 1998

well-argued and powerful case for the system it recommends. It's very much a modification of the existing Westminster system rather than any full-blown PR system as practised in other countries." If Ashdown and Jenkins were expecting a positive response, a 'well-argued and powerful case for the system it recommends' would have been disappointing, offering no guarantee of Blair's support for PR. Blair is reported to have told cabinet ministers that only he and Jack Cunningham, minister for the Cabinet Office, were empowered to speak at length on electoral reform. Cunningham was known to be keen on electoral reform whereas others were allowed to "give their views if asked" but were not to campaign. This was "unsustainable" according to one unnamed cabinet minister and "all the ingredients (were) in place for a cabinet revolt."⁵⁹⁴ According to Campbell once it became apparent the leadership were attempting to help Ashdown and strike the balance Blair desired, the Cabinet "basically knew it (PR) was for the long grass."⁵⁹⁵

The Jenkins Commission proposals were met with strong opposition from a cross-party group including Labour backbenchers, trade unionists, Conservatives and the Institute of Directors. A press release from Labour FPTP campaign group, stated: "The proposal that 15-20 per cent of MPs should be chosen by a list system breaks the constituency link between MPs and electors." Bell continued: "This recommendation would add to the volatility of the electoral system by institutionalising tactical voting and making coalition government inevitable." Channel 4 conducted a poll of Labour's Campaign Group, finding four-fifths thought voting reform could produce a split within the Labour Party and the formation of a breakaway party. Ken Jackson considered Jenkins to be

⁵⁹⁴ *Guardian*, 'Jenkins PR plan redraws political map', 30th October 1998; *Financial Times*, 'Blair backs radical plan for voting overhaul', 30th October 1998

⁵⁹⁵ Campbell, *Power and the Peoples*, p. 546, Thursday 29th October 1999

“irrelevant” to the concerns of the British electorate. “Labour will win the next election by delivering what it promised, not by appeasing the Liberals. The government was elected to reform the welfare state, improve our schools and rebuild the NHS – it must not allow Liberals to hijack its agenda for Britain.”⁵⁹⁶ It was reported in the *Financial Times* that at least 100 Labour backbenchers were making common cause with the Tory party and trade unionists to block the changes⁵⁹⁷, highlighting a significant section of the Labour Party were manoeuvring to ensure the proposals were rejected.

A parliamentary debate took place in the House of Commons on 5th November 1998. Straw opened the debate and only offered faint-praise for the report stating he was “extremely grateful to...the commission and its staff for their considerable work in bringing together the Report in relatively short time”. The Report had “a number of important points of detail...to be resolved”, a task which “would plainly take time”. Straw reiterated that “the process certainly could not be completed before the next general election” and that the government “will not rush into holding a referendum.” There was also the need to study the Neill Committee’s report on party funding and the wider constitutional changes enacted by the Labour government.⁵⁹⁸ Straw’s comments suggest that any government impetus for reform was on the wane, with the Home Secretary willing to bury PR behind other matters. Straw had ‘damned Jenkins with faint-praise’.

Then followed the opportunity for Labour backbenchers to pass judgement: Gerald Kaufman considered the report to be “glutinously euphuistic as well as being intellectually shoddy”; with the effect of AV+ being “fewer Labour seats”

⁵⁹⁶ *Financial Times*, ‘Foes of change united in an unlikely alliance’, 30th October 1998

⁵⁹⁷ *Financial Times*, ‘Foes of change’, 30th October 1998; *Daily Mail*, ‘Blair votes for a delay on ballot box shake-up’, 30th October 1998.

⁵⁹⁸ House of Commons Debates, 6th Series, Vol. 318, cols. 1036-7, 5th November 1998

and “Lord Jenkins's own party will enjoy the greatest enhancement.” In a referendum the Labour Party would be “split.” Kaufman offered eight reasons why the Jenkins Commission should be rejected: hopelessly complicated, complex and confusing ballot paper, the report is self-contradictory, top-up mechanism is arbitrary, disparately sized and disparately elected top-up constituencies, potentially insoluble problem of filling vacant top-up seats, the current system works and there is an inbuilt bias against Labour in AV+.⁵⁹⁹

Giles Radice entered parliament as “an unquestioning supporter of first past the post” yet changed his mind for three main reasons: the Thatcher government elected on a percentage in the low forties, FPTP is unfair towards the Liberals and Labour’s inability to win seats in the South of England.⁶⁰⁰ Anne Campbell, MP for Cambridge desired a ‘fairer’ voting system under which “Parliament better represents the views of the voters” believing “a large proportion of votes do not count.” This has resulted in “tactical voting” which was “unfair to the Conservative Party” in 1997 but could “equally be unfair to other parties” in subsequent elections. “The adversarial system is extremely off-putting to a large proportion of the electorate, particularly women.” Moreover, “There is no room in the system for taking on board someone else’s view, or to consider a range of opinion.”⁶⁰¹

Tony Benn MP affirmed:

“The idea that every Liberal or Labour voter supports every item of Liberal or Labour party policy is absolute nonsense. People want to be represented.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, cols. 1044-6, 5th November 1998. Elsewhere, Kaufman considered the PR enthusiasts in Labour should “identify the hundred volunteers who would sacrifice their seats in order to achieve ‘fair voting’.” *Guardian*, ‘Not so fair, after all’, 7th June 1999

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, cols. 1049-1050, 5th November 1998

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, cols. 1057-1059, 5th November 1998

Introducing proportionality completely destroys the idea of representation... (leading) to people being governed by a Government whom nobody had voted for, because nobody would know the basis of the coalition on polling day. At least the coalitions of the parties are transparent: people can see them developing and know what they are voting for and what their own Member thinks... The idea that the parliamentary Labour party would go through the Lobby to destroy 50 of its own Members... is ludicrous. People ask whether the proposals would lead to a coalition; but they are all about getting a coalition."⁶⁰²

Roger Godsiff supported the AV recommendation but not the top-up element as in Birmingham where the Liberal Democrats polled 11.8 per cent they would have won an extra seat. "It is illogical. If one wants to give more seats to the Liberals, so be it...but it is nonsense to give them localised democratic legitimacy in this way."⁶⁰³ Martin Salter MP also supported electoral reform but wished to maintain the constituency link. Salter believed "that the system is a recipe for civil war inside the Labour Party. The constituencies of many Labour Members are surrounded by those of other Labour Members. Will we spend the next three, four, five or eight years deciding which of our number will be chopped? I think not. This system is not a recipe for a cohesive parliamentary party."⁶⁰⁴ Bell considered Jenkins was "trying to increase the number of Liberal Democrat Members of Parliament." FPTP "has given us stable government. It gives us the constituency link...it provides accountability. It also gives us the doctrine of mandate...Every party puts forward its proposals in a general election and the

⁶⁰² *Ibid.*, cols. 1053-1055, 5th November 1998. Benn is alleged to have told Neil Kinnock that he was opposed to PR because under such a system, he, Benn, would be 599th on the list, while Dennis Skinner would be 600th. Neil Kinnock is supposed to have replied 'Do you want that in writing?' See Vernon Bogdanor's submission to the Independent Commission on the Voting System, 1998

⁶⁰³ *Ibid.*, cols. 1061-1062, 5th November 1998.

⁶⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, Cols. 1071-1073, 5th November 1998

country votes on them. The manifesto is there; we are there to fulfil the manifesto commitments. If we fail, we should say why. If we are not successful, the public have a chance to turn us out.”⁶⁰⁵

Richard Burden, MP for Northfield, supported Jenkins arguing that the constituency link was maintained, the top-up list will empower voters and “coalitions are good or bad depends not on the electoral system, but on whether the electorate gives a clear view and whether the coalitions are honest, open and transparent.”⁶⁰⁶ Robert Wareing MP for Liverpool West Derby considered “PR would mean coalitions being cobbled together in back rooms by politicians. It is an electoral system for politicians” whereas FPTP “is an electoral system for the people of this country.” Furthermore, it would not be the case that the Liberal Democrats would support the Labour Party and he asked the question who would give way for Ashdown to have a seat in the cabinet.⁶⁰⁷ Claire Ward MP for Watford in all her years campaigning for the Labour Party had not come across a Labour voter who was voting Labour in order for them to change the electoral system. “The electorate vote for a party and a candidate to form a Government” and people wanted a “Labour government implementing their policies, not forming a coalition with the Liberal Democrats.”⁶⁰⁸

Elsewhere, Alan Johnson recalls a meeting in 1999 with Tony Blair, Oona King and other “PR enthusiasts.” Blair, in Johnson’s opinion, “was never in that camp but he wasn’t hostile” due to the influence of Jenkins. At this time, Blair “was at his absolute pomp, we’d just had the Good Friday Agreement, he was walking on water.” However, he told the meeting “frankly ‘even with all my influence with the

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, cols. 1064-1066, 5th November 1998

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, cols. 1075-1077, 5th November 1998

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, cols. 1083-1085, 5th November 1998

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, cols. 1087-1089, 5th November 1998

PLP I do not think I could get this through.’ Blair had picked up that the mood had changed, we’d won. It looked like we would be in power for a long period of time... why should we let the Tories back in?” Johnson speculated “Whether Tony thought it would be unwise for him as leader of the party is another thing...He would have a real fight on his hands for them to water down the overall majority, as it undoubtedly would have done.”⁶⁰⁹

When asked whether Blair had the political capital to carry AV+ through Cabinet, with many members hostile, Johnson considered Blair would have done. However, he had “used up a lot of collateral” such as the battle with “Gordon Brown on raising the level of spending on the NHS to the European average.” Blair “probably thought there were bigger battles to win than this.” The Labour government was committed to eradicating “child poverty, building 3,000 sure start centres, rescuing the NHS, getting the long waiting lists down, policies which were put ahead of the issues of great interest to the chattering classes, not really to their constituents.” It was possible if he “had have put his weight behind at that time with all the pro-electoral reform people within the party” and he “would have had the Liberal Democrats with him.” The question for Blair was “how much collateral would I use up in doing it.”⁶¹⁰ Charles Clarke agrees that Blair would have had to exercise his authority, but “he wasn’t prepared to do that. The fundamental existential reason for doing it was not apparent.”⁶¹¹

⁶⁰⁹ Interview with Alan Johnson MP, 23rd October 2015

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*,

⁶¹¹ Interview with Charles Clarke, 21st May 2014

Jenkins for the 'long grass'

Over the thirteen years of a Labour government, no referendum on the electoral system materialised and Jenkins was 'kicked into the long grass'. The reasons for this are varied. Mandelson cites the example of the referenda in Scotland and Wales as a cause of retreating enthusiasm. "Both of which had been won" writes Mandelson, "but by an extremely narrow margin in Wales, Tony's appetite for a further public vote was waning."⁶¹² Furthermore, the Labour Party was elected on a manifesto commitment to hold a referendum on the United Kingdom's adoption of the euro currency. If Blair was "worried about the obstacles to holding and winning a referendum on the single currency" thought Mandelson, "he knew that those to remaking Britain's voting system were likely to prove even more difficult."⁶¹³ Moreover, if the Labour government were willing to hold a UK wide referendum on the electoral system then the calls to hold a referendum on the single currency would have likely increased, thus pressurising the government into holding a potentially divisive referendum for both party and country.

Blair had informed Ashdown prior to the publication of Jenkins that he would be unable to deliver PR before the next general election. Blair outlined his reasoning: "there was so much constitutional change going through we had to watch out for overload, added to which we needed to see how it worked elsewhere" echoing the theme mentioned earlier that 'enough is enough'. Blair "was not convinced and in any case could not get it through Cabinet" as he was isolated. Campbell also claims that the media "thought we were going to kick it out."⁶¹⁴ Opposition within Cabinet and the wider PLP was considerable. Prescott

⁶¹² Mandelson, *The Third Man*, p. 258

⁶¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 258

⁶¹⁴ Campbell, *The Blair Years*, p. 323. Sunday 13th September 1998; p. 545, Thursday 27th October 1998

was joined by Beckett, Straw and Blunkett. Exercising his authority as a high-profile Cabinet Minister would have weakened Blair's position. At the Labour Party Conference in 2000, Prescott scorned links with the Liberal Democrats and attempted to bury PR. "Put it (PR) in a boat and send it away with the Lib/Labs" and Prescott had "seen nothing (in the 1970s) or nothing since that convinces me that PR is in the nation's interests of stable government. I've never been a fan of it."⁶¹⁵ Referring back to the Callaghan government was an indirect criticism and warning to Blair about his desire to re-unite the centre left.

The lack of support in the Cabinet and the dominance of those hostile to reform meant there was a lack of high-profile pro-reform ministers and MPs who could pressurise Blair, convince fellow MPs and build support for the movement away from FPTP. Robin Cook – who was famously described as being in "a minority of one"⁶¹⁶ – had other PR sympathisers in Cabinet, including Mo Mowlem, the Northern Ireland Secretary, along with Chris Smith, the Culture Secretary, and therefore was not a lone voice. Baroness Armstrong deemed that although Cook was very knowledgeable and intellectual he was never a "clubbable person" and was therefore "not a good champion of the cause as he could not persuade his colleagues it was a good idea." In addition, Armstrong who joined Cabinet in 2001, could not "recall anyone else who was on his side" until Alan Johnson joined the Cabinet at a much later date.⁶¹⁷ For Mandelson, Blair "had not convinced enough people that this was a good thing to do in principle and therefore when the electoral need disappeared the support that existed for it disappeared as well."⁶¹⁸ Colleagues therefore had not been convinced on an

⁶¹⁵ *Guardian*, 'Prescott scorns links with Lib Dems'; *Financial Times*, 'Prescott urges party to ditch Lib-Lab links and PR plans'; *The Times*, 'Prescott buries PR project', 25th September 2000.

⁶¹⁶ Ashdown, *Ashdown Diaries: Volume Two*, p. 120. for 3rd November 1997

⁶¹⁷ Interview with Baroness Armstrong, 16th July 2014

⁶¹⁸ Interview with Lord Mandelson, 31st March 2015

intellectual level. Moreover, with each Cabinet Minister focusing on their own department and facing the practical constraints of holding high office, there was a limited amount of time that could be spent on promoting electoral reform.

It was also “incomprehensible” for some, deemed Mandelson, that after winning an historic landslide victory “we should contemplate dealing away cabinet seats on the hypothesis that it might help keep the Tories from returning to power ten years down the road.” Having won such a big majority, and given the poor state of the Conservative Party, there was little prospect of defeat in the foreseeable future. Mandelson continues: “What ultimately killed the prospect in the late 1990s was that neither side was ready to sign up to the only workable deal: baseline of two Lib Dem cabinet members and a gradual move towards a simple AV voting system.” Blair “might have signed up to this” but Ashdown “insisted on a larger number of cabinet seats, a governing ‘coalition’, and a proportional voting system, not just AV.”⁶¹⁹ Given the weight of support in favour of FPTP, AV alone would have faced considerable opposition. At a Cabinet meeting in early 1999 Campbell noted, “Dobson and Blunkett said people were not sure what the purpose of the Libs strategy was, and David was unsure our people meant it when they said they wanted a new politics.”⁶²⁰

However, whilst Mandelson claims he was in favour of ‘the project’, a different picture emerges in the *Ashdown Diaries*. By July 1998 Mandelson expressed the worry that “it will be viewed, not as like-minded people coming together in the national interest, but as a crude attempt by the government to buy off the opposition and create an even greater hegemony. Secondly, the Jenkins proposals will, as you know, split the Cabinet, probably around 50/50...this is

⁶¹⁹ Mandelson, *The Third Man*, pp. 258-259

⁶²⁰ Campbell, *Power and the Peoples*, p. 638, Thursday 21st January 1999

something very, very big on which you will find a large number of your Cabinet members opposed.” In Mandelson’s mind there was the problem of how the British public would perceive coalition, and also how Blair would get this through Cabinet especially before the agreed November 1998 timetable. Furthermore, according to Roger Liddle, it was Mandelson who “has been trying to persuade Blair that he can’t win a referendum on PR” and had stated it could not be won in September.⁶²¹

Mandelson replied in *The Times* acknowledging that Ashdown blamed him for blocking the switch to PR. However, Mandelson was only prepared to support the switch to PR if this was the Prime Minister’s will.

“In the event it was not. To Ashdown this looked pusillanimous. But the problem was that Blair was far from convinced either that PR was desirable (because of the political instability it brings) or that the public would go for it in a referendum. A referendum vote lost would have meant losing the issue for a generation or more. Is this what Ashdown wanted to risk, we kept asking?”

Blair maintained that if the Liberal Democrats were to become a party of government then they must have firm policies on economic and social issues, not just constitutional reform and PR. However, the reason why Blair continued to engage Ashdown resides in Blair’s opinion of what the ‘project’ was about.

“He was willing to consider electoral reform not least because he inherited a commitment from John Smith to hold a referendum and there was a significant constituency of support for PR in the Labour Party. Hence his willingness to

⁶²¹ Ashdown, *Ashdown Diaries*, pp. 224-225, Diary entry Tuesday 7th July 1998; p. 265, Diary entry Sunday 13th September 1998; p. 269. Diary entry Thursday 17th September 1998.

set up the Jenkins Commission on electoral systems. But, for him, the project was always more about an approach to politics based on co-operation and partnership rather than tribalism or electoral mechanics...Ashdown on the other hand, insisted that PR was the *sine quo non* of enduring co-operation.”⁶²²

Domestic and foreign affairs also prompted Blair to move away from PR. The Labour government had encountered difficulties with other European leaders whose coalition partners in their own country prevented them from taking a hard line over Kosovo. Campbell observed the problems facing Schroeder, the German Chancellor, and how in part this was caused by their political system which “weakened leaders. Why anyone backed PR for national government was beyond me. It is a recipe for weakness and every time I meet Schroeder that view is strengthened.”⁶²³ Mandelson reflected on the importance of continental politics on Blair’s attitude: “He looked at the European experience and rather than picking out the good examples where coalitions have worked, for example in Germany, he points to other examples, for example Belgium which he thinks produces a complete mess.”⁶²⁴

Elsewhere across Great Britain, AMS in Scotland and Wales had denied the Labour Party a majority in both devolved assemblies. Blair was said to be annoyed by the behaviour of the Liberal Democrats in Scotland, particularly in relation to tuition fees in coalition talks.⁶²⁵ This played into the hands of those who were already suspicious of the opportunism of the Liberal Democrats,

⁶²² *The Times*, ‘High cost of reform’, 19th September 2001

⁶²³ A. Campbell, *Power and Responsibility, 1999-2001, The Alistair Campbell Diaries, Volume Three*, (Arrow Books, London, 2012) p. 138

⁶²⁴ Interview with Lord Mandelson, 31st March 2015

⁶²⁵ *The Times*, ‘Crisis for Kennedy as Blair dumps PR’, 10th August 1999; *The Times*, ‘PR reforms languish in absence of leadership’, 26th October 1999

witnessing first hand their ability to hold the Labour Party hostage, something in their mind would happen at Westminster if PR was adopted for general elections. Additionally, the European elections – the first UK wide election to be held under PR – took place in June 1999, resulting in Labour’s representation reducing from 62 to 29, an election in which the Labour Party had finished second behind the Conservatives. A poll of 150 Labour MPs for BBC One programme *On The Record* in September 1998 had shown 58 per cent in favour of the new European electoral system. The Sunday following the European elections, this had reduced to 43 per cent, with a majority now in favour of returning to FPTP.⁶²⁶

Internally, opposition appeared to be mounting against abandoning FPTP. A consultation with rank-and-file Labour party members had produced 1,800 responses; 75 per cent were in favour of retaining FPTP, while 25 per cent backed AV Plus. Margaret McDonagh, then Labour Party General Secretary and known supporter of FPTP, believed that the Liberal Democrats were failing to woo Conservative supporters. Without the electoral benefit of Liberal Democrats undermining the Conservative Party the case of working with the Liberal Democrats was limited.⁶²⁷ Therefore, the referendum pledge should be dropped. Fraser Kemp, a member of Labour’s FPTP campaign, said: “This consultation has demonstrated the tremendous support that maintaining the current system has in our party. The prospect of having PR foisted upon us is getting ever more remote and hopefully we can kill it off altogether at the next conference.”⁶²⁸ However, the publishing of the results were claimed to be disingenuous: many of the 1,500 submissions received were postcards printed by the AEEU, a trade union who backed FPTP, and not all submissions had been analysed by officials.

⁶²⁶ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/events/euros_99/news/368450.stm (Accessed 27th January 2015).

⁶²⁷ *Financial Times*, ‘Labour party rank-and-file hostile to poll reform’, 5th January 2000

⁶²⁸ *The Times*, ‘Vote against PR dashes Blair hope of Lib-Lab pact’, 5th January 2000

In addition, McDonagh opposed PR, leading the *Guardian* to ponder whether it was a calculated leak by Labour.⁶²⁹ Given the overall lack of responses it could be argued the 'rank-and-file' had displayed apathy towards the issue. The GMB Union also attempted to thwart a manifesto commitment appearing at the 2001 general election by submitting an amendment to the National Policy Forum.⁶³⁰

The lack of enthusiasm for reform was such that the 2001 Labour Party Manifesto commitment on proportional representation was buried behind other constitutional changes already made by the Labour government.

"We will review the experience of the new systems (for the devolved administrations, the European Parliament and London Assembly) and the Jenkins Report to assess whether changes might be made to the electoral system for the House of Commons. A referendum remains the right way to agree any change for Westminster."⁶³¹

Summary

Reforming FPTP had an underlying importance for the relationship between the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats, specifically Blair and Ashdown. PR was the mechanism, in Ashdown's opinion, that would ensure the Liberal Democrats could survive during unpopular periods for the junior partner in government, allowing for continued support towards a Labour government whilst also allowing for a more open and pluralistic British politics. Indeed, Ashdown placed such emphasis on the introduction of PR that his position as leader of the Liberal

⁶²⁹ *Guardian*, 'Labour rivals row over claims that grassroots reject PR', 6th January 2000

⁶³⁰ *Financial Times*, 'Union thwarts progress on electoral reform', 14th June 2000

⁶³¹ 'Ambitions for Britain', Labour Party Manifesto, 2001

Democrats was reliant on Labour delivering such a pledge, providing him with a policy concession that would appease both MPs and supporters.

For Blair, a coalition – whether a loose arrangement or with Liberal Democrats in Cabinet – offered political and ideological benefits. Politically, Blair was unsure whether he would achieve a parliamentary majority – a view he held up to the last few days of polling – and wanted to be in a position to be able to offer the Liberal Democrats something should a hung parliament emerge. Moreover, Blair wanted to bind the Liberal Democrats into a position where they would back the Labour government on most policies, particularly the constitutional reform agenda, thus preventing them peeling off and resorting to typical ‘Lib Demery’ and opportunism. Such a tactic would avoid the situation whereby both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives could attack the Labour government over the lifetime of the parliament, especially once the honeymoon period had worn off and the government was becoming unpopular. In addition, it would allow Blair to marginalise the left wing of the Labour Party, showing the electorate that he was a ‘centrist’ and willing to work with the centre; a visible break from ‘Old Labour’.

On a theoretical level, Blair saw merit in the ‘progressive left’ thesis, subscribing to a more pluralistic vision of the British left. Personally and politically Blair aligned closely to the social-liberal wing of the Liberal Democrats believing their views overlapped, supporting a broadening of cooperation within Labour’s ‘big tent’ of support in the country and parliament. ‘The project’ was worth pursuing for the reasons outlined above, yet Blair had reservations about PR and whilst it opened up an avenue to the Liberal Democrats it was not a policy concession he was willing to make, a result in the main due to high-profile opponents of PR in Cabinet and the wider PLP. PR and coalition with the Liberal Democrats was a minority pursuit, the existential reason for committing to one or both did not exist

and with the Conservatives in disarray, it appeared Labour would remain in office for a prolonged period of time. The 1997 general election result had given the Labour Party no cause to seek the support of the Liberal Democrats, and after winning the greatest victory in Labour Party history, Blair was not willing to push his party towards doing a deal with the Liberal Democrats.

Labour fulfilled their manifesto commitment insofar as a Commission was formed to look at the electoral system. The decision to appoint Jenkins – who had a personal relationship with Blair – was a political move designed to reach out beyond ‘tribal’ Labour, yet from the outset left many in Labour uncomfortable as a politician who had broken away from them in the 1980s had now been charged with devising a system that would, in all likelihood, reduce the number of Labour MPs. Straw’s terms of reference for the Commission were irreconcilable, and although little attention was paid to these once the Commission had embarked on its work, it suggested the government had asked the Commission to deliver the impossible. As Lipsey affirmed, the Commission was not there to ‘square the circle’ and address theoretical issues, but to devise a system that could be put before the British people in a UK-wide referendum. Indeed, it was hoped the system chosen offered the greatest chance of success, rather than being the ‘best’ form of PR. The system devised was AV+, a variation of AMS, with only a small number of top-up seats based on a county system. Jenkins, unlike Plant, was from the outset an overtly political exercise, starting from the premise of change, designed to keep the possibility of a coalition alive, delivering the commitments Blair had made to Ashdown in private.

Whilst much discussion took place on the prospects of closer relations between the two parties after May 1997, both the ‘project’ and the introduction of the Jenkins proposals disappeared into the ‘long grass’. Had Blair chosen to pursue

his relationship with Ashdown and introduce PR it risked splitting the Cabinet, the wider PLP and the trade unions for the sake two issues that many in the Labour movement didn't much care for. In the process, Blair risked damaging his own position over an issue which was not deemed a priority and for which there was no political necessity. Consequently, as Labour and the Liberal Democrats drifted apart over the course of the parliament, the possibility of a realignment of the British left faded along with the prospect of PR at Westminster.

Chapter 5 - The end of New Labour and the Alternative Vote Referendum, 2011

The Alternative Vote (AV) Referendum provides the thesis with a convenient finishing point. After many years of discussing electoral reform and manifesto commitments to hold a referendum the Labour Party was faced with a UK-wide vote. The early polling evidence suggested there was a considerable chance that there would be a movement away from FPTP. However, rather than viewing the AV Referendum as an individual event it is best viewed as part of a wider interest in AV, starting with Gordon Brown becoming Prime Minister and the ensuing coalition negotiations after the 2010 general election. Indeed, AV has often been put forward by reformers within Labour as a 'half-way house'; accepting the principle of reform but rejecting proportional representation (PR). The objective of this chapter is to examine and explore Brown's conversion to electoral reform having long been considered a supporter of FPTP, the five days of coalition negotiations that followed the 2010 general election – specifically Labour's attitude towards electoral reform and the idea of coalition government – and, finally the Labour Party's performance and arguments during the AV referendum.

Labour's continuing scepticism

The 2005 Labour Party manifesto stated the Party remained "committed to reviewing the experience of the new electoral systems – introduced for the devolved administrations, the European Parliament and the London Assembly." It also noted that the Labour Party's view remained that a referendum was "the right way to agree any change for Westminster."⁶³² The result of the 2005 general

⁶³² Labour Party Manifesto 2005, *Britain Forward Not Back*

election saw the Labour Party win a majority on only 35% of the vote across Great Britain and therefore a historic third successive general election. However, in England, the Conservatives were experiencing a revival; outpolling Labour by 50,000 votes, although Labour won 286 seats to the Conservatives 194, in part a result of the smaller urban constituencies favouring Labour. A brief outpouring emanated from electoral reformers in the weeks that followed the election, but a number of Labour's 'big hitters' sought to dispel calls for PR.

Straw dismissed those in the days following the 2005 general election, particularly the Liberal Democrats, who were advocating PR as it was not the panacea for all ills and the Labour Party had won the 2005 general election "fair and square." Whilst there had been a decline in the vote share for the two major parties and a case for AV could be made, FPTP was still preferable with the alternative being small parties on a considerably smaller vote share wielding disproportionate influence. The winner in any system necessarily gains much more power than those in opposition and FPTP had two major strengths; the constituency link and the 'contract' between electors and parties in the form of the manifesto. "Our people want strong majority government" wrote Straw, "not the mush of PR."⁶³³ Elsewhere Straw affirmed PR would allow "weak governments with limited mandates to hold on to power for decades and takes away the fundamental power of ordinary people to remove them." Consequently, "PR for the Commons would undermine our democracy, the effectiveness of our government and the relationship between electors and elected."⁶³⁴ Lord Falconer, the Lord Chancellor, also dismissed calls for reform remarking, "I don't think there is real groundswell for change." Furthermore, "The consequences of change

⁶³³ *Guardian*, 'There are no short cuts in democracy', 12th May 2005.

⁶³⁴ J. Straw, 'New Labour, Constitutional Change and Representative Democracy', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 63: 2, (2010) pp. 356-368

would be significant for the way we are governed without the clarity of who is in power”, a result of politicians becoming preoccupied with establishing coalitions.⁶³⁵

Therefore Labour had minimal interest in reforming FPTP. Moreover, in January 2008 the Labour government, as promised, produced its review of the electoral systems used in the United Kingdom, a largely factual report that drew attention to the problems associated with each electoral system and not making any firm recommendations for reform.⁶³⁶ The review was debated in the House of Lords and the government response did not suggest that change to the method of electing the House of Commons was imminent. The minister, Lord Hunt of King’s Heath, recognised the advantages of PR but added, “The disadvantages seem to be pretty fundamental as well.” He acknowledged that the existing electoral system delivered ‘core accountability’ and was believed to deliver a legitimate outcome.⁶³⁷

A noteworthy aside is Hattersley’s reasoning for coming out in favour of PR during the Labour government. During Labour’s first term Hattersley continued to profess the virtues of FPTP, dismissing Ashdown and the Liberal Democrats. “It is not the first time that one political party has stolen another’s clothes. But it is one of the rare occasions on which the dispossessed have shown so much admiration for the thieves. Perhaps because he believes so much that Blair believes, there is nothing else in honour that Ashdown can do. But he has become redundant. And his response to Jenkins will prove it. His only hope is to

⁶³⁵ *Guardian*, ‘Falconer warns against switch to PR’, 20th May 2005

⁶³⁶ Ministry of Justice, *Review of Voting Systems: The Experience of New Voting System in the United Kingdom since 1997*, CM 7304 (London: TSO, January 2008)

⁶³⁷ Quoted in P. Norton, ‘Brown’s New Constitutional Settlement? Constitutional Developments in 2007-08’, in M. Rush, & P. Giddings, (eds.) *When Gordon Took the Helm*, (Palgrave MacMillan, Hampshire, 2008) pp. 30-31

be given a place in the court of King Tony.”⁶³⁸ On the matter of the electoral system, the oft mentioned claim of ‘fair voting’ was “inaccurate, impertinent and an arrogant attempt to end the argument before it begins... The theory that democracy depends on parliament becoming a mathematical reflection of the percentage of votes cast for the rival parties is a simplistic absurdity. And the notion that the smallest party, in a three party system, should decide which of its more popular competitor’s forms the government is equally indefensible.”⁶³⁹ Importantly, “For Labour it would only mean the loss of what remains of its socialist identity” keeping “Labour in the soggy centre for ever.”⁶⁴⁰

Yet Hattersley warmed to PR, a result of Blair and the policies of New Labour, believing it would allow a more social democratic party to flourish, not to replace the Labour Party but to pull it to the left. “The attraction of a new voting system is the effect that new parties would have on Blair and his successors”, allowing “one or two new parties to flourish might produce what I hope is still possible in this country – a genuine social democratic government.”⁶⁴¹ Moreover, as the country had become more fractured and the political system had become multi-party, “whether I liked it or not, the future of this country would be coalition government.” It would be “better for people to know there was going to be a coalition government to begin with. If in fact we had PR, the electorate would know from the beginning they were not voting for a party that would win the election, they were voting for a part of a government. PR was a way of signalling that this country now accepts coalitions and you could go to the polls thinking about this rather than something else... PR would make it clear that there were

⁶³⁸ *Guardian*, ‘King Tony’s courtier’, 29th October 1998

⁶³⁹ *Guardian*, ‘Not so fair, after all’, 7th June 1999

⁶⁴⁰ *Guardian*, ‘Fighting the soggy centre’, 10th January 2000

⁶⁴¹ *Guardian*, ‘Maybe I was wrong after all’, 2nd June 2003

limitations on our power before we started.”⁶⁴² Hattersley’s change of mind emphasises how fluid attitudes towards electoral reform are.

Brown’s ‘death-bed’ conversion to electoral reform

Brown, having long been considered a FPTP supporter, announced as Prime Minister he would pursue electoral reform. Consequently it prompted questions of whether the basis for the reform was damascene or political expediency; genuinely convinced on the merits of reform or looking ahead towards a potentially difficult general election, hung parliament and coalition bargaining.

From the outset of his Premiership Brown displayed an interest in constitutional reform and toyed with the idea of a snap general election to be held by mid-2008 as the polls were pointing favourably towards Labour.⁶⁴³ Had Brown lost he would have been the shortest serving Prime Minister since George Canning in the nineteenth century. The plan was duly dropped, with the event dubbed the ‘election that never was’ and no fresh mandate was sought. Brown announced he would seek to address several constitutional issues, something designed to please the Liberal Democrats. The reforms ranged from limiting the executive’s Royal Prerogative Powers including the decision to declare war, making the executive more accountable, increasing public participation and considering a British Bill of Rights and Responsibilities. The ideas were to be found in a document called *The Governance of Britain*, with the foreword speaking of an intention to forge “a new relationship between government and the citizen, and

⁶⁴² Interview with Lord Hattersley, 17th November 2014

⁶⁴³ <http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/voting-intention-2005-2010> (Accessed 20th April 2015)

begin the journey towards a new constitutional settlement.”⁶⁴⁴ There was no mention of electoral reform.

However, as a gesture reminiscent of the Labour-Liberal Democrat talks in the 1990s, Brown talked of a ‘government of all the talents’ offering Ashdown the position of Secretary of State to Northern Ireland. Indeed, Brown’s attempts to ‘reach out’ included the suggestion of coalition to the then Leader of the Liberal Democrats, Sir Menzies Campbell. Three Liberal Democrat peers – Lord Lester, Lady Neuberger and Baroness Williams – accepted advisory posts, whilst retaining their independence and keeping the Liberal Democrat whip.⁶⁴⁵ Ashdown records that he could not observe collective responsibility in a Brown Cabinet and without the promise of PR the Liberal Democrats were being offered a “deadly suicide pill.” Brown thought such a move would pave the way for Liberal Democrat-Labour relations in the future, while on the matter of opposing this kind of government in 1997 it was because he could “not trust the Lib Dems in government then.”⁶⁴⁶

Brown mooted the idea of electoral reform in June of 2009 in a statement to the House of Commons containing other constitutional reforms. In the Commons, Brown affirmed:

“I still believe that the link between the MP and the constituency is essential and that the constituency is best able to hold its MP to account. We should be prepared to propose change only if there is a broad consensus in the country that it would strengthen our democracy and our politics by improving the

⁶⁴⁴ Her Majesty’s Government, *The Governance of Britain*, Cm. 7170, London, The Stationery Office, 2007, P. 5

⁶⁴⁵ M. Campbell, *My Autobiography*, (Hodder and Stoughton, 2008) pp. 278, 284

⁶⁴⁶ P. Ashdown, *A Fortunate Life*, (Aurum Press Ltd., London, 2009) pp. 374-377

effectiveness and legitimacy of both Government and Parliament and by enhancing the level and quality of representation and public engagement.”⁶⁴⁷

The commitment to hold a referendum on AV was made at the Labour Party Conference in September 2009.⁶⁴⁸ In a speech to the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) Brown made the case for AV: “As we seek to re-engage people and enhance public participation I believe we should ask the people to look afresh at whether the electoral system can enhance the mandate of the constituency MP, as well as engaging people further in the choice they have at the ballot box.” Brown committed to arguing and campaigning for such a change, and in “moving towards a more democratic form of election” the hope was “making parliament itself better reflect the people it serves.” AV “offers a system where the British people can, if they so choose, be more confident that their MP truly represents them, while at the same time remaining directly accountable to them.” The referendum – should a Labour government be elected – was to be held “before the end of October 2011.”⁶⁴⁹ However, at the meeting of the PLP Mullin records how there was opposition not just to incorporating a referendum into the Bill, but “a host of objections to any change whatsoever.” Mullin concluded: “The Parliamentary Labour Party is really a most conservative institution. In truth, however, it is all an irrelevance since, whatever we do, no Tory government is going to take the slightest notice... and stinks of desperation and self-interest.”⁶⁵⁰

⁶⁴⁷ House of Commons Debate, 10th June 2009, c798

⁶⁴⁸ Labour Party Conference, 2009

⁶⁴⁹ ‘Towards a new politics’, Speech by Gordon Brown to the IPPR, 2nd February 2010

⁶⁵⁰ C. Mullin, *Decline and Fall, Diaries 2005-2010*, (Profile Books, London, 2010) p. 414 dairy entry Monday 18th January 2010

The commitment was in part a response to the revelations released in the *Daily Telegraph* about MPs' expenses which was to quote Baston and Ritchie, "a godsend for electoral reformers."⁶⁵¹ FPTP, it was argued, had led to a culture of distant and remote MPs, a consequence of 'safe seats', leading MPs to assume immunity from criticism and wrongdoing. On the other hand, a proportional electoral system would make MPs more accountable to their constituents. Clive Betts MP rejected the argument that there was any clamour for reform amongst the electorate. Whilst voters wanted expenses to be cleaned up they did not think PR was the answer.⁶⁵² As Table 7 below suggests, the size of an MPs majority had little bearing on the amount of money claimed as a majority of 5.1-10% led to the highest amount of expenses claimed. The amount of money claimed was more a case of the moral integrity of the MP. Yet reformers deemed AV would rectify trust in politics, and give better expression to the multi-party nature of British politics.

Average expenses repayment per MP, by size of majority⁶⁵³

(Table 7)



⁶⁵¹ Baston & Ritchie, *Don't Take No For an Answer*, p. 15

⁶⁵² *Daily Politics*, BBC2, Thursday 11th June 2009

⁶⁵³ F. McGuinness, *Alternative Vote Referendum 2011, Analysis of results*, Research Paper 11/44, (House of Commons Library, 19th May 2011) p. 19

Straw, when moving the *Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill* for a second time through the House of Commons stated: “Members will ask why we need to make the change now. The answer is that in the past 12 months, as everyone knows... we have seen a crisis of confidence in our political system and our politicians on a scale that none of us has witnessed before in our political lifetime. Trust has been profoundly damaged.”⁶⁵⁴ Not all members took so kindly to the suggestion they were corrupt and that corruption was a result of the electoral system. Tom Harris, then Labour MP for Glasgow South asked Straw rhetorically, whether he attributed the “stainless reputation of Italian politicians to the fact that the Italians have proportional representation?” Harris thought it was “utter nonsense” and a “complete myth to think the answer to the expenses scandal was changing the electoral system.”⁶⁵⁵

Ed Balls, a key Brown ally, was unconvinced on adding the AV referendum amendment to the Bill: “we’d have to think really hard about whether or not there’d be unified support for it, whether it would work for us in the run up to the election – and I have an open mind on that.”⁶⁵⁶ Balls, whilst claiming to have advocated reform since 2005 for reasons to do with turnout and participation, was thought to be a sceptic on electoral reform. One senior minister outlined the ‘credibility’ problem facing Labour. “How do you think it’s going to look if we are fiddling the rules on how to get rid of us just weeks before an election?”⁶⁵⁷ In an interview with the *New Statesman* in the days before the 2010 general election Balls dismissed PR, in what was thought to be a direct riposte to other Cabinet Ministers, including Ben Bradshaw, Alan Johnson and John Denham. “PR leads

⁶⁵⁴ House of Commons Debates, 09th February 2010, Vol: 505, Col. 798

⁶⁵⁵ Quoted in *Independent*, ‘Gordon Brown to ditch first-past-the-post voting system’, 2nd February 2010.

⁶⁵⁶ LabourList, ‘Our strategy is quintessential, classic New Labour’, <http://labourlist.org/2010/01/our-strategy-is-quintessential-classic-new-labour-the-ed-balls-interview/> (Accessed 1st November 2015)

⁶⁵⁷ *The Times*, ‘Special vote to block more powers for MPs’, Thursday 28th January 2010

to a politics of behind-closed doors deals after elections. It makes it harder to make long-term decisions and it gives more power to small parties.” As a matter of principle Balls did not think “coalition governments are better” as they are “not the British way of doing government.” Importantly, he could still work with the Liberal Democrats although a realignment of the left was not the correct course for the Labour Party. “Some people have said that it would be the fulfilment of New Labour to enter a coalition with the Liberals... actually the whole point of New Labour was to show we could govern for the whole country... as the Labour Party”⁶⁵⁸ returning to themes outlined by Blair’s dismissal of PR in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Pressure from within

Johnson, a vocal advocate of electoral reform, wrote that there should be a referendum on the same day as the next general election with the electorate asked whether they want AV+, the system proposed by Jenkins. Furthermore, it was reported in one newspaper Johnson would trigger a by-election and stand on a platform in favour of PR. Johnson’s position was in part influenced by the ‘safe seat’ mentality which, in his opinion, ought “at least be an aspect of the accusation that MPs became careless in their expenses claim and dismissive of their electorate.”⁶⁵⁹ Johnson admitted he had visited Brown and the Prime Minister was “seized by AV+” with the matter being discussed on a “sub-committee.” However, the consensus that emerged was due to the influence of “people like Peter Hain, (who) thought that it should be AV, without the Plus.” AV+ would have involved a redrawing of the boundaries and a reduction in

⁶⁵⁸ *New Statesman*, ‘I urge Lib Dems to bite their lip and back us’, 4th May 2010

⁶⁵⁹ *The Times*, Monday 25th May 2009, Johnson reiterated the argument in the *Independent*, Wednesday 8th July 2009

constituencies, consequently “*real politik*”, led to a coalescing “around what was possible and that was AV.”⁶⁶⁰

Ben Bradshaw recalls there “being widespread support for it as a policy” around the Cabinet.⁶⁶¹ Seldon and Lodge record that within Cabinet, Jim Murphy and Andy Burnham were against, whereas those in favour included Ed and David Miliband, Johnson, Hain, Bradshaw and Andrew Adonis. Consequently, Bradshaw’s assertion that there was widespread support for AV appears questionable. Seldon and Lodge list only six members of Cabinet who were willing to support the proposal, suggesting only a minority of Cabinet Ministers backed AV and therefore Bradshaw was overstating the level of support. Straw reportedly took soundings of the PLP and found that all the Scottish MPs totally against as electoral reform would damage Labour in Scotland. As for Johnson’s idea of holding a referendum on the same day as the general election, the Cabinet Office informed Brown that there was not the parliamentary time to make that possible. Furthermore, there was doubt a referendum could be won, and ‘no’ votes could have a negative impact on Labour support. Nick Brown, the Chief Whip, steered Labour’s *Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill* through the Commons with only three Labour MPs voting against. It was reported that Nick Brown was informing sceptics not to worry as it was not going to be enacted before the general election.⁶⁶²

⁶⁶⁰ Interview with Alan Johnson MP, 23rd October 2015

⁶⁶¹ Interview with Ben Bradshaw MP, 21st October 2015

⁶⁶² A. Seldon, & G. Lodge, *Brown at 10*, (Biteback Publishing Ltd, London, 2010) pp. 418-419. On whether AV would have benefitted Labour MPs in Scotland in 2015, Tom Harris rejected the notion of “journalists (who) were tweeting ‘I bet MP’s like Tom Harris wish they’d voted for AV now’, which made no sense at all... under AV my result would have been no different, and even if the percentages had been different, there is no guarantee that would have helped me or the SNP. You don’t know which way the preferences are going to go. It was a nonsensical argument.” Interview with Tom Harris, 2nd October 2015

The Times reported that up to 100 Labour MPs had expressed interest in electoral reform and, whilst there was support in the Cabinet, there was no enthusiasm to have a referendum on the same day as the next general election. Johnson rejected the accusation that the policy change on electoral reform was based on political calculations and the desire to secure the support of the Liberal Democrats. Instead, Johnson was “simply a supporter of getting rid of a system that doesn’t empower the voter.” Straw was said to support AV, although not PR which would lead to backroom deals; and Alistair Darling was said to be open to the idea.⁶⁶³ Legislating in 2010, considered Bradshaw, would “expose the Tories for what they are – the no change status quo party” allowing for policy differentiation to emerge between Labour and the Conservatives. Legislating for AV now, according to the *Guardian*, was a move backed by Denham and Hain as it would attract the support of the Liberal Democrats, providing practical electoral benefits.⁶⁶⁴ Interestingly, Bradshaw, who would go on to lead Labour Yes to AV in 2011, stated he also favoured AV+. It was “a brilliant synthesis of systems that both maintain the constituency link introducing a greater element of proportionality.” Bradshaw continued: “If one of the reasons that we want reform is to rebuild public trust and confidence in politics, make MPs more accountable, give more power to people, and establish a political and parliamentary system that more reflects the will of the public then AV doesn’t deliver that.”⁶⁶⁵

Progress, the Blairite wing of the Labour Party, along with Labour’s Campaign for Electoral Reform (LCER), gathered the signatures of 35 prospective parliamentary candidates (PPC) in a letter to Brown expressing their belief that

⁶⁶³ *The Times*, ‘Cabinet support for Johnson puts plans for voting reform on electoral agenda’, Tuesday 26th May 2009

⁶⁶⁴ *Guardian*, ‘Cabinet members urge Gordon Brown to back electoral reform now’, 22nd January 2010

⁶⁶⁵ *New Statesman*, ‘It would be a missed opportunity not have a referendum on election day’, 5th November 2009

Labour will only win if a referendum on electoral reform was offered on the same day as the general election. A “referendum on polling day on a system that delivers real voter choice” it was claimed, “would see hundreds of Liberal Democrats switching to Labour, hundreds more stay-at-home Labour supporters coming out to vote for the government and every Tory opponent on the back foot trying to explain why the failed old system is worth keeping and why Cameron wouldn’t give the people a say.”⁶⁶⁶ Compass, the cross-party anti-Conservative think tank deemed that a referendum on FPTP contained many advantages for the Labour Party: Cameron would represent the status quo and be put on the defensive, a progressive coalition could be built, voters would be more likely to turn out and vote Labour, and it could be Brown’s ‘Clause IV’ moment.⁶⁶⁷

The attempt to win support of wavering Liberal Democrat voters was, as Curtice claimed, the more instrumental reason behind Brown’s conversion to electoral reform. For all the talk about political reform and changing the way politics is conducted, the opinion polls were pointing towards a hung parliament and the Conservatives were starting from a low point, requiring a significant swing to achieve a majority of one. Therefore the Labour Party, by bringing forward legislation on AV and making a manifesto commitment, had laid down a marker.⁶⁶⁸ Furthermore, polling conducted by YouGov for the Electoral Reform Society in August 2009 had showed that one in three Lib Dem voters would be willing to consider switching his or her vote to Labour if the Party delivered on an electoral reform referendum⁶⁶⁹ suggesting important votes could be won by this

⁶⁶⁶ The letter which appeared in November 2009 is referenced on the following website <http://liberalconspiracy.org/2009/page/23/> (Accessed 14th May 2015)

⁶⁶⁷ Compass, *The Last Labour Government, Why only a referendum on electoral reform can save the party now*, 2009

⁶⁶⁸ J. Curtice, ‘The Death of a Miserable Little Compromise: The Alternative Vote Referendum’, *Political Insight*, (September 2011) p. 14

⁶⁶⁹ *New Statesman*, ‘It would be a missed opportunity’

policy change. Mullin wrote: “Damage limitation, not victory, is all we can reasonably hope for. We need to do something bold that will strike a blow behind enemy lines, such as switching from first-past-the-post to alternative voting. The Tories of course, would cry ‘foul’, but the Lib Dems could probably be persuaded to back it, all the while protesting that they prefer some purer form of PR... It won’t save us from defeat but it might save us from ruin.”⁶⁷⁰ Therefore, a commitment to a referendum on AV entailed practical political benefits by attracting wavering Liberal Democrat voters, placing the Conservatives on the back foot and preventing a landslide defeat.

Charles Clarke considered: “If he (Brown) had been serious about it he could have done it. He could have legislated and why not?” Brown, in Clarke’s opinion, “wanted to hold it over as a point of negotiation with the Liberal Democrats” implying he was already looking to a post-election situation where coalition building was necessary. However, “All the measures he announced in terms of constitutional reform when he became Prime Minister, almost all, just faded away.”⁶⁷¹ Mandelson, who Brown had brought back into government, outlined the issues that faced Brown over these constitutional matters. Firstly, “the conversion looked a little belated, a little shallow.” Secondly, “there was a feeling that it would be difficult to get the Party to campaign enthusiastically on these issues and, thirdly, there was the issue of how that would leave his position if he were defeated in the referendum, either on all the issues or on one or two of them. Would he then need to resign?”⁶⁷²

⁶⁷⁰ Mullin, *Decline and Fall*, p. 341 dairy entry Sunday 7th June 2009

⁶⁷¹ Interview with Charles Clarke, 21st May 2014

⁶⁷² Interview with Lord Mandelson, 31st March 2015

Labour's commitment to AV was dismissed by Nick Clegg, the Leader of the Liberal Democrats. Given the underlying reasons were to appeal to the Liberal Democrats and the likelihood of a 'hung parliament' in 2010 – making Clegg kingmaker – it somewhat failed in its objective. Clegg's response in the *Independent* would be tirelessly repeated – specifically 'the miserable little compromise' – by the No campaign in the AV Referendum.

"The Labour Party assumes that changes to the electoral system are like crumbs for the Liberal Democrats from the Labour table. I am not going to settle for a miserable little compromise thrashed out by the Labour Party."⁶⁷³

Clegg had to take into account the pressures facing his own Party and he was not the first Leader of the Liberal Democrats to be approached by Labour with promises of electoral reform. Clegg had to do what was in the best electoral interests of the Liberal Democrats. Had he been seen to be aligning with the Labour Party, it had the potential to lose right-leaning Liberal Democrats to the Conservatives, particularly in the South-West. On the other hand, had Clegg been perceived to be aligning with the Conservatives he risked losing the Labour-leaning voters who were willing to support the Liberal Democrats. Additionally, electoral reform was a key policy for the Liberal Democrats and, with the Labour Party moving on to Liberal Democrat territory, AV had to be dismissed as an insignificant reform, to ensure that the Liberal Democrats retained their 'radical' stance on electoral reform by offering more than any other mainstream party.

⁶⁷³ *Independent*, 22nd April 2010. Conversely, Cameron refused to rule out discussions on electoral reform, inviting his interviewer to "put the question in Serbo-Croat if you want, you're going to get the same (non) answer." *Observer*, 'David Cameron leaves door open for poll deal with Liberal Democrats', 25th April 2010

Prior to the general election there had been indications that Clegg wished to keep his distance from the Labour Party. Clegg had written an article in 2009 for *Demos* claiming that this was the ‘Liberal moment’, Labour was out of touch and morally bankrupt and all ‘progressives’ should fall under the Liberal Democrat banner⁶⁷⁴, a stance unlikely to have endeared him to Labour. Importantly, with the polls pointing to a hung parliament, Clegg affirmed in that situation he would consult with the largest party first, in all likelihood the Conservative Party. Moreover, Clegg did not “think at a time when people will have voted for massive change it would be acceptable to the public to have no change at all, to have the same person in Number 10.”⁶⁷⁵ Clegg was implying either Brown had to step down for the formation of a Lab-Lib pact or a complete change of government was required, namely a Conservative or Conservative-led government.

Adonis – a former Liberal Democrat councillor, parliamentary candidate and importantly for Brown, someone who maintained good relations with his former party – wrote in the *Independent* at the start of the general election campaign that Labour and the Liberal Democrats were “united by a common antipathy to Conservative values.” Indeed, Labour and the Liberal Democrats shared a number of policies on public services, constitutional reform, equal rights, fair taxation and Europe, and “philosophically it was nonsense to pretend that the Lib Dems... are equidistant between left and right.” Only a Labour government was able to implement Lib Dem policies with policy disagreements revolving around PR for the House of Commons. However, with Labour’s commitment to a referendum on AV it was a case of “the nature of reform rather than the

⁶⁷⁴ N. Clegg, *The Liberal Moment*, (Demos, London, 2009)

⁶⁷⁵ *Irish Times*, ‘Clegg open to Labour coalition if Brown steps down’, 27th April 2010

principle.”⁶⁷⁶ Boulton and Jones viewed this as Adonis laying out Labour’s agenda for coalition negotiations with the Liberal Democrats.⁶⁷⁷

The 2010 Labour Party manifesto, written by Ed Miliband, included a manifesto commitment to hold “A referendum on introducing the Alternative Vote for elections to the House of Commons” in order to “ensure that every MP is supported by the majority of their constituents voting at each election.”⁶⁷⁸ Placing the issue in the hands of the electorate, rather than a firm commitment to reform, was a useful party management tool particularly considering the impending general election, a tactic deployed by previous Labour leaders. Harris thought this to be a mistake, deeming electoral reform was a “complete red herring” and “one motivation for having constitutional reform should never be electoral gain.” The people will “not believe that the only chance of winning the next election is to promise some form of electoral reform.” The Labour Party after thirteen years of a government “should be able to stand on its own platform, own policies and win a fourth election.”⁶⁷⁹ Having spent thirteen years in government, Harris considered, the Labour Party had a record of achievement it could defend on social and economic matters – the ‘bread and butter’ concerns of voters - rather than seeking to muster a few extra votes on a niche issue.

The 2010 general election and coalition negotiations

It was widely predicted from inside and outside of Labour that it would be a very poor night for the Party. Labour had largely accepted it would lose the general

⁶⁷⁶ *Independent*, ‘Andrew Adonis: It’s madness to split the centre-left vote’, 9th April 2010.

⁶⁷⁷ A. Boulton, & J. Jones, *Hung Together, The Cameron-Clegg Coalition*, (Simon & Schuster, London, 2012) p. 134

⁶⁷⁸ *A Fair Future for All*, Labour Party Manifesto 2010

⁶⁷⁹ *BBC Daily Politics*, BBC2, 2nd February 2010

election, with the question being 'by how much'. The Brown government had become increasingly unpopular due to the financial crash, in-fighting with Cabinet resignations and rumours of leadership coups, and the alleged tiredness produced by thirteen years of government. Brown's personal ratings as Prime Minister were poor. In spite of these beneficial factors for the Conservatives their low starting point required them to achieve a significant swing across Great Britain to achieve a majority of one. Indeed, an 11-point lead was required for a bare majority and if the Labour Party could have been on the same vote share as the Conservatives, they would have returned to Westminster with more MPs.⁶⁸⁰ The 7-point lead left the Conservatives shy of a majority and produced the first hung parliament since February 1974.

The 29% of the vote received by the Labour Party was the second lowest since 1918 and compared to 2005 was a loss of 6% of the national vote, resulting in a significant reduction in votes and seats. In the south outside London, the Labour Party held only 10 out of 197 seats, described as the "dismembering of New Labour's electoral triumph."⁶⁸¹ Labour had been pushed back into its heartlands. Worryingly, since 1997 Labour had lost 5 million voters. The bias in the electoral system had seen the Labour Party win a majority of 66 in 2005 on 35% of the vote, whereas the Conservatives on 36.1% fell short of a majority in 2010. Yet, the Conservatives on a small increase of the vote had managed to significantly increase its number of MPs. The 65.1% combined vote of Labour and the Conservatives was the lowest since 1918, beating the previous low of 67.6% of the vote set in 2005. Only 210 out of the 650 MPs in 2010 secured 50 per cent of the vote or more in their constituency, 67.7% had been elected on a plurality

⁶⁸⁰ See N. Allen, & J. Bartle, *Britain at the Polls 2010*, p. 212

⁶⁸¹ Quoted in P. Diamond. & G. Radice, *Southern Discomfort Again*, (Policy Network, 2010) p. 11

compared to 1955 when only 5.9% of MPs were elected on a plurality.⁶⁸² Whilst FPTP had all but 'kicked' Labour out of office – one of the professed benefits of the system – it had not clearly facilitated a new government.

A simulation by the Electoral Reform Society predicted the Conservatives under AV would have won 281 seats (down 26), Labour 262 (up 4) and the Liberal Democrats 79 (up 22). The British Election Study simulation calculated the Liberal Democrats would have won 89 seats.⁶⁸³ Such an outcome would have changed the nature of the coalition negotiations, strengthening the bargaining hand of the Liberal Democrats. Thus the Liberal Democrats could have formed a coalition with Labour as a potential Lab-Lib coalition would have had 341 seats. Rallings and Thrasher argued that under AV many British voters would only indicate one preference, known as 'plumping' and think the Liberal Democrats would only have won 15 more seats. Curtice maintains that the electoral benefits of AV for the Liberal Democrats would be "modest", with "the prospect of the occasional Conservative or Labour landslide."⁶⁸⁴ Yet 'modest' gains still had the potential to increase the likelihood of a hung parliament in the future and make the Liberal Democrats kingmakers. Harris raised this point during the AV referendum in 2011. Although Labour and the Liberal Democrats would have had the numbers to do a deal and therefore "remain in power – despite losing to the Conservatives", Harris questioned "How can that possibly be fair or democratic?"⁶⁸⁵

⁶⁸² McGuinness, *Alternative Vote Referendum 2011*, p. 9

⁶⁸³ D. Sanders, H.D. Clarke, M. C. Stuart, & P. Whiteley, 'Simulating the Effects of the Alternative Vote in the 2010 UK General election', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 64:1, pp. 5-23

⁶⁸⁴ C. Rallings, & M. Thrasher, 'Suppose UK voters accept the Alternative Vote in the May referendum... but then don't use AV to single multiple party preferences?' (2010) British Politics and Policy at LSE blog; *Independent*, 'The miserable compromise with modest gains for Clegg', Monday 21 February 2011

⁶⁸⁵ Speech by Tom Harris, MP for Glasgow South (2001-2015), to East Lothian Fabians, Thursday 24th March 2011

The Liberal Democrats decision to 'go right'

The result of the general election put the onus on the Liberal Democrats to choose which of the two major political parties it would support in government. Brown, as the sitting Prime Minister, had the constitutional right to remain in Downing Street until the political situation became clear; either the Liberal Democrats along with the smaller parties would sustain a Labour government, or the Conservatives would form a minority government or seek to govern in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. It was for the Liberal Democrats a case of “Cannon to the left of them, cannon to the right of them”, the problem identified for the third party by the *Spectator* in the 1960s: “On the left is the gunfire of the party which they must smash, to replace it. On the right is the gunfire of the party whose camp they must occupy, in order to ransack it for votes.”⁶⁸⁶ The situation in which the Liberal Democrats found themselves was the lot of a political party which had little chance of forming a government on their own and therefore its only opportunity of entering government was through coalition.

Supporting either party posed problems for the Liberal Democrats. Backing Labour would have meant propping up a ‘tired’ and defeated party, allowing an unpopular Prime Minister to stay in office and, due to the numbers, offered little prospect of stability. Peter Hennessy deemed, on *Channel 4 News* on the Monday after the election, a rainbow coalition “would have too many moving parts.” Many within Labour were hostile to a Lab-Lib Coalition, sceptical about its longevity and the high price in buying Liberal Democrat support and the concessions that would be made to minor parties. Supporting the Conservative

⁶⁸⁶ *Spectator*, ‘No Gunfire’, 20th December 1963, p. 4

Party – considered by many in the Liberal Democrats to be ‘toxic’ – would mean being in government with a party with whom they are in direct competition for votes and seats in the South-West of England and alienating many voters who had voted for the Liberal Democrats believing them to be on the ‘progressive’ side of politics. In the north of England – where the Liberal Democrats had replaced the Conservatives as the main opposition to Labour – they would take the punishment for government policies.

Ashdown remarked that the voters at the 2010 general election seemed to have “invented a deliciously painful torture mechanism for the Liberal Democrats because our instincts go one way (Labour) but the mathematics go the other (Conservatives).”⁶⁸⁷ Whilst Paddy Ashdown considered the ‘instincts’ of the Liberal Democrats leant towards Labour, the years of opposition to a Labour Government should not be underestimated in encouraging the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats together. Previous leaders such as Ashdown, Charles Kennedy and Ming Campbell may have been inclined towards Labour, yet the ‘modern era’ of Liberal Democrats had been upset by Labour’s record on civil liberties, the environment, constitutional reform and the Iraq War. Clegg, David Laws, Jeremy Browne and Danny Alexander were part of the *Orange Book* Liberals, moving away from social liberalism towards classical liberal positions, professing the benefits of the free market rather than the state. The shift at the top of the Liberal Democrats coincided with the ‘compassionate conservatism’ advocated by Cameron, resulting in a policy and ideological crossover on the centre right of British politics.

⁶⁸⁷ Quoted in A Geddes. & J. Tonge, *Britain Votes 2010*, (Oxford University Press, 2010) p. 27

Adonis later recognised the ideological overlap, considering the decision of Clegg and Laws to enter coalition with Cameron and Osborne was not simply a matter of parliamentary arithmetic and building a coalition that could survive the full parliament, but “was a marriage of neo-liberal minds.”⁶⁸⁸ The influence of ideology is highlighted by the Liberal Democrats’ acceptance of faster and deeper public spending cuts, a policy they had opposed during the election campaign. “Clegg and Laws did not lead their party into coalition with the Conservatives despite Osborne austerity” wrote Adonis, “but because of it.” Other areas of agreement included education reform, allowing parents greater influence over state school provision, public sector reform, localism and devolution. “It was therefore not pre-ordained that Britain should have taken the Tory road in 2010... the critical determinant was Nick Clegg’s instinct to go Right rather than Left.”⁶⁸⁹

Chapter 4 of the thesis alluded to the Liberal Democrats’ movement away from Labour, a process that began many years before Clegg’s leadership, regularly voting against Labour and voting with the Conservatives. Notably, in 2009, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats worked together to defeat the Government over the settlement rights of the Gurkhas. Stuart states “it seems that long before the 2010 General Election, the Liberal Democrats had progressively fallen out of love with the Labour Party and were far more favourably predisposed towards the Conservatives.”⁶⁹⁰ Kavanagh and Cowley argue, Labour “underestimated the extent to which there had been a generational shift at the top of the Liberal

⁶⁸⁸ A. Adonis, *5 Days in May The Coalition and Beyond*, (Biteback Publishing Ltd., London, 2013) p. 156

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 146

⁶⁹⁰ M. Stuart, *The Cameron-Clegg Government, Coalition Politics in an Age of Austerity*, (Palgrave MacMillan, Hampshire, 2011) p.43

Democrats.”⁶⁹¹ However, Baroness Armstrong deemed any thought of a Lab-Lib coalition ended upon Clegg winning the leadership:

“As soon as Nick Clegg was elected, we said that puts off any chance of working with the Liberals. It was very clear from the beginning, along with the division within the Liberals that was very clear too, that they would rather do a deal with the Conservatives. We just knew and we said very strongly that ‘the project’ is off the table.”⁶⁹²

Armstrong’s statement suggests the ‘general shift’ stated by Kavanagh and Cowley was not missed and the Labour Party realised a deal with the Liberal Democrats was not necessarily going to materialise. Other factors decreased the likelihood of coalition: The personal relationship Brown and Clegg was strained, Brown viewed Clegg’s politics and ideological beliefs as ‘largely Conservative’: English, affluent public school boy and not belonging to the same political wing of the Liberal Democrats as Ashdown and Kennedy. Rather disparagingly Brown had always referred to the Liberal Democrats as the ‘Liberals’, refusing to dignify them with full use of their name. Such difficult personal relations between the two men posed the issue of whether a government in the short term could survive with evident acrimony between the two leaders of the two parties in government.

Edgar wrote “The conventional wisdom about the five days is that Cameron and Clegg played their hands better than Labour.” Labour was unprepared for talks, coming to the negotiating table with the Liberal Democrats with few agreed positions. “The reality of the election result was that, together, the Tories and the

⁶⁹¹ D. Kavanagh, & P. Cowley, *The British General Election of 2010*, (Palgrave MacMillan, Hampshire, 2010) p. 210

⁶⁹² Interview with Baroness Armstrong, 16th July 2014

Liberal Democrats commanded a comfortable Commons majority over all other parties, while a Labour-Lib Dem coalition would have had to rely on the fickle support of smaller parties to get its legislation through.”⁶⁹³ A coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats would produce an overall majority of 83. For those negotiating, the knowledge of such numbers would allow a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition the ability to pass its legislative programme for the duration of the parliament whilst allowing for rebels and marginalising the more controversial wings of both parties. Coalition also offered the Conservative Party the route back into government after thirteen years of opposition, having not won a general election since 1992, allowing Cameron to promote a new type of open and pluralistic conservatism, representing how the party had changed from the dogmatism of the Thatcher years and was willing to listen to ideas from outside the party.

Jones deems the account given by Adonis can be termed the “‘bad faith’ thesis”⁶⁹⁴ as the numbers, contrary to Edgar’s view, did add up for a Labour-Liberal coalition. Gordon Brown had thought “The key numbers were these: Labour plus Lib Dems 315; Tory 307; other parties, almost all of them more anti-Tory than anti-Labour – 28.”⁶⁹⁵ The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) from Northern Ireland was a natural ally, so was the Green MP Caroline Lucas who would not vote for a Conservative government. There was also an Alliance MP, an ally of the Liberal Democrats and an independent Unionist, bringing a potential Lab-Lib coalition very close to the 323 mark. Furthermore, the nationalist parties could not risk a repeat of 1979 when they brought down the Labour government and ushered in a Conservative government. Additionally,

⁶⁹³ D. Edgar, ‘When Dave met Nick’, *Guardian Review*, 15th June 2013

⁶⁹⁴ B. Jones, ‘The Road Not Taken and the ‘Bad Faith’ Theses: Why a Liberal Democrat-Labour Coalition Never Happened in May 2010’, *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 84: 4, (Oct- Dec 2013) p. 460

⁶⁹⁵ Adonis, *5 Days in May*, p. 144

triggering another election risked the electorate blaming the smaller parties for failing to act in the 'national interest' and provide the stable government the country required. If another general election had to be fought it raised the practical issue of cost and funding a campaign. Having already fought one general election and the costs that that incurred parties, would have been reluctant to fight a second in a short space of time.

For Brown, the prospect of doing a deal with the Liberal Democrats and relying on the support of smaller parties, held out the prospect of remaining in power. Moreover, Brown told the Cabinet which met on Monday 11th May "It (was) to be an enduring progressive alliance... leading naturally to an electoral pact at the next election, with the two parties standing down in favour of each other in some seats. 'This is an historic opportunity for progressive politics which may not come back for fifty years.'"⁶⁹⁶ The account given by Adonis claims Cabinet overwhelmingly backed Brown's plan to seek to form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. The trade unions were also supportive: "They are absolutely clear that we should govern with the Liberals rather than let them put the Tories in, with all that would mean for the public services and union members."⁶⁹⁷ David Miliband is quoted as saying there were "grave risks – no one won, but we lost." Nonetheless, Cameron had "legitimised coalition government by offering one to the Lib Dems rather than just saying 'I've won, you've lost'"⁶⁹⁸ – something Salmond had done in 2007 for the Holyrood election – and as such, the Labour Party was entitled to seek to govern in coalition.

⁶⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 119

⁶⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 92

⁶⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94

Denham considered coalition was in the best interests of the Labour Party and should be presented as “the best attainable government.” Otherwise, the “Tories could lock us out of power for a generation.”⁶⁹⁹ Bradshaw concurred thinking power should not just be handed to the Tories, for Labour as the second largest party could govern in the same fashion as Brandt and Schmidt, the “great historic progressive German Governments.”⁷⁰⁰ The issue of the Liberal Democrats was then raised. Mandelson, whilst supporting Brown’s plan, affirmed “the Lib Dems will need to stop being normal opportunist Lib Dems.”⁷⁰¹ Liam Byrne thought “Many of the PLP think it better to renew in opposition and they positively relish the idea of the Liberals doing a deal with the Tories.”⁷⁰² Only Burnham clearly opposed coalition. “While we might be able to stitch something together, it won’t be ‘renewal’ and the country won’t listen to us,” he said. ‘The public will find it a surprise; it will build up resentment and we will find ourselves punished in an election in twelve to eighteen months’ time.”⁷⁰³ Burnham became the first senior minister to publicly express opposition when on *The World At One*, he declared that the Party had to “respect the result of the general election and we can’t shy away from the fact that Labour didn’t win.”⁷⁰⁴

The “evident sceptics” in Cabinet were Darling and Straw. There was the “spectre of real problems in working with the Lib Dems in practice.” For Straw, “We have been fighting the Lib Dems like cats and dogs.”⁷⁰⁵ Straw fleshed out his objections in *Last Man Standing*. Brown, whilst advocating an alliance with the Liberal Democrats, was not at ease with the idea like Mandelson and Adonis.

⁶⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95

⁷⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 95

⁷⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 95

⁷⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 95

⁷⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 96

⁷⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 118

⁷⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 95

Brown “went through the dangers to the country, and the Party, if the Tories were to take power, whether in a coalition or as a minority government, claiming that ‘15 million people had voted for the progressive majority’.” Yet, for Straw, Brown “hadn’t quite come to terms with the fact that we had lost the election, comprehensively, even if we’d done a lot better than most of us had feared.” Having witnessed how the Liberal Democrats “operated institutionally”, Straw was unable “to trust them as a party.” Moreover, the numbers did not add up. “Still eleven seats short of a bare overall majority in the Commons. I’d witnessed the hand-to-mouth existence of the 1974-1979 Labour government, the constant crises, the grubby deals... the grotesque spectacle of nearly dead Labour MPs having to be brought into Speaker’s Court in ambulances so that their vote could be counted – and that was with sixty more seats than we’d won now.”⁷⁰⁶

Straw is reported to have told Brown on Sunday 10th May that a period in opposition might not be bad for Labour as “We have to accept that we lost. We need time in opposition.”⁷⁰⁷ On the Tuesday, Sadiq Khan, Burnham and Bob Ainsworth gathered in Straw’s Commons room. “We were all of one mind. A Lib-Lab coalition would not work.” Straw sent Brown a note outlining his reservations on why “coalition with the Lib Dems would be doomed – on grounds of legitimacy, stability, and the management of the economy and public finances.” Importantly, Straw succinctly rejected the ‘progressive-left’ thesis. “The fanciful notion of a ‘progressive alliance’” was in Straw’s opinion, nothing more than “arrogant nonsense” as “there was no ‘Progressive Alliance’ on the ballot paper’. Many of those who voted Lib Dem would have done so tactically to stop Labour, despite, not because of, the Lib Dems’ policy offer.”⁷⁰⁸

⁷⁰⁶ J. Straw, *Last Man Standing, Memoirs of a Political Survivor*, (Macmillan, London, 2012) p. 530

⁷⁰⁷ Seldon & Lodge, *Brown at 10*, p. 454.

⁷⁰⁸ Straw, *Last Man Standing*, p. 531

Darling questioned whether there could be agreement on the economy, rejecting the view that Labour could put something together with the Liberal Democrats. The “principled objection” considered Darling was, “On any view, we had lost the election. We did not have the moral right or the high ground needed to form a government and then embark on highly contentious and deeply unpopular measures as we set about cutting borrowing.” The practical objection was “that the numbers did not add up. Even adding the Liberal to the Labour MPs, we would still be short of a majority in the House of Commons. We would be at the mercy of the minority parties from Northern Ireland and the Scottish and Welsh Nationalists, who would be able to extract what they wanted on a daily basis.”⁷⁰⁹ There was no harm in Labour talking to the Liberals in case their deal with the Conservatives unravelled thought Darling, “not being against coalitions in principle.” However this was qualified: “In practice one involving the Labour Party was dead in the water.”⁷¹⁰

Bradshaw debated who had won the election and who had legitimacy to govern with Adam Boulton on *Sky News*. Boulton claimed that Labour had lost the election and if the result was done on a points system – points won for votes and seats gained, points lost due to seats and votes lost – only a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition had the moral authority to govern. Moreover, the parliamentary numbers meant only a Conservative-Liberal Democrat government could offer stability. Bradshaw rejected this view, claiming the combined Labour and Liberal Democrat vote share had 5 million more votes than the Conservatives and “no one had won the election.” Regardless that the Conservatives could make the same argument about combining vote shares and

⁷⁰⁹ A. Darling, *Back from the Brink*, (Atlantic Books, London, 2011) p. 294

⁷¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 303

therefore the 'legitimacy' to govern, Bradshaw's reasoning was based on policy issues – the economy, electoral reform, Europe, securing the recovery and paying down the deficit – meant there was a “much more sustainable potential coalition between us and the Liberal Democrats and the other progressive parties.”⁷¹¹ Bradshaw continued: “I've always thought it tragic and made more tragic by FPTP that we have been lumbered with majority Conservative governments for most of our modern history because the progressive centre and left are divided.” However, in light of the 2015 general election result, he shared Adonis' preference “for them to all join the Labour Party so we have one centre left progressive party that can fight more effectively and beat the Conservatives.”⁷¹²

John Reid publicly opposed a deal with the Liberal Democrats, telling the *BBC* a Lab-Lib pact would be “disastrously wrong for the country and the Labour party.” In terms of the country “I fail to see how trying to bring together six different parties – and even then not having a majority – will bring the degree of stability we need.” Furthermore, “it doesn't match up from the point of view of the electorate for the two losing parties to cobble together a deal.” Relying on the nationalist parties, who would demand extra spending for their respective parts of the United Kingdom, would result in an English backlash who would suffer the brunt of spending cuts. “From the point of view of the Labour Party, if we look as if we are ‘cocking a snook’ at the electorate when we have lost more MPs than at any time with the exception of 1931, they will wreak revenge on the Labour Party at future elections.”⁷¹³ Reid told *Sky News* he feared a Lab-Lib Pact would result

⁷¹¹ *Sky News*, 10th May 2010

⁷¹² Interview with Ben Bradshaw MP, 21st October 2015

⁷¹³ <http://www.politics.co.uk/news/2010/05/11/labour-heavyweights-come-out-against-lib-lab-> (Accessed 5th October 2015); *Irish Times*, ‘Senior Labour MP's sceptical on coalition’, 11th May 2010

in “mutually assured destruction” and that it was the responsibility of the Conservatives as the biggest party to form a stable government.⁷¹⁴

David Blunkett not just opposed coalition but openly damned the Liberal Democrats on *BBC Radio 4* questioning what was in the best interests of the British people and “our future democracy.” Blunkett stated: “we see now what it would be like with fully fledged PR, don’t we? We see what we would have to put up with. Secondly, can we trust these people? Can we trust the Liberal Democrats? They’re behaving like every harlot in history.” Thirdly, what were the thoughts of the British public, “not what a small group on each side feel but how we put together something that people in this country can respect as part of our living democracy?” Blunkett, in the same fashion as Reid, outlined the potential political damage: “A coalition of the defeated, cobbled together, uncertain whether it can carry anything night by night” what it “would do to the Labour Party and its vote.” Blunkett questioned how the nation would have felt if having rejected Heath in February 1974 he’d remained in power through a deal with Jeremy Thorpe.⁷¹⁵

Brown’s position as Prime Minister and behaviour towards the Liberal Democrats, was considered a block to a Lab-Lib coalition, initially refusing to give a specific date for when he would step down. This caused angst amongst the Liberal Democrats, who did not want to be seen as propping up a defeated Prime Minister. Brown announced on Monday 10th May that he would step down by September 2010, a move that paved the way for negotiations with the Liberal Democrats. The Lib Dem precondition of Brown standing down in Straw’s opinion “could only add to the instability of any arrangement with them, and provoke

⁷¹⁴ *Financial Times*, ‘Brown to quit in effort to woo Lib Dems’, 11th May 2010

⁷¹⁵ BBC Radio 4, 11th October 2010

scorn from the electorate that they were being foisted off with a new prime minister who had been untested at the election.”⁷¹⁶ For Harris, who had told Brown during his premiership that he should stand down, it reinforced his opposition to electoral reform. “The electorate should have the final say on who governs and it should not be up to Clegg. Clegg was one person and in 2010 sacked Gordon Brown and appointed David Cameron... One MP should not have that amount of power... Clegg, who’s not even a member of the Labour Party tells Brown he has to go and he goes. All these Labour colleagues saying go, and being ignored, then Clegg of all people tells him to go and he does.”⁷¹⁷ On the matter of electoral reform, Harris blogged that Labour MPs will not vote for the replacement of FPTP with AV, or for a referendum on further change after that towards PR. Moreover, “The word ‘progressive’ has now been redefined as ‘willing to barter away everything you campaigned for in return for the chance to be in government, albeit at the beck and call of a party that has spent its entire existence trying to wipe you off the political map’.”⁷¹⁸

In the cities of northern England the Liberal Democrats had become the main opposition to Labour, as the Conservatives had still not recovered from their electoral decline in industrial areas since the 1980s. In Liverpool and Sheffield, for example, the Liberal Democrats had gained control of the city councils for periods of the Labour government. Bradshaw considered the attitude towards the Liberal Democrats was determined by both the “historical and geographical context” and therefore the hostility in those areas was understandable. However, in other parts of Britain, Labour and the Liberal Democrats had a common enemy

⁷¹⁶ Straw, *Last Man Standing*, p. 531

⁷¹⁷ Interview with Tom Harris, 2nd October 2015

⁷¹⁸ <http://www.politics.co.uk/news/2010/05/11/labour-heavyweights-come-out-against-lib-lab-> (Accessed 5th October 2015)

in the Conservatives.⁷¹⁹ Johnson reiterated the geographical dimension, as some of the opposition to coalition stemmed from local government. “You read a Lib Dem focus leaflet with them being all things to all people, some of the terrible things they put out if they thought they had a chance of beating the sitting Labour MP, leading to an understandable offence.” Johnson believed this caused an “inability” for some Labour MPs “to look at the bigger picture.”⁷²⁰

Mandelson remarked in *The Third Man* that during the days following the 2010 general election he reminisced about the Lab-Lib talks in the 1990s. Mandelson “did not see them so much as a missed opportunity as an opportunity that was never really there to be grasped.” There were strong forces against a deal “in both of our parties... and the circumstances were never propitious enough to overcome them.” Whilst not an excuse for not working towards cooperation, something could have been put together “at any time during the previous thirteen years. When the circumstances changed with the hung Parliament in 2010, both the electoral arithmetic and the lack of an established rapport between our parties and their leaderships militated against any serious prospect of a progressive alliance.”⁷²¹

For Labour MPs two immediate issues were influencing their decision. Firstly, did the Labour Party have the ‘moral authority’ to govern and, secondly, did the numbers stack up for a coalition with the Liberal Democrats? A ‘coalition of losers’ would have faced questions of legitimacy – denying the biggest party in terms of votes and seats the right to govern – especially from an unsympathetic press. Longer-term issues can be added: firstly, looking forward, the electoral

⁷¹⁹ Interview with Ben Bradshaw MP, 21st October 2015

⁷²⁰ Interview with Alan Johnson MP, 23rd October 2015

⁷²¹ Mandelson, *The Third Man*, p. 564

consequences for Labour if it were to enter a coalition with the Liberal Democrats and minor parties. By remaining in office there was a fear the electorate would wreak revenge and do considerable damage to the Labour vote, its representation in parliament and its standing as a national party. Secondly, a period back in opposition would allow Labour to regroup, whilst it was hoped that the coalition government took the electoral punishment for introducing the deep economic cuts forecast in the parliament, providing an opportunity to return to office in 2015. Thirdly, the problems of sharing office with the Liberal Democrats with whom Labour had a strong dislike and mistrust was succinctly outlined by one Liberal Democrat who thought a Lab-Lib coalition would be primarily a Labour government with one or two Lib Dems – “a continuation of the current government, just with a few irritants added in.”⁷²²

Labour's offer on electoral reform

The negotiations provide an example of the length that Labour was willing to go to tie in the Liberal Democrats and remain in office. Considerable opposition to coalition and electoral reform existed within the PLP, yet the Cabinet was willing to countenance the idea. Mandelson considered the disagreement on electoral reform “was never properly tested in the coalition negotiations.”⁷²³ However, during the five days following the election it is clear electoral reform was one of the key determinants. On Friday 8th May, the day after the election, an hour before Cameron made his ‘big, open and comprehensive offer’ to the Liberal Democrats, Brown made a statement on the steps of Downing Street. He spoke of his “plan to carry through far-reaching political reforms, including changes to

⁷²² Quoted in V. Bogdanor, *The Coalition and the Constitution*, (Hart Publishing, Oxford, 2011) pp. 30-31.

⁷²³ Interview with Lord Mandelson, 31st March 2015

the voting system”, believing that the “British people should be able to decide in a referendum what the system should be.”⁷²⁴ Although unspecific, Brown appeared to be willing to consider going further than the manifesto commitment already made on AV.

Boulton and Jones record a meeting on Saturday 9th May between Mandelson and Alexander, during which Alexander floated the idea of Labour and the Liberal Democrats imposing AV without a referendum. According to Mandelson, “he said their worry was that a referendum would be lost because voters might see a Lib-Lab pact as a self-interested stitch-up on both sides, so it might be better to avoid such a test.” Alexander pointed out that the Lib Dems had no such manifesto commitment, simply a commitment to deliver it. Reportedly, legislating for AV without a referendum was due to the Lib Dem fear that a ‘coalition of the losers’ would find it hard to sell anything to the British public let alone a new voting system.⁷²⁵ This was not the first time Mandelson had affirmed he thought a referendum on changing the voting system would be lost. Mandelson had told Blair that a referendum on the Jenkins’ proposal might not be won.

According to the journalist Michael Crick, Brown held two secret meetings with Clegg on Sunday 10th May. The suggestion of AV without a referendum was made at their first meeting. Qvortrup suggests at these talks that it might be possible to go ahead with AV without a public vote and then have a referendum later on more radical and proportional electoral reform.⁷²⁶ After the Cabinet had met on Monday 11th May, news broke that Cameron had offered AV with a

⁷²⁴ Quoted in A. Boulton, & J. Jones, *Hung Together, The Cameron-Clegg Coalition*, (Simon & Schuster, London, 2012) p. 138

⁷²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 229

⁷²⁶ M. Qvortrup, ‘Voting on Electoral Reform: A Comparative Perspective on the Alternative Vote Referendum in the United Kingdom’, *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 83: 1, (Jan-Mar 2012) p. 109

referendum to the Liberal Democrats. Brown told Adonis: "We've got to go as fast as possible on AV. There's got to be a referendum, but do the legislation in parallel, or something like that, so it can be brought in immediately after the referendum. We can't have the Lib Dems claiming they have got nothing to choose between us and the Tories on this."⁷²⁷

Laws, a member of the Lib Dem negotiating team, recorded the first negotiating meeting on Monday 11th May between Labour and Liberal Democrats. Adonis reiterated Labour's commitment to a referendum thinking "most Labour MPs will support AV but vote against proportional representation." Harman emphasised the opposition to AV: "Most Labour MPs will grit their teeth and vote for AV, but let's be clear that many of my colleagues are not exactly champing at the bit!" implying a referendum on AV would not be easy to implement. When the Lib Dem negotiating team questioned further, Laws writes, Labour "cracks opened up." Alexander asked "can we rely on Labour MPs supporting an AV referendum?" Adonis said, "That is what is guaranteed in our manifesto" yet Balls intervened to say: "AV would not be at all straightforward" and "the chief whip thinks it would be difficult to get the AV referendum through. Many of our colleagues are opposed to it. It cannot be guaranteed." It was, for Laws, a "deadly intervention" for the whole prospect of a Lab-Lib coalition, questioning "how could we go into coalition with a Labour Party that could not even guarantee to deliver a referendum on AV... that it had promised in its own manifesto."⁷²⁸

Laws records at the second meeting how electoral reform was again discussed. Mandelson thought there were three main issues: political legitimacy, policy agreement and deliverability. However, Adonis affirmed the AV Referendum

⁷²⁷ Adonis, *5 Days in May*, p. 97

⁷²⁸ D. Laws, *22 Days In May*, (Biteback Publishing, London, 2010) pp. 152-153

would be a “confidence issue for the government”, implying that the government would challenge its own backbenchers to vote down the government. Adonis reiterated that Labour could “certainly agree to a post-legislative referendum on AV.” However, if STV or AV+ was put into the Bill it raised problems of timing and deliverability. “Labour would support AV but we would have to oppose PR.” Mandelson agreed with Adonis arguing that it would be best if a Lab-Lib coalition coalesced around AV, to avoid dividing the coalition and presumably to present a united front in the referendum. Balls, as in the first negotiations, was sceptical, deeming “Getting our people to support AV is going to be quite hard. There are a lot of Labour MPs opposed.”⁷²⁹

Ed Miliband’s account of the first meeting of the two teams maintains Brown was not willing to offer AV without putting it to the people. The first Miliband knew that the Lib Dems might push for AV without a referendum was “the first meeting we had as part of the negotiating team, and all those at the meeting on the Labour side... were completely sceptical about this and thought it’s not a runner.” A large part of one of the meetings with the Lib Dems was “consumed by whether or not we could have AV without a referendum... or have it for by-elections. We didn’t want it without a referendum but they said as a compromise, ‘well, let’s just have it for by-elections.’ We thought that was just for the birds, frankly.”⁷³⁰ The influence of political ambition for both Ed Miliband and Ed Balls cannot be underestimated as regardless of the pressure placed on Brown to stand down as Prime Minister from the Liberal Democrats, he had lost the general election, and the precedent is for the party leader to stand down. Remaining in government with Brown as Prime Minister – to stand down at ‘some point’ in the future – would have meant a leadership contest whilst in government, potentially during a

⁷²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 167-170

⁷³⁰ Quoted in Boulton & Jones, *Hung Together*, pp. 229-230; *Newsnight*, BBC2, 29th July 2010

time of unpopularity for the government due to spending cuts, in coalition government and without having been tested at a general election. Therefore, a lack of enthusiasm for the Liberal Democrats and scepticism towards electoral reform hampered the likelihood of a Lib-Lab deal, increasing the likelihood of Labour moving into opposition and conducting a leadership election.

Johnson “had a role with Chris Huhne talking about PR as part of the deal.” According to Johnson, the deal on offer from Labour was either “genuine PR, AV Plus or something similar, a referendum with the British people on a meaningful and genuine alternative.” However, the Liberal Democrats asked for “AV without any reference to the British people, no referendum introduced through Parliament, and then further down the line a referendum on a much more proportional electoral system.” This was not acceptable as the prevalent belief in the Labour Party was that a constitutional change requires going “back to the British people.” Accordingly, this is “what the negotiations floundered on.”⁷³¹ Seldon and Lodge support this view, writing Brown was willing to assent to a multi-question referendum allowing for a choice between FPTP, AV or a proportional system, therefore going beyond AV. The government would make this an issue of confidence to ensure its passage through the Commons, yet the Liberal Democrats demanded AV without a referendum.⁷³²

Cameron and the Conservative leadership team were under the impression that the Labour Party was willing to offer AV without a referendum. Whether Cameron foisted his doubting backbenchers into coalition with the Liberal Democrats, based on fallacious rumours about AV without a referendum is a contentious matter. During a debate on the British constitution and Home Affairs, early in the

⁷³¹ Interview with Alan Johnson MP, 23rd October 2015

⁷³² Seldon & Lodge, *Brown at 10*, p. 459

lifetime of the coalition government, Dr Julian Lewis, the Conservative MP for New Forest East, asked Straw the following:

“Will the right hon. gentleman confirm that in the course of the competitive negotiations with the Liberal Democrats as to which side was going to form a Government, his party offered the Liberal Democrats a deal whereby AV would be rammed through this House without a referendum?”

Straw: “The answer is no... a very significant proportion of Labour Members, including myself, would never have accepted such a proposition had it been put forward - let us be absolutely clear about that.”⁷³³

Later in the same debate, Lewis would raise the same issue with Clegg.

“I asked him (Straw) whether it had been the case that the outgoing Labour Prime Minister had offered, during the coalition negotiations, to ram through the alternative vote without a referendum. I am not giving away any trade secrets when I say that Conservative MPs were told that that was the case. The Deputy Prime Minister is in a position to know. Were the Liberal Democrats offered by the Labour party the alternative vote without a referendum? Can he set the matter to rest?”

Clegg: “The answer is no... That was not offered by the Labour party in those discussions.”⁷³⁴

Clegg repeated his position in Nick Robinson’s *Five Days that Changed Britain* stating “that had not been offered by Labour. There had been talk about what kind of electoral systems would require a referendum, whether we should request

⁷³³ House of Commons Debate, 7th June 2010, Vol: 511, Col. 29-30

⁷³⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol: 511, Col. 44

a referendum on this electoral system but not on that. There was plenty of toing and froing on that. The perception which I think was accurate was that there was discussion around and might have been an offer made, it might have been considered... Was it formally made to me? No. It was not formally made to me.”⁷³⁵ Crick, based on conversations he had held, considered the Lib Dems asked Labour for AV without a referendum and at some point Brown may have discussed it without making a formal offer, this was then over egged by the Lib Dems in their conversations with the Conservatives. Cameron didn’t probe deeply enough, and perhaps didn’t want to knowing he could use this to cajole his MPs into accepting AV with a referendum.⁷³⁶

The negotiations between Labour and the Liberal Democrats were unsuccessful. There was considerable opposition within the PLP and sections of the Cabinet for a deal with the Liberal Democrats, a point not missed by the latter. Moreover, Labour appeared to be unprepared for the negotiations compared to the Conservatives and Labour were unwilling to make as many policy concessions. Specifically for Labour, AV was a means of tying the Liberal Democrats into government not an end in itself, doubtful of even making it onto the statute due to opposition within the PLP. On the other side, the Liberal Democrats understood that by negotiating with Labour they could gain more concessions from the Conservatives; ‘stringing along’ Labour to strengthen their hand. Laws admitted to a select committee that talks with Labour were, in part, a device to ratchet up concessions from the Tories. “Coalition with the Labour Party was certainly something we were willing to consider and we would have been mad not to

⁷³⁵ *Five Days that Changed Britain*, BBC2, 29th July 2010

⁷³⁶ *Newsnight*, BBC2, 29th July 2010.

because it would have weakened our negotiating position in terms of delivering as many of our policies as possible.”⁷³⁷

The ‘miserable little compromise’: the AV Referendum, 2011

The AV Referendum in 2011 came about as a result of the coalition negotiations between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. Neither the Conservatives nor Liberal Democrats had a manifesto commitment. The Conservatives were committed to FPTP and the Liberal Democrats committed to STV. Therefore, the referendum was a result of political bargaining. One member of the Liberal Democrat Federal Executive summed up the attitude on AV after the election: “this is as good as it’s going to get, we can’t get any better”⁷³⁸; understanding the limitations of pursuing PR and vindicating the view that the Conservatives were the preferred partner all along, as the Labour leadership was prepared to make a similar offer. For Labour, whereas Plant and Jenkins had been theoretical and political exercises respectively, conducted on the whole behind closed doors, the referendum openly and publicly pitted Labour politicians against one another. The response of the Labour Party was vital to the overall outcome of the referendum as the Party had the ability to influence key sections of the electorate who would determine the outcome of the referendum, a point not missed by either side of the split within Labour. From the outset the split was apparent as in campaigning and financial terms Labour did not register as a permitted participant, and as a party did not spend anything on the campaign. On the other hand, the Conservatives spent £660,785 and the Liberal Democrats spent £62,782. Instead, Labour split into two campaign groups; ‘Labour No to AV’ and

⁷³⁷ *Financial Times*, ‘Did the Lib Dems ever want a coalition with Labour?’, 14th October 2010.

⁷³⁸ Quoted in D. Kavanagh, & P. Cowley, *The British General Election of 2010*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire, 2010) p. 226

'Labour Yes'. The former spent £192,084 whereas the latter like the Party itself did not spend anything, and was therefore outspent by the 'Conservative Yes' campaign.⁷³⁹

In comparison, the stance of the coalition parties was clear. The Conservative Party was overwhelmingly against, whilst the Liberal Democrats were overwhelmingly in favour. Cameron and Clegg had to respond to different pressures and consequently the result mattered for the coalition partners; Cameron had to deal with his backbenchers, disgruntled at being in coalition with the Liberal Democrats and opposed to AV believing it could prevent the party from winning a parliamentary majority in the future. Although it was also claimed that Cameron had assured Clegg he would not campaign hard against AV; Cameron would duly make several high profile statements in favour of the status quo. On the other hand, Clegg, whose ministerial oversight included constitutional reform, had to provide something substantial for his own MPs, party members and electoral base to show that the Liberal Democrat participation in government with the Conservatives was worthwhile. Many Lib Dems across the party felt uneasy about being in coalition with the Conservatives, thinking it was damaging aligning with a party that they had spent their entire existence fighting.

The *Coalition Agreement: Our Programme for Government* stated:

“The parties will bring forward a Referendum Bill on electoral reform, which includes provision for the introduction of the Alternative Vote in the event of a positive result in the referendum, as well as for the creation of fewer and more

⁷³⁹ Electoral Commission, *May 2011 Polls: Campaign Spending Report*, (Electoral Commission, London, 2012) p. 33, footnote 44 'campaign spending' Quoted in D. Seawright, 'Yes, the census': The 2011 UK Referendum campaign on the Alternative Vote', *British Politics*, Vol. 8:4, p. 467

equal-size constituencies. Both parties will whip their Parliamentary Parties in both Houses to support a simple majority referendum on the Alternative Vote, without prejudice to the positions parties will take during such a referendum.”

Binding the issue of AV with a reduction in the number of constituencies across the United Kingdom – an act which was believed to be in the electoral interests of the Conservative Party – was designed to satisfy the separate demands of the coalition partners: electoral reform, a longstanding policy commitment for the Liberal Democrats and, as a *quid pro quo*, the Conservatives could nullify the Labour Party’s advantage in small urban constituencies by reducing and therefore redrawing the constituency boundaries. Furthermore, the Conservatives had two insurances for either winning or losing the referendum: if the referendum was lost the reduction in the number of parliamentary constituencies would help mitigate the bias towards Labour; should the referendum be won, the Fixed Term Parliament Act would prevent the Liberal Democrats withdrawing from the coalition.

However, the *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill 2010* did not sit well with Labour MPs and peers. Denham considered, “there is no philosophical, legal, practical or parliamentary reason for combining the referendum with boundary changes: it’s simply that the changes favour the Tories.”⁷⁴⁰ Baroness Armstrong stated there was concern about the legislation on the equalisation of constituencies, believing this to be part of “another agenda.”⁷⁴¹ The Labour Party would have been affected by the reduction of MPs, particularly in its industrial heartlands where constituencies tend to have fewer electors, along with Scotland and Wales, and a number of Labour MPs would have had to

⁷⁴⁰ Quoted in Baston & Ritchie, *Don’t Take No For an Answer*, p. 24

⁷⁴¹ Interview with Baroness Armstrong, 16th July 2014

find different constituencies to contest. Additionally, a considerable number of voters – estimated to be 3.5 million – were missing from the electoral register, many of whom would be in urban areas; poorer, working class, or students more inclined to support Labour. Several Labour peers sought to wreck the Bill in the House of Lords by imposing a 40 per cent turnout threshold, proposed by Falconer. Only at the last minute did the Bill pass in the Lords, by 224 votes to 210. Other Labour Peers indicated that they would let the referendum clauses pass if they were decoupled from the constituency redistribution parts of the Bill.⁷⁴²

Arguments by Labour proponents and opponents of AV

For Harris, the holding of a referendum highlighted “how rotten coalition government is” as it was taking place “not because there was the demand for any reform, it was because the Lib Dems wanted something out of the coalition agreement as a ‘compromise’”, the consequence of “two-party horse trading behind closed doors.” As such, “it wasn’t at all democratic or transparent.” After all, the ‘Coalition Agreement’ had no mandate, drafted after the general election, influenced by a handful of politicians at the top of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. “The Lib Dems themselves never supported AV. So we had a referendum on a system proposed by a government, neither of which the two parties in the government supported. The only party that had proposed a referendum on AV was the Labour Party. We were against having a referendum... on a system that nobody wanted.”⁷⁴³ Falconer was also critical of the cause of the referendum. Not only was it a “complicated system”, which

⁷⁴² R. Johnston, & C. Pattie, ‘Parties and crossbenchers voting in the post-2010 House of Lords: The example of the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill’, *British Politics*, Vol. 6: 4, pp. 434-435, 439

⁷⁴³ Interview with Tom Harris, 2nd October 2015

“people didn’t understand... which nobody wants” with “no groundswell of support” it was a “Liberal Democrat driven change... basically it is a concoction of the politicians.”⁷⁴⁴

Burnham, who had stood in Labour’s leadership contest, raised opposition to AV, reasoning: “Let’s not get obsessed by this issue, because it really is irrelevant. It’s a kind of fringe pursuit for *Guardian*-reading classes” implying that it might be a concern of the ‘radical middle classes’ but it is not a dispute that has any traction amongst working-class Labour voters. Burnham went on to say it was not his job to “prop up the Liberal Democrats by helping them win a referendum that is important to them.” The Liberal Democrats at the time were languishing in the opinion polls around 10% down from 23% in the general election. Burnham’s comments indicate that he was not interested and it was not the Labour Party’s job to restore their electoral fortunes. The Labour Party could not officially take sides in the referendum, according to Burnham: “The party nationally couldn’t campaign for any one position.” Furthermore, “those who are calling for retention of first past the post are making an incredibly important and legitimate argument.”⁷⁴⁵

In July 2010 Burnham continued to express doubts on the merits of AV in the *New Statesman*. Although Burnham did not want to dismiss the importance of the debate, he was asking Labour to keep it in perspective. “I don’t believe any of my constituents would put it in their top ten most important issues.” Focusing on the matter of electoral reform could “cement an impression Westminster and the Labour Party is out of touch and talking about things that are not the everyday concerns of people.” The coalition government had embarked on a course of

⁷⁴⁴ *BBC Newsnight, AV Referendum Debate*, BBC 2, 26th April 2011

⁷⁴⁵ *Guardian*, ‘Voting reform ballot planned for May’ 20th May 2010

deep spending cuts; “1.3 million people, we're told, are in danger of losing their jobs. There are more urgent and important issues.” Hence, the social and economic issues take precedence over constitutional arrangements. Although he was “tending towards AV”, questions remained what the reform meant for “our political system and Labour's place within it.” Coalition government “could be attractive and it would be wrong for Labour to snigger or dismiss coalition”, yet Burnham stated his reservations as “this country has been served well by majority government over the years; that clarity helps drive social change when it's necessary. You have to look carefully at what kind of political system you want.”⁷⁴⁶

Burnham was appointed as Labour's election campaign co-ordinator and reiterated in November 2010 that the Labour Party would not campaign in favour of AV in the referendum, as it would be concentrating on the Scottish, Welsh and local elections on the same day. Therefore, AV was not the priority and allowed Labour to avoid the potentially divisive issue as the party machine and activist network could not help the ‘yes’ campaign. Clegg, in Burnham's opinion, had “sold electoral reform campaigners short by agreeing to hold the AV referendum on the same day as the local and national elections. The referendum should have been held on its own day, when the yes and no campaigns could have argued it out.” Labour's “sole priority” in 2011 “has to be, and will be, winning in Scotland and Wales, and doing well in the local elections. It would be a recipe for chaos and confusion if Labour candidates were also supporting AV in their literature. The election and referendum campaigns have to be separate and distinct.” Clegg had been outmanoeuvred by Cameron. “You cannot have what is essentially a

⁷⁴⁶ *New Statesman*, ‘Andy Burnham Interview’, 22nd July 2010

tribal battle over issues like spending cuts being fought out at the same time as a cross-party campaign is under way.”⁷⁴⁷

Joan Ryan, who had lost her seat in the 2010 general election was deputy campaign director of the cross-party NOtoAV, said: “This issue is more important than party politics. The Labour Party has said that MPs, councillors and activists are free to make up their own mind. We are pleased to see so many MPs from right across the party united in voting No and we are confident that many Labour supporters will be joining them.” Tom Watson, reportedly switched from FPTP to AV, thought it was hard to analyse any pattern in how Labour members thought. “New intake MPs, MPs in safe or marginal seats, northern MPs or whatever – it is an issue that divides all the Labour tribes, groups and regions.”⁷⁴⁸ In addition, trade unions joined the NOtoAV campaign including the GMB, Community, Alliance, Aslef and the Prison Officer’s Association. Unite although not officially part of No2AV campaigned against reform and Unison remained neutral. Billy Hayes of the Communication Workers Union supported AV: “The MP has to get 50% of the vote...If you vote No to AV you are actually voting Yes to David Cameron”⁷⁴⁹ suggesting only Cameron would benefit from the retention of FPTP.

Labour’s Yes to AV campaign wrote a letter to the *Guardian* in December 2010:

“When just a few thousand people determine every election result in a few swing seats, the interests of the Labour party and the people we represent go unheard. The alternative vote means the majority get their voices heard...

⁷⁴⁷ *Guardian*, ‘Labour will not campaign for alternative vote, says Andy Burnham’, 5th November 2010.

⁷⁴⁸ *Guardian*, ‘Labour in last-ditch push on both sides of AV debate’, 1st May 2011

⁷⁴⁹ *Financial Times*, ‘Unions campaign against vote reform’, 9th March 2011; <http://labouryes.org.uk/video-trade-unions-say-yes/> (Accessed 3rd October 2012)

When people switch off from politics it damages Labour, not the Tories. That's why the Tories don't want fairer votes. They don't want change; they say no! Labour is the party of fairness and change. Labour says yes. It's time for change."⁷⁵⁰

Present at the launch of the Labour Yes campaign were Johnson, Denham, Bradshaw, Livingstone, Oona King, Kinnock and the Labour leader Ed Miliband.

Yet, some of the aforementioned had varied history with electoral reform:

Kinnock became convinced of the need for reform. Johnson and Denham both supported AV+, with the latter believing AV "would have given us an even bigger majority in 1997 and it would have given the Tories an even bigger majority in 1983 and 1987 as well."⁷⁵¹ Bradshaw became the front of the Labour Yes to AV

campaign.⁷⁵² Johnson, on reflection, considered AV to be a "sop" as it was missing the "Plus bit" meaning electoral reformers "were not enthused by it."⁷⁵³

Given that AV was not the preferred choice of a number of electoral reformers, it was perceived as a 'Trojan horse'. Harris perceived AV to be "seen by reformers as a stepping stone to something else, not an end in itself", something he thought "was very cynical and dishonest."⁷⁵⁴ Beckett concurred, deeming the "people who

⁷⁵⁰ *Guardian*, 8th December 2010. Notable Signatories included, Ben Bradshaw, Alan Johnson, Sadiq Khan, Douglas Alexander, Ken Livingstone, John Denham, Peter Hain, Tessa Jowell, Hilary Benn, Liam Byrne, Jack Straw, Tom Watson, Jon Cruddas, Chris Bryant, David Lammy, Liz Kendall, Chuka Umunna, Anas Sarwar, Alison McGovern, Gloria de Piero, Stephen Timms, Helen Goodman, John McDonnell, Stephen Twigg, Susan Elan Jones, Richard Burden, Frank Field, Hugh Bayley, Ann Coffey, Willie Bain, Paul Blomfield, Joan Ruddock, Heidi Alexander, Stephen Pound, Kevin Brennan, Fiona Mactaggart, Malcolm Wicks, Fabian Hamilton, Alan Whitehead, Prof. Lord Plant, Lord Adonis, Lord Hattersley, Baroness King, Lord Mandelson, Lord Lipsey, Lord Beecham, Baroness Gould, Baroness Quinn, Lord Kinnock, Baroness Kinnock, Baroness Lister, Richard Howitt, Claude Moraes, Murad Qureshi, Tony Benn, James Purnell, Nick Pearce (Director, IPPR – personal capacity), Phil Collins, Gavin Kelly, Luke Akehurst (NEC), Chris Mullin.

⁷⁵¹ *New Statesman*, 'It would be a missed opportunity not to have a referendum on election day', 5th November 2009

⁷⁵² *Guardian*, 16th November 2010

⁷⁵³ Interview with Alan Johnson MP, 23rd October 2015

⁷⁵⁴ Interview with Tom Harris, 2nd October 2015

wanted AV wanted it as a stepping stone, they did not want it as a system in itself.”⁷⁵⁵

Denham stressed AV to be “fairer”, making each “MP work harder”, having to “gain the support of a greater group, the support of half the people who voted”, resulting in the “end of people being told they have to vote tactically or their vote will be wasted, it’s more democratic, it’s fair and it will produce a better type of politics.”⁷⁵⁶ However, there was a backlash against the accusation of ‘lazy’ MPs from Labour figures including Ian Murray, Jeremy Corbyn and Kerry McCarthy. Murray stated “It’s been deliberately designed to upset MPs and provoke negative feelings towards them, saying they’re not working hard enough and raking up the expenses issue again. I’m calling on the campaign to name the MPs they think are lazy because all the ones I know work very hard.”⁷⁵⁷

In an article for the *Guardian*, Denham, along with Chris Huhne and Caroline Lucas, explained why party difference must be put aside to change British politics. Britain, the article claimed, “votes as a centre-left country and yet the Conservatives have dominated our politics for two-thirds of the time since 1900.” Progressives, tactical voting and safe seats were all mentioned as AV would be the “dawn of an honest age”, creating a “system that reflect how Britain actually votes, the progressive majority will be one step closer to reality.”⁷⁵⁸ Given that Britain was a year into a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government, the ‘progressive majority’ argument had been shaken and the refutation offered in Healey’s autobiography appeared increasingly relevant.⁷⁵⁹

⁷⁵⁵ Interview with Margaret Beckett MP, 26th March 2014

⁷⁵⁶ *BBC Newsnight, AV Referendum Debate*, BBC 2, 26th April 2011

⁷⁵⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-13082549> (Accessed 21st October 2016)

⁷⁵⁸ *Guardian*, ‘AV referendum: why progressives must unite to vote yes’, 1st May 2011.

⁷⁵⁹ Healey, *The Time of My Life*, pp. 582-583

Harris rejected the argument that it was FPTP that had delivered Conservative governments for much of the twentieth century. Blaming FPTP for Labour's electoral defeats was fallacious as the "Tories governed for most of the century because they were more popular, because they won more votes, because they had more popular policies and because they won the argument." Passing judgement about events post-1992, Harris affirmed the Labour Party faced two different options: either to stop "trying to connect with the voters" and seek to "change the electoral system so we could achieve government by changing the rules" or do as Tony Blair did and propose "new, attractive policies and messages, broadening our appeal beyond our traditional base." For Harris the correct course of action was the one pursued by Blair, as elections are won, "by appealing to more voters, not by changing the system."⁷⁶⁰ Denis MacShane submitted written evidence to the House of Commons Constitutional Reform Committee. FPTP in the post-World War Two era had facilitated an almost even split of Labour and Conservative governments:

"There was once a fashionable view that coalitions in and of themselves produce good government. Yet Britain's electoral system has produced both good and bad governments. There are plenty of examples of coalition governments being complete disasters... In Britain since 1945, Labour has ruled for 30 out of 65 years. This is as good if not a better record of longevity in power than all European left parties outside of Scandinavia and better than Australia or Ireland where electoral systems are closer to AV than Britain's first past the post system... if one of the key desired goals of democratic politics is a regular alternance of power then the evidence suggest that FPTP

⁷⁶⁰ Harris, Speech to East Lothian Fabians

has delivered that better in the UK since 1945, than AV or other electoral systems used elsewhere.”⁷⁶¹

Tessa Jowell supported AV considering preferential voting would force politicians to look beyond “what might be defined as a core vote” and put the “voter first.”

Jowell extended the argument of ‘making more votes count’, estimating on *BBC Daily Politics* that “at the last election the focus was on 460,000 swing voters. We should be looking to involve the whole country in electing our government.”⁷⁶²

The number referenced by Jowell was supposedly the number of voters who determined the outcome of the 2010 general election, targeted by the Conservatives and Labour in marginal constituencies, in order to win a parliamentary majority. Consequently, only a fraction of the electorate determines who forms the government. However, as Harris noted, such an argument fails to consider the clear majority of voters who have participated in the election and how they have decided to vote. “Everyone’s vote matters” stated Harris, “even those who are committed to voting one way at every election have the same right to have their voices heard. Elections are won, yes, by persuading part of the electorate to change their minds. But they’re also won by persuading an even larger proportion of the electorate not to.”⁷⁶³

Indeed, the fundamental reason why Harris was in favour of FPTP was that “it gives the people of this country something extremely valuable: the ability to sack a government.”⁷⁶⁴ The argument that the purpose of elections was to elect a government was regularly used by supporters of FPTP during the AV

⁷⁶¹ Written evidence submitted by Rt Hon Denis MacShane MP, 15th July 2010, House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill, Third Report of Session 2010–11,

⁷⁶² *BBC Daily Politics, AV Referendum Debate Special*, BBC 2, 6th April 2011

⁷⁶³ Harris, Speech to East Lothian Fabians,

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid.*,

Referendum. Prescott deemed: “It is what government does that is the important thing about elections... Government is the most important decision people can make. Trusting government, which is often brought up by people in AV, is about whether governments carry out what they have promised.”⁷⁶⁵ Blunkett, in the NOtoAV campaign video released the day before the referendum, echoed Prescott’s sentiments, ending the campaign broadcast stating FPTP was “a system that elects a government rather than having decisions taken after the election about policies and programmes.”⁷⁶⁶

Conversely to Miliband’s refusal to share a platform with Clegg, Reid shared a platform with Cameron – an ‘unholy alliance’ that cut across class lines – humorously pointing out he had yet to see any of those MPs advocating AV step forward to say they are the ones who are not working hard enough. Reid continued: “It would be an outrage to try and secure a change in our electoral system for tactical party advantage.” This was the aim of the leadership of the Liberal Democrats, yet what they had to realise was “every system has its losers as well as its winners, which is the nature of elections; it is the nature of the contest.” Consequently, “The answer for losing parties is to work harder to win the confidence of the electorate (and) when you lose elections you accept the will of the people.” Reid’s statement correlated with his attitude towards coalition after the May 2010 general election when he proclaimed that Labour must accept defeat. “What you don’t try and do is try and change the rules of the game to suit yourself” as the British way is not for the “Government to sack the electorate, or change the electoral system just because they, the politicians, don’t like the result. In a democracy it works the other way round.”⁷⁶⁷ The objective of reaching

⁷⁶⁵ *BBC Daily Politics, AV Debate Special*, BBC 2, 6th April 2011

⁷⁶⁶ *Campaign Broadcast by No to AV*,

⁷⁶⁷ David Cameron and John Reid Joint Statement, No to AV, Transport House, 18th April 2011

out across class and party lines worked, as the *Guardian* published a poll the following day highlighting how support for AV had plummeted. According to Dan Hodges, a communications consultant for 'NOtoAV', it was the moment when the referendum campaign was, to all intents and purposes, over.⁷⁶⁸

Supporters of FPTP claimed AV would lead to hung parliaments and therefore coalitions. The evidence on AV suggests otherwise as since 1979, only in 1992 would a coalition government have resulted.⁷⁶⁹ Regardless, Falconer considered under AV, "the public will get more disconnected" because of "more coalitions, more hung parliaments." Falconer questioned whether going back on promises made once in power in a coalition is "going to connect people to their politicians or disconnect people further from their politicians?" In his view it would "very strongly... disconnect people further."⁷⁷⁰ Prescott reiterated the argument, considering AV was "necessarily a step towards coalition and coalition does not give you the stability of government." Moreover, as shown by the Conservative-Liberal coalition, it "doesn't deliver the promises made to the electorate; it's fixed by a few people in the room."⁷⁷¹ Caroline Flint MP wrote in the Labour supporting *Daily Mirror* that AV was "complicated, unfair and expensive" and at present "British elections are simple and decisive – you vote for what you believe in with one vote each... The Lib Dems want a system that makes coalitions more likely, where politicians fix a deal behind closed doors and the people have no say."⁷⁷²

Advocates of AV criticised those within Labour who opposed AV, arguing it was the same system used for electing the Leader of the Labour Party, a pertinent

⁷⁶⁸ D. Hodges, 'No We Can', The inside story of the No to AV campaign', *New Statesman*, 11th May 2011

⁷⁶⁹ See G. Eaton, 'AV' Faith', *New Statesman*, 25th April 2011, p. 14

⁷⁷⁰ *BBC Newsnight, AV Referendum Debate*, BBC 2, 26th April 2011

⁷⁷¹ *Ibid.*,

⁷⁷² *Daily Mirror*, 'Caroline Flint: Why I'm voting 'No to AV'', 4th May 2011

point as Ed Miliband had narrowly been elected only nine months prior to the referendum. The argument put forward by No campaigners within Labour was the same as the argument made in the *Plant Report*: different institutions depending on their function could use different electoral systems. Beckett thought that electing a government and electing a leader of a political party were “two completely different things”, a view shared by Prescott.⁷⁷³ Harris fleshed out the position adding that choosing the Leader of the Labour Party is “choosing amongst people who are members of the same party as me, who have the same set of values and principles as I do. In a general election you are not.” Thus, AV is “sensible for you are giving second or third preference to other Labour candidates.” In a general election Harris didn’t “have a second or third preference”, only “one preference” which was the Labour Party.⁷⁷⁴

Ed Miliband and AV

Ed Miliband, the newly elected Leader of the Labour Party supported AV, albeit unenthusiastically. Miliband found himself in the minority in the PLP, and faced dissent from a number of high-profile Labour politicians. The referendum put into focus Miliband’s political judgement and had AV won the referendum, he risked being on the ‘wrong’ side of the PLP. Should FPTP be maintained it had the potential to lead to the perception that Miliband was an electoral underachiever. However, Miliband had the objective of attracting disaffected Liberal Democrats into the Labour fold. Therefore, the act of coming out in favour of AV would have appealed to former Liberal Democrat voters, regardless of the overall outcome of the referendum. It was in many ways a ‘win win’ situation for Miliband, who could

⁷⁷³ *BBC Newsnight*, BBC 2, 2nd December 2010; *BBC Daily Politics, AV Debate Special*, BBC 2, 6th April 2011

⁷⁷⁴ Interview with Tom Harris, 2nd October 2015

present himself as a moderniser if the public supported AV whilst privately relishing the predicament in which Clegg and the Liberal Democrats would find themselves should a key Liberal Democrats coalition policy be rejected by the electorate. Equally, a Yes vote would have caused difficulties for Cameron. Conservative backbenchers, many disillusioned with ‘compassionate conservatism’ compounded by the inability of Cameron’s rebranding to win a majority, would have blamed him for conceding permanent coalition government with the Liberal Democrats or opposition should the Liberal Democrats join forces with Labour.

Miliband wrote in the *Guardian* that AV offers an “opportunity for political reform, ensuring the voice of the public is heard louder than it has been in the past.” Miliband gauged the matter “not to be at the top, or even near the top, of many people’s lists of concerns”, being a matter not often raised in his constituency or any other, implying a lack of enthusiasm. However, the reform was still necessary due to the low current standing of politicians in the eyes of the public, and therefore the opportunity should be taken to make politics more relevant to people. AV “combined the direct representation of first-past-the-post with one that will make the votes of more people count” and breaking that link would be a mistake. AV would not alone bridge the disconnect between people and politicians, as House of Lords reform was also necessary, but AV had the benefit of increasing “political accountability” forcing “parties to admit where there is agreement between them, prising open our confrontational system.”⁷⁷⁵

At the launch of ‘Labour Yes’, Miliband claimed that “the great tragedy in British politics has been the split in the progressive vote, a long tragedy in British

⁷⁷⁵ *Guardian*, ‘Why the Alternative Vote gets my vote’, 16th February 2011

political history.” Whilst Clegg’s decision to go into coalition with the Conservatives had made this less obvious, it should not be assumed that is “going to persist forever because that would be a cardinal mistake when we look back at our history.” In a direct approach to those disaffected by the coalition government, Miliband claimed the Tories were against reform because “They fear the creation of a progressive majority in this country.”⁷⁷⁶ Miliband returned to the ‘split in the progressive vote’ in the days leading up to the referendum, reiterating his belief that AV would “reflect confidence... give expression to the anti-Conservative majority... that there is a genuine progressive majority” in Britain. “Margaret Thatcher never secured the support of a majority of people in this country... The first-past-the-post system helped her force extremely divisive policies through parliament that did lasting harm to so many communities.” Miliband dubiously and disingenuously added: “Labour has always been a force for political reform.”⁷⁷⁷ Basing his argument on the ‘progressive-left’ thesis, yet refusing to share a platform with Clegg, the leader of the other ‘progressive’ party was contradictory, and a ‘tribal approach’. Although Miliband could point to sharing a platform with other Liberal Democrats, to not share with Clegg implied any sincerity towards reuniting the left was ‘skin deep’.

The *Financial Times* reported that regardless of a No vote in the referendum, Miliband wished to retain a commitment to electoral reform in the next Labour manifesto, keeping alive the possibility of a pact with the Lib Dems. According to one unnamed Labour insider “if there is a No vote, it’s important that the margin of defeat is as narrow as possible to keep the reform agenda alive.”⁷⁷⁸ If correct, it infers the Labour leadership were keeping their options open to a potential deal

⁷⁷⁶ Ed Miliband, Launch of Labour Yes, 16th March 2011

⁷⁷⁷ *Financial Times*, ‘Voters set to deliver resounding No to AV’, 5th May 2011.

⁷⁷⁸ *Financial Times*, ‘Miliband calls for progressive Yes’, 3rd May 2011

with the Liberal Democrats in 2015, suggesting even as early as 2011 they were unsure of outright victory and desired an ‘insurance’ policy. Bradshaw delivered a speech at Kings College London. “If the No vote wins in May, That’s it. We’re not going to get another bite at this cherry. If the British people vote to keep FPTP that means any change to our electoral system is off the agenda.” In relation to the Labour Party, “I know my own party will not re-visit this, it’s not going to have an appetite for this.”⁷⁷⁹ Bradshaw was perhaps encouraging those to vote AV by emphasising how it was a ‘once in a generation’ chance although if the Labour leadership were hoping to carry this over into 2015 then the issue would return to the agenda.

The impact of the Liberal Democrats ‘betrayal’

Focusing on the issue of coalition government and the role of the Liberal Democrats within it, particularly on what were perceived as ‘broken promises’, was understandable, and became a vocal point for the No campaign. The coalition government was one year into the parliament, and the Liberal Democrats were becoming increasingly unpopular. Students were particularly upset due to the *volte face* on tuition fees amongst other Lib Dem policies that failed to make it into the Coalition Agreement. Watson judged “I always expected there would be a majority of Labour MPs voting no. Much of this is to do with Nick Clegg. I have never known an issue inside the Labour Party that is being so determined by your attitude to one man.”⁷⁸⁰ Clegg had become the *persona non grata*, symbolic of the broken promises, and whilst the Yes campaign chose to focus on other figures, he was part of the reason why the referendum was taking

⁷⁷⁹ The Rt. Hon Ben Bradshaw MP, speech to Kings College London Think Tank Society, 24th March 2011

⁷⁸⁰ *Guardian*, ‘Labour in last-ditch push on both sides of AV debate’, 1st May 2011

place. When Clegg insisted on attending a 'Yes to Fairer Votes' event Miliband withdrew, stating: "What is the problem with Nick Clegg? Where do you start? He was the person who promised new politics. And the brief bout of Cleggmania there was, was supposed to be about new politics. I'm afraid he has become the exemplar of old politics; of breaking your promises."⁷⁸¹

Clegg played directly into the hands of the No campaign, who could tap into Labour voters' dislike of the Liberal Democrat leader, with posters appearing of 'No to President Clegg.' Indeed, the scathing attacks on Clegg in the campaign literature were according to Matthew D'Ancona pushed by Labour people in the No campaign.⁷⁸² Hodges supports this view, writing how Joan Ryan pushed for the twin attack of the £250 million cost of the AV referendum and the personal attack on Clegg. Indeed, it was Ryan who met one of Cameron's close aids, Stephen Gilbert, and advocated Cameron and Reid making a joint statement to avoid accusations of NOtoAV being a 'tory front'. Reportedly, Cameron and Conservative HQ did not wish to attack Clegg when he was already down, yet in order to motivate Labour voters, it was agreed to emphasise how the referendum was an opportunity to punish Clegg and the Lib Dems for letting the Conservatives in.⁷⁸³ 'Labour No to AV' also attacked Clegg mercilessly, associating him with all the pledges he had failed to keep and utilising 'pictorial narratives', one of which was a mock *Guardian* front page with the headline: 'New voting system saves President Clegg'. Other images included Clegg walking into Downing Street with his hand on Cameron's back after the formation of the coalition government and Clegg holding the tuition fees pledge.

⁷⁸¹ *Independent*, 15th March 2011

⁷⁸² M. D'Ancona, *In It Together, The Inside Story of the Coalition Government*, (Penguin Books, London, 2013) p. 82

⁷⁸³ Hodges, 'No We Can', 11th May 2011

As such, Labour were pinning the blame on the Liberal Democrats for propping up the Conservatives, rubbishising any suggestion that the Liberal Democrats were on the 'progressive' side of British politics and holding them equally responsible, if not more so than the Conservatives, for the coalition's economic reforms. For some within the Labour Party, a No vote offered the opportunity to inflict damage on the Liberal Democrat and give Clegg a 'bloody nose'. Baroness Armstrong, "agreed with Tony (Blair) on bringing about progressive centre-left politics" and was personally "ambivalent towards the huge anti-Liberal factor in the Labour Party." However, the referendum was "a means of kicking the Liberals" as the "compromises the Liberals made to go in with the Tories were a bit shocking and therefore they deserved a kicking."⁷⁸⁴ Harris echoed Armstrong's sentiment stating: "the hatred of the Liberals and the belief that they had betrayed all their own principles was a factor throughout the last parliament and I have no doubt impinged on the AV debate."⁷⁸⁵ Indeed, a post-referendum analysis by the Liberal Democrats considered the whole exercise and campaign tactics were designed "to kick the party twice."⁷⁸⁶

Whitty deemed the referendum took place "too early in the lifetime of the coalition" and that the Labour Party had "been defeated; so the thinking was we'd better let the other lot run it for a bit. The perceived wisdom was to work out how to get back into power on the traditional method."⁷⁸⁷ Therefore, gains that could be made by disrupting the workings of the coalition – particularly damaging Cameron who would be held responsible for the change to the electoral system by his backbenchers – was not the preferred option. Instead, Labour were

⁷⁸⁴ Interview with Baroness Armstrong, 16th July 2014

⁷⁸⁵ Interview with Tom Harris, 2nd October 2015

⁷⁸⁶ Liberal Democrats, *Liberal Democrats Consultative Session: Election Review May 2011*, (Liberal Democrats Policy Unit, London, 2011) p. 7

⁷⁸⁷ Interview with Lord Whitty, 31st March 2014

prepared to 'wait their turn' to resume office under the current system. Harris affirmed Clegg was not "the main driving force behind Labour's opposition." Instead it was a case of the Labour Party opposing a "flawed proposal", because "we are against electoral reform... Most of us understood the debate was about more long term important issues rather than getting short term political advantage over another political party."⁷⁸⁸ In this case, the other political party was the Conservatives and the vehemently anti-Liberal section in the Labour Party was more than happy to gain an advantage over the Liberal Democrats.

The Result

On 5th May 2011 the electorate went to the polls to vote in only the second UK-wide referendum. The vote coincided with elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly of Wales and local government elections in England outside London. Whereas in 1975 the issue was the United Kingdom remaining in the European Economic Community, in 2011 the question put to the British electorate was as follows:

"At present, the UK uses the 'first past the post' system to elect MPs to the House of Commons. Should the 'alternative vote' system be used instead?"

The outcome was unanimous: AV was rejected by the electorate by a majority of 2:1 with only ten counting areas across the United Kingdom voting in favour of AV. Baston and Ritchie analysed the result, and deemed the scale of the defeat for reformers a 'disaster'. Only a further eleven counting areas returned a yes vote above 45% and all eleven shared similarities with the ten counting areas

⁷⁸⁸ Interview with Tom Harris, 2nd October 2015

that did return a yes vote: “highly educated, youthful, liberal and cosmopolitan areas... The political colours of the areas with a Yes vote of more than 45 per cent were mostly Labour – not Labour strongholds (except Hackney) but places where local political competition tends to be between Labour and Lib Dem (Islington, Haringey, Oxford, Cambridge, Southwark), Labour and SNP or Labour and Green.”⁷⁸⁹ The Yes campaign “had made the reforming vote a stereotype of itself, the domain of the metropolitan liberal middle classes – a potentially broad coalition had been whittled down to its hard core.”⁷⁹⁰

Polling conducted on behalf of YouGov on election-day found 47% of Labour voters backed Yes and 53% voted No. 53% of those belonging to ABC1 voted Yes whereas 60% of C2DE voted No.⁷⁹¹ Whilst the Yes campaign may have thought little of the Labour ‘old guard’ – Beckett, Reid, Blunkett – labelling them ‘dinosaurs’, traditional Labour voters may have looked more kindly upon these experienced politicians. Moreover, claims by electoral reformers that there was public demand for reform was proved doubtful due to both the magnitude of defeat in terms of votes and the widespread rejection across the United Kingdom. As Beckett pointed out, “It was a comprehensive victory. It would look (if another referendum was held) as if the people spoke but they got it wrong, so let’s ask them again, which is not a wise thing for any government to do. Given the result of the referendum and the experience of the coalition, it probably does mean it is dead in the water for a very long time.”⁷⁹²

⁷⁸⁹ Baston & Ritchie, *Don’t Take No For an Answer*, pp. 46-48

⁷⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57

⁷⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52

⁷⁹² Interview with Margaret Beckett MP, 26th March 2014

Summary

The final years of the Labour government and the following leadership contest was a turbulent period for the Labour Party: economic crash, MPs expenses, the unpopularity of Brown and the Labour government, a poor result in the 2010 general election, the end of thirteen years of government and the emergence of a Conservative-Liberal coalition government. Throughout, electoral reform was on the political agenda although interest was motivated by political expediency rather than a genuine conversion. Labour had won three successive general elections and talk of reform, looked and indeed was, belated and insincere. Publicly, talk of 'cleaning up politics' after the expenses scandal was secondary to the political calculation of keeping alive the prospect of a post-election deal with the Liberal Democrats. Labour understood it was likely to lose the upcoming general election and whilst Labour MPs voted for the government Bill they did so in the knowledge it would be 'washed up' with the dissolution of Parliament. The manifesto commitment was a direct appeal to Liberal Democrat voters to vote Labour and the Liberal Democrat Party that Labour was *serious* about reform. However, it was expected that Labour would lose the election and the Party would be out of office.

The five days that followed the 2010 general election were important for it exposed two tensions: Labour's antipathy towards electoral reform and its attitude towards coalition, the likely consequence of PR. Electoral reform was a key policy that the Liberal Democrats had long desired and to which Labour had a manifesto commitment. Yet negotiations floundered, in part due to Labour's scepticism towards entering a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, and although PR was mooted it was never formally offered. As Balls stated in the negotiations, AV, let alone PR would have struggled to pass through the House of Commons

given the opposition within the PLP. Moreover, high-profile Labour figures were openly damning the idea of coalition, which added to the Liberal Democrats' belief that whatever Labour offered, it was not deliverable. However, the failure of 'realignment' and the fulfilment of the 'progressive-left' was influenced by factors other than electoral reform: ideological overlap between the *Orange Book* liberals and 'compassionate conservatism', parliamentary arithmetic and the political stability of coalition with the Conservatives, and the gradual 'falling out of love' with Labour over the course of thirteen years of government. The 'bad-faith' was apparent on both sides and the political will was therefore lacking.

Attitudes to coalition were, to some degree, influenced by the heavy electoral defeat and the desire to renew in opposition, allowing the Conservatives to take the electoral punishment for unpopular public expenditure cuts. Yet the arguments put forward by the likes of Blunkett, Reid and Straw went beyond one solitary general election defeat, to the heart of Labour's thinking about coalition government at Westminster. There was the question of how a 'coalition of the losers' reliant on the potentially fickle support of the minor parties would survive from day-to-day. Moreover, how would such a government be perceived by the electorate and the media, what would this do to the standing of the Labour Party as a national party of Great Britain, and if it was perceived negatively, what would be the electoral backlash at future elections and would this do irrevocable damage to the Labour vote? Whilst Adonis might have viewed such an attitude as 'defeatist' it was the more realistic and politically acceptable decision to make. The Labour Party, as a serious party of the British State, had to play by the rules and accept when it was defeated and await its turn to form a government in the future by winning under FPTP.

It would be the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition who would deliver Labour's referendum manifesto pledge. Burnham had made clear in 2010 that Labour would campaign neither for nor against, instead focussing on the different elections taking place across Great Britain. The matter was deemed secondary to the primary concern of winning seats in local government and the devolved assemblies. During the AV Referendum, the newly elected Labour leader Ed Miliband found himself in the minority view of the PLP, supporting a switch to AV. Miliband, having only narrowly beaten his brother months earlier in a tight leadership contest, had little political capital to use and although he campaigned in favour, it was not considered a priority like the other elections taking place across Britain. Labour duly split. Many of the Labour politicians who were openly opposed and expressed reservations of coalition with the Liberal Democrats in 2010 were most opposed to AV, including Reid, Blunkett, Falconer, Harris and Beckett. Whilst Clegg was attacked mercilessly and provided a figurehead to point out all that was wrong AV and coalition government, underpinning the referendum was a traditional defence of FPTP: broadly, arguments centred on the purpose of voting is the creation being a single-party government, the electorate's ability to sack a government and the rejection of hung parliaments and coalition government as it would lead to broken promises and the trading away of manifesto pledges. For the Yes side, whilst they could call upon the support of high-profile Labour figures such as Ed Miliband, Johnson and Bradshaw, the refrain of 'fair voting' lacked traction as did the belief that AV would clean up politics, create greater choice and increase accountability. Whilst politicians on the left talked about the split on the British left and how AV would foster 'progressive' politics, the creation of the coalition government suggested such a notion was illusory. The sheer scale of the defeat for AV has meant that electoral reform, whether it be a different majoritarian system or proportional representation, has been set back a generation.

Conclusion

In conclusion we return to the research questions which were outlined in the introduction, namely: what are the main theoretical approaches in the Labour Party towards electoral reform; what are the main historical approaches to electoral reform within the Labour Party; and, why has interest in electoral reform grown within the Labour Party since the 1980s and with what consequences?

The thesis has addressed the research questions, with the theoretical, historical and recent interest in electoral reform explored in considerable detail. H. J. Hanham's assertion, quoted in the introduction, that the electoral reform debate contains a dual aspect, entailing both the theoretical and historical⁷⁹³ can be ascertained in relation to the Labour Party. The competing views on the electoral system within the Party are based on different theoretical frameworks, each striving for supremacy and experiencing times of prominence, reflecting political context, and the pressures facing the Party. In addition, issues of *real politik* have received attention throughout the thesis, for it must be remembered that the Labour Party acts not only in the realm of ideas, but in the context of the day to day battle of Westminster politics.

The intention of the thesis has been to draw out ideas implicit in the narrative. Labour's attitude towards the electoral system, as the thesis makes apparent, is primarily based on two competing views: democratic elitism and pluralism, of which democratic elitism has been the dominant strand. Marxism has rarely held influence on Labour's attitude towards the Westminster electoral system. However, it would be a mistake to dismiss Marxism as its importance can be

⁷⁹³ Hanham, *The Reformed Electoral System in Great Britain*, p.7

viewed in its critique of the Labour Party's acceptance of parliamentary orthodoxy.

The Party, as the political wing of the Labour movement, has considered parliamentary representation the priority, with socialism to be achieved through the parliamentary method. Popular movements have been side-lined in favour of elections, with Labour attempting to capture the state and utilise the power invested in a parliamentary majority to reform and ameliorate capitalism. Although Labour had experienced minority government in 1924 and 1929-31, Labour's 1945-51 majority government highlighted the benefits of a single-party majority in the House of Commons, convincing the Party that the state could be used to meet Labour's ends. The state was there to be captured, and the Westminster Model of politics and workings of FPTP was deemed the best attainable method to produce Labour governments and the implementation of its distinct socio-economic agenda, symbolised by the introduction of the welfare state. The objections raised by Labour's political opponents within and outside Parliament could be countered by a parliamentary majority, with the oft repeated achievements of Labour governments used to defend FPTP. Despite the raft of constitutional changes introduced by New Labour, Labour's commitment to parliamentary means continues. During the days following the May 2010 general election Labour's behaviour and attitude displayed a clear and unfailing constitutionalism, abiding by the 'rules of the game', and in some cases, gladly accepting defeat and entering opposition.

Marxists and pluralists have utilised arguments professing proportional representation (PR) would permit a realignment in British politics. Yet the direction and implications of realignment differ. For Marxists, the Labour Party would be pulled to the left by the emergence of a fully avowed socialist party,

exposing the class divisions within society. Alternatively Labour would split with the right of the Labour Party joining the centre party, and the left of the Party – freed from constitutional and economic orthodoxy of Labour – able to join a Socialist party truly representing the interests of the working class. Consequently, the compromises Labour makes with capital in order to win elections – necessary through the workings of FPTP forcing Labour to attract and win the votes of non-socialists and Conservatives – would cease, as PR would reveal the class divisions within society.

Such a view contradicts the principles and objectives of Labour which, as outlined, is concerned with parliamentary representation and the formation of a government operating in the interests of working people. For this end to be realised it is necessary for Labour to build broad electoral coalitions, attracting support from across different classes and regions of Great Britain. Therefore, Labour becomes not just a class-based party but a national party and importantly desires to be perceived by the electorate as a national party. Consequently, the Labour Party is a broad church, in relation to its electoral base, membership and parliamentarians; including trade union members, the working class and middle-class, intellectuals, all from across the regions of Great Britain. FPTP encourages the Labour Party to come together, fusing a coalition of people who broadly share the same principles, deeming it better to work within one party than with those who may or may not agree in a different party. An electoral system that causes division, such as STV where Labour candidates would compete against one another, would only benefit the Conservatives as Labour's factions from left, centre and right would be exposed. Prevalent amongst the FPTP supporters during the Plant Report was the recent memory and trauma of the SDP and, more generally, Labour's history of ruptures. An electoral system which had the potential to foster further splits was to be opposed.

Pluralists consider that the divisions within society are not sufficiently represented under FPTP. The declining vote share enjoyed by the two major parties suggests they are becoming less representative of society. The Labour Party is not exempt meaning the political system requires reform, replacing the constricting and limiting FPTP with PR in order to give expression to the diverse and fluid nature of society. PR would also facilitate a realignment of the left between the 'progressive' parties in British politics. PR would offer a more inclusive, collegiate and open politics, allowing the 'progressive' parties to work together to defeat the Conservatives. Greater democratic legitimacy would result through the combining of votes, so government would have the support of over 50% of the electorate, containing a more diverse range of views, therefore leading to a 'better politics', ending tribalism and sectional interest.

Healing the historic schism on the British left between Labour and the Liberal Democrats through PR would permit Labour to create a greater electoral coalition which otherwise would remain out of reach. Labour on its own is incapable of attracting the support of social groups required to deliver a parliamentary majority due to its 'tribalism' and belief that only it is capable of defeating the Conservatives. Through political engagement a renewed interest in politics would ensue, allowing Labour to gain from those who deem constitutional reform to be important. This entails several benefits for the Labour Party, making it 'safe' in the eyes of the electorate and therefore electable, as the Labour left would be silenced by the moderating influence of the centrist MPs. The centre party would also ensure a Labour government would remain in office for a prolonged period of time, working in unison in parliament, creating both a united front against the Conservatives at Westminster and in the country. By doing so a Conservative government would be prevented, perhaps for a generation, allowing for the

implementation of, to some degree, a social democratic policy agenda. Unlike the twentieth century which was dominated electorally by the Conservative Party, the 'progressive' forces in British politics could ensure a 'progressive' twenty-first century.

Whilst the pluralist analysis has its supporters within the Labour Party, and has experienced times of prominence, the elitists have remained dominant. The professed benefits of pluralism have been treated with caution, not just by the Labour leadership but by much of the wider PLP, perceiving it as placing at risk the Labour Party having sole control of the levers of power through a parliamentary majority in the House of Commons. The Labour Party considers itself to be the sole defensive agent of the working class with a unique socio-economic ideology committed to furthering its interests. A coalition involving Labour and one or more of its opponents would be to admit that Labour can no longer fulfil its primary role, whilst also watering down the policies designed to ameliorate capitalism and benefit the working class, breaking the doctrine of the 'mandate and the manifesto', the contract between government and the British people.

Plant broke with Labour orthodoxy when he stated it is far better that Labour implemented some of its manifesto in coalition with a likeminded partner than remain impotent in opposition, thus rejecting the doctrine of the mandate and the manifesto. No longer did a single policy document and the general election, in an era of declining class and political loyalty, with voting now taking place on instrumental lines and electors thinking of their own interests in deciding how to vote, sufficiently represent the views and changing nature of British society. For Plant, FPTP supporters wanted to resist the idea of people voting instrumentally. The idea of class identification and the more cultural identification of working

people led Labour FPTP supporters to conclude the working class should vote Labour however hopeless it might seem, rather than voting tactically or instrumentally. Consequently, an election is partly about expressing loyalty to a set of ideas.⁷⁹⁴

Labour politicians from across the Party have viewed elections to primarily be about the election of a government. Therefore, during the AV Referendum it should have been no surprise that the majority of Labour MPs backed FPTP, continuing Labour opposition to electoral reform also seen at the time of Plant and Jenkins. Indeed, Labour's adherence to FPTP at Westminster has been maintained despite the ideological shifts within the Party and the acceptance in the latter part of the twentieth century of much of the New Right agenda.

Therefore, the continuing acceptance of FPTP suggests a profound conviction in a model of governance akin to Schumpeter's democratic elitism.⁷⁹⁵ Throughout the chapters analysing and reappraising the arguments contained in the Plant Report, Jenkins Commission and the Alternative Vote referendum, themes found within democratic elitism are found within Labour's justification for the preservation of FPTP for Westminster elections. Elections are concerned with the choice of a government; government is to do the governing not the wider electorate through popular participation as government is better placed to know the facts; democracy is contained in the mandate and manifesto which acts like a contract between the government and the electorate; and the theory offers the electorate accountability and the ability to pass judgement on the government at the subsequent general election.

⁷⁹⁴ Interview with Lord Plant, 14th September 2016

⁷⁹⁵ See Thesis, pp. 45-63

Furthermore, not only on an intellectual level has the Labour Party conformed to the elitist model, but so to have the actions of the Parliamentary Labour Party and Labour leadership. Labour's scepticism of coalition at Westminster has been common place through much of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. Whilst that Lib-Lab Pact was born out of necessity, the aftermath of the 2010 general election clearly revealed Labour's reluctance to fully embrace coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Whilst the scale of the 2010 election defeat is important, prominent Labour figures damned coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Blunkett succinctly scorned the Liberal Democrats, coalition and PR stating, "we see now what it would be like with fully fledged PR, don't we? We see what we would have to put up with"⁷⁹⁶ emphasising Labour's continuing doubt at Westminster of anything resembling power sharing.

Consequently, the 'progressive left' thesis put forward by Marquand⁷⁹⁷ has been rejected: firstly, because it runs counter to Labour's objective of having sole control over the levers of power, and secondly, the likely introduction of PR, often thought of as a method to aid realigning the British left, would be an acceptance that Labour is no longer capable of governing without the support of others. The electorate would question Labour's resolve and standing as a national party and consider it as far as the elitists in Labour are concerned as an acceptance of defeat. The Marquand view has been dismissed, for it has been based on a misreading of twentieth century British politics. Far from Labour and the Liberal Party – in all its various guises – complementing one another, sharing the same history, ideology and policies, they are in direct competition for votes, seats and power and have different views on the direction in which socially and economically they desire to take the country.

⁷⁹⁶ BBC Radio 4, 11th October 2010

⁷⁹⁷ See Thesis, pp. 32-33, 39-46

Whilst the pluralist analysis outlines the overlapping policies and shared values between the two parties – especially the right of the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats on issues such as nationalisation, welfare, the economy, taxation and Europe, support and opposition towards PR does not fit comfortably into a ‘Left-Right split’. Not all those on the right of the Labour Party support PR just as not all those on the left of the Party support FPTP and, therefore, the matter is best viewed as an issue based on competing governing strategies and perceived self-interest. Tom Harris, on the right of the Party, is staunchly in favour of FPTP having little time for the Liberal Democrats. On the other hand, Ben Bradshaw MP supports a move away from FPTP to PR. During Blair’s premiership, a figure on the left of the Cabinet such as John Prescott damned the notion of PR, vetoing Blair’s overtures towards the Liberal Democrats. On the right of the Cabinet, Jack Straw also dismissed PR. On the left of the Party John McDonnell MP is in favour of PR whereas Denis Skinner remains wholly opposed.

However, attitudes towards the electoral system in the Labour Party are fluid. Roy Hattersley changed his mind, having led the arguments against PR in the 1980s and 1990s, he then accepted PR. Collectively, the Labour Party in the 1920s moved away from PR towards FPTP, a position it has maintained ever since with fluctuating confidence. Baroness Armstrong’s moved towards FPTP and her comments encapsulates Labour’s wider thoughts on PR and its consequences:

“The longer I was on the Working Party the less convinced I became about change. I went on as an agnostic but came off thinking the sacrifices we

would have to make from losing our system were greater than what we would gain, largely because of one person and the identification with constituents.”⁷⁹⁸

Between the polarised views is a cohort of MPs who are agnostic on the matter of electoral reform, deeming it not to be a burning issue. Lord Mandelson neatly summarised the view, stating “It’s not a passionate view of mine and it’s not the highest priority issue for me.”⁷⁹⁹ Hattersley deemed, “There is no point the Labour Party tearing itself apart over a Liberal issue... an issue that is somewhat marginal.”⁸⁰⁰ Labour politicians perceive liberal issues to be of no concern to the electorate and working class, reminiscent of Gilbert Gray’s quip ‘they speak of little else in Barnsley’. Whilst PR might be an urgent issue for the liberal intelligentsia and north London dinner table sets, the working class – as far as the dominant view in the Labour Party is concerned – are interested in the economy, health service and education, not the mechanisms that send representatives to Parliament.

Harris wrote:

“There are some in Labour’s own ranks who yearn for the chance to reshape British politics by uniting the ‘progressive’ forces against the evil Tories. Perhaps they might even prefer a Lab-Lib coalition to an outright Labour majority. When you start drawing up policies to impress the Lib Dems, it certainly gives the impression that you’re planning for failure, rather than preparing for majority rule.”⁸⁰¹

⁷⁹⁸ Interview with Baroness Armstrong, 16th July 2014

⁷⁹⁹ Interview with Lord Mandelson, 31st March 2015

⁸⁰⁰ Interview with Lord Hattersley, 17th November 2014

⁸⁰¹ *Daily Telegraph*, ‘What is my party playing at? No one wants votes for 16-year-olds’, 19th August 2013

PR becomes a distraction from the task of winning the general election, which is to be fought under FPTP against the Conservatives. Advocating electoral reform is a sure sign of defeatism, pandering to the Liberal Democrats rather than appealing to the electorate through credible and sensible policies and displaying confidence in your own ability to win. Moreover, the electorate did not vote Labour to introduce PR but to build hospitals and schools, and it is on these issues that the electorate will judge the Party. The 1992 general election was a case in point. Although Labour had been discussing constitutional issues including PR for several years, ambiguity over PR was blamed for defeat, creating a distraction from the *serious* business of governing. Whilst competing views on the electoral system are sincerely held, unity is required in the Labour Party. The matter becomes – as far as the leadership is concerned – one of party management, a position adopted by John Smith who thanked the Plant Commission for its deliberations, before committing the Party to a referendum on the electoral system to side step a divisive issue. A referendum commitment found favour with Blair and Brown, both of whom acknowledged the divisions in Cabinet, the PLP and wider Labour movement.

Realignment of the left is also rejected by Labour politicians through appeals to Labour history, recalling how the Liberals voted with the Conservatives to oust James Callaghan in 1979, beckoning in eighteen years of Conservative government. The SDP split in which Labour MPs left the Party – comparable to MacDonald forming the ‘National Government’ – was intent on replacing Labour as the main opposition to the Conservatives. At a local level the Liberal Democrats fought and beat Labour, for example the city councils in Liverpool and Sheffield. The campaigning and electoral tactics deployed by the Liberals on the ground, in election material and general demeanour, has led some in Labour to

view them as untrustworthy, duplicitous and opportunistic. Consequently, they are viewed as inferior, not of the same quality as Labour politicians, having no firm principles and beliefs. Harris affirmed “you should never give Lib Dems any power, ever – but certainly not the power over who runs the Labour Party”⁸⁰², alluding to Clegg’s role in Brown resigning as Leader of the Labour Party, and the wider implication under PR of a small party dictating to the larger Labour Party. The Liberal Democrats entering coalition with the Conservatives has reinforced the perception that, in the words of Ramsay MacDonald, the Liberals are ‘cads’.

Tony Blair’s personal and political relationship with Paddy Ashdown in the 1990s gave hope to the pluralists in the Party: the Cook-MacLennan Pact brokered agreement between the two parties on Labour’s constitutional reform agenda; the independent commission on the voting system led by Roy Jenkins (chosen much to the disapproval of the ‘tribalists’) proposed a new electoral system; and a joint cabinet committee was formed to discuss political issues, predominantly those on the constitution. However, personnel, principle and politics ensured that the ‘historic schism’ remained, as agreement could not be reached on timings, nature and direction of a ‘progressive alliance’. Moreover, bar a handful of individuals on either side who thought it a worthwhile pursuit, opposition throughout all levels of the PLP ensured that over thirteen years of Labour government the two parties drifted apart, so much so that the Liberal Democrats entered a coalition with the Conservative Party in May 2010. The AV referendum in 2011 allowed Labour to direct its displeasure at the Liberal Democrats entering a coalition with the Conservatives, simultaneously rubbing the notion of the ‘progressive left’ and the Liberal Democrats long-treasured hope of electoral reform.

⁸⁰² Interview with Tom Harris, 2nd October 2015

The events of May 2010 exposed the failings of the 'progressive left' thesis, and vindicated those in the Labour Party who had opposed realignment. Beckett considered that the 'progressive left' was "A leap of faith without any concrete evidence which supports the claim... The assumption was the Liberal Democrats would always go with the Labour Party. It never seemed to me to be accurate."⁸⁰³ Straw deemed: "The fanciful notion of a 'progressive alliance'" nothing more than "arrogant nonsense. There was no 'Progressive Alliance' on the ballot paper. Many of those who voted Lib Dem would have done so tactically to stop Labour despite, not because of, the Lib Dems' policy offer."⁸⁰⁴ Indeed, both Beckett and Straw cut their teeth as politicians during the Lib-Lab Pact and Healey's dismissal of the 'progressive left' and PR, based on his experience of the Lib-Lab Pact, summarises Labour's prevalent attitude: FPTP produces the best form of government; compromising on policy does not better represent the views of the electorate; Labour cannot escape its problems through PR and coalition; there is an anti-Labour majority just as large as the anti-Conservative majority due to the centre parties being deeply divided; and the benefits of PR in terms of aiding the Labour Party in forming a government are unlikely to materialise.⁸⁰⁵

Consequently, the rejection of the 'progressive left' thesis is based on historical as well as theoretical grounds. Once Labour had replaced the Liberals as the main opposition to the Conservatives in the 1920s, elections and the pursuit of power was to revolve around Labour and the Conservatives. There was to be no room for the Liberal Party who could be dismissed as an irrelevance. As Labour discovered what could be achieved through a parliamentary majority interest in PR faded, for Labour had become a party of government. Yet, PR returned to the

⁸⁰³ Interview with Margaret Beckett MP, 26th March 2014

⁸⁰⁴ Straw, *Last Man Standing*, p. 531

⁸⁰⁵ Healey, *The Time of My Life*, pp. 458 & 582-583

fore in the Labour Party in the latter third of the twentieth century and remains to the present day. Interest in PR in the first third of the twentieth century was concerned with Labour maximising representation and gaining a foothold in the political system as the third party in British politics. Opinions diverged, yet MacDonald's view that Labour should compete and stand independently across Great Britain prevailed, remaining dominant and largely unchallenged until the 1980s.

Labour had in the post-World War Two era experienced electoral success and periods in government. At the height of the two-party system PR was at best a minority pursuit, generally in British politics and specifically in the Labour Party. Losing in 1951 despite polling more votes than the Conservatives – leading to thirteen years in opposition – prompted little interest in PR. Instead, the Party was concerned about an increasingly affluent working class and its implications for Labour Party policy and the introduction of socialism. Morrison waxed lyrical about the workings of Westminster and at the 1965 Speaker's Conference, all Labour representatives offered strong defences of FPTP.

In contrast, electoral success seemed remote after two successive landslide defeats in 1983 and 1987. Interest in PR revolved around the idea of whether Labour could ever win again. Therefore, PR was part of a wider interest in constitutional reform and new methods that would allow the Labour Party to form a government. Labour was struggling to maintain its standing as a broad-based national party in the face of a dominant and confident Conservative statecraft. Moreover, the policies of the Conservative government were undermining the planks of social democracy, who enjoyed a large parliamentary majority achieved even at the height of Thatcherism, on a vote share in the low 40s. Pluralist arguments in favour of PR became fashionable, growing in prominence and

challenging orthodox views in the Labour Party, so much so that the Labour leadership were forced into commissioning the Plant Report. In addition, electoral benefits for the Labour Party lay in wait for the Party should it focus constitutional reform and adopt PR, attracting the support of wavering Liberal Democrat voters.

Evidently, interest in PR has remained within the Labour Party despite thirteen years of government between 1997-2010. Towards the end of the Brown government, electoral reform returned to the agenda, primarily in the hope that they could hold it over into the coalition talks with the Liberal Democrats. A historic three successive election victories, of which 1997 and 2001 were landslide victories, may have justified those who rejected PR during the eighteen years in opposition. But as the AV referendum highlighted, a significant minority of the PLP consider electoral reform to be a worthwhile pursuit. Many of the arguments in Plant in favour of electoral reform continue to be utilised to the present day by pluralists within the Party, suggesting a continuity of rationale. However, reformers in the Labour Party are hindered by a lack of agreement on the type of electoral system they wish to see implemented and are faced by a unified bloc of FPTP supporters. The thesis has shown that attitudes towards the electoral system are both matters of principle and perceived self-interest. Given views are sincerely held on both sides, for as long the Labour Party exists, PR will continue to cause division.

Appendix 1 - List of Interviewees

- Dame Margaret Beckett MP, 26th March 2014, Houses of Parliament
- Lord Elder, 27th March 2014, Houses of Parliament
- Lord Rosser, 28th March 2014, Houses of Parliament
- Lord Whitty, 31st March 2014, Houses of Parliament
- Charles Clarke, 21st May 2014, St Ermins Hotel, London
- Dr Tim Lamport, 14th July 2014, Personal Residence, Croydon
- Baroness Armstrong, 16th July 2014, Houses of Parliament
- Lord Hattersley, 17th November 2014, Houses of Parliament.
- Lord Lipsey, 21st January 2015, Houses of Parliament.
- Baroness Gould, 3rd March 2015, Telephone Interview
- Lord Mandelson, 31st March 2015, Telephone Interview
- John Edmonds, 9th April 2015, Kings College London
- Tom Harris, 2nd October 2015, Café Gandolfi, Candleriggs, Glasgow

- Ben Bradshaw MP, 21st October 2015, Telephone Interview
- Alan Johnson MP, 23rd October 2015, Telephone Interview
- Lord Plant, 14th September 2016, Houses of Parliament

Personal Correspondence

- Bryan Gould, 26th February 2014

Appendix 2

Labour List recorded the names of Labour MPs who had declared whether they were supporting FPTP or AV. The final list published by *Labour List* on 4th May 2011 revealed 132 MPs had sided with NOtoAV and 92 had come out in favour of Labour Yes to AV.⁸⁰⁶

<u>No to AV</u>		<u>Yes to AV</u>	
Bob Ainsworth	Diana Johnson	Diane Abbott	Madeleine Moon
David Anderson	Graham Jones	Debbie Abrahams	Albert Owen
Ian Austin	Helen Jones	Rushanara Ali	Teresa Pearce
Adrian Bailey	Kevan Jones	Douglas Alexander	Stephen Pound
Gordon Banks	Eric Joyce	Heidi Alexander	Nick Raynsford
Margaret Beckett	Gerald Kaufman	Graham Allen	Jamie Reed
Stuart Bell	Alan Keen	William Bain	Jonathan Reynolds
Joe Benton	Ian Lavery	Ed Balls	Lindsay Roy
Clive Betts	Tony Lloyd	Kevin Barron	Joan Ruddock
Hazel Blears	Ian Lucas	Hugh Bayley	Anas Sarwar
David Blunkett	Denis MacShane	Hilary Benn	Alison Seabeck
Nicholas Brown	Khalid Mahmood	Tom Blenkinsop	Virendra Sharman
Russell Brown	Shabana Mahmood	Benjamin Bradshaw	Barry Sheerman
David Cairns	Steve McCabe	Kevin Brennan	Andrew Slaughter
Ronnie Campbell	Michael McCann	Lyn Brown	Andrew Smith
Jenny Chapman	Siobhain McDonagh	Gordon Brown	Peter Soulsby
Katy Clark	Jim McGovern	Chris Bryant	Jack Straw
Tom Clarke	Alan Meale	Karen Buck	Gareth Thomas
Ann Clwyd	Ian Mearns	Richard Burden	Stephen Timms
Vernon Coaker	Andrew Miller	Liam Byrne	Stephen Twigg

⁸⁰⁶ <http://labourlist.org/2011/01/labour-mps-are-they-yes-or-no-to-av-yes-92-no-132/> (Accessed 2nd November 2016)

Jeremy Corbyn	Austin Mitchell	Martin Caton	Chuka Umunna
David Crausby	Graeme Morrice	Ann Coffey	Tom Watson
Mary Creagh	Grahame Morris	Yvette Cooper	Alan Whitehead
John Cryer	George Mudie	Stella Creasy	Malcolm Wicks
Jim Cunningham	Meg Munn	Jon Cruddas	John Woodcock
Margaret Curran	Jim Murphy	Alex Cunningham	
Nic Dakin	Paul Murphy	Alistair Darling	
Simon Danczuk	Ian Murray	Wayne David	
Ian Davidson	Lisa Nandy	Gloria de Piero	
Geraint Davies	Pamela Nash	John Denham	
Jim Dobbin	Fiona O'Donnell	Frank Dobson	
Thomas Docherty	Chi Onwurah	Jack Dromey	
Brian H. Donohoe	Toby Perkins	Angela Eagle	
Jim Dowd	Bridget Phillipson	Bill Esterson	
Michael Dugher	Yasmin Qureshi	Frank Field	
Maria Eagle	Rachel Reeves	Paul Flynn	
Julie Elliott	Emma Reynolds	Mike Gapes	
Louise Ellman	Linda Riordan	Roger Godsiff	
Natascha Engel	Geoffrey Robinson	Helen Goodman	
Chris Evans	John Robertson	Lilian Greenwood	
Jim Fitzpatrick	Frank Roy	Nia Griffith	
Robert Ffello	Jim Sheridan	Peter Hain	
Caroline Flint	Gavin Shuker	David Hamilton	
Yvonne Fovargue	Marsha Singh	Fabian Hamilton	
Sheila Gilmore	Dennis Skinner	Harriet Harman	
Pat Glass	Angela Smith	Huw Irranca-Davies	
Mary Glendon	Nick Smith	Dan Jarvis	
Paul Goggins	John Spellar	Alan Johnson	
Tom Greatrex	Graham Stringer	Susan Elan Jones	

Kate Green	Gisela Stuart	Tessa Jowell
Andrew Gwynne	Gerry Sutcliffe	Liz Kendall
David Hanson	Mark Tami	Sadiq Khan
Tom Harris	Emily Thornberry	David Lammy
John Healey	Karl Turner	Mark Lazarowicz
Mark Hendrick	Derek Twigg	Andrew Love
Stephen Hepburn	Keith Vaz	Fiona Mactaggart
David Heyes	Valerie Vaz	Gordon Marsden
Julie Hilling	Joan Walley	Kerry McCarthy
Margaret Hodge	David Watts	John McDonnell
Sharon Hodgson	Chris Williamson	Alison McGovern
Jim Hood	Phil Wilson	Catherine McKinnell
Kelvin Hopkins	David Winnick	John Mann
George Howarth	Rosie Winterton	Michael Meacher
Lindsay Hoyle	Shaun Woodward	Alun Michael
Tristram Hunt	David Wright	David Miliband
Cathy Jamieson	Iain Wright	Ed Miliband

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