

Electoral Reform Society Briefing: **The Context of the Government Review of Electoral Systems**

Nearly ten years from the publication of the Jenkins report and a manifesto commitment to a referendum on electoral reform the Government's Review of Electoral Systems is to be published this month.

When the review is published it will sit within the context of the numerous other reports and analyses that have sought to assess our electoral systems. It will have been informed by them, and it will warrant being compared and contrasted to them.

Then there is also wider context to consider, including the opportunities provided by the Governance of Britain Green Paper and the parallel debate on reform of the House of Lords.

Out of the ten reports under the current Labour Government which looked at the merits of various electoral systems in the UK, seven recommended the use in some way of the Single Transferable Vote (STV), nine recommended some form of proportional electoral system and none were able to recommend First Past the Post as the most desirable system.

In chronological order those reports were:

1997 - The Independent Commission on the Voting System (the Jenkins Commission): Devised and recommended the PR electoral system Alternative Vote "top-up" (AV+) for elections to the House of Commons.

1999 - The Commission on Local Government and the Scottish Parliament (McIntosh Commission): Recommended PR for Scottish local government elections as 'an essential step towards the goal of enhancing local democracy.'

2000 - The Renewing Local Democracy Working Group (The Kerley Group): Recommended that STV be the PR system used for Scottish local government elections.

2002 - Commission on Local Government Electoral Arrangements in Wales, (The Sunderland Commission): Recommended that STV be used for local government elections in Wales.

2004 - The Independent Commission on Proportional Representation: Concluded that there was "no ideal voting system" – that the debate on proportional representation was open, with the final decision being a political decision.

2004 - The Commission on the Powers and Electoral Arrangements of the National Assembly for Wales (The Richard Commission): Recommended that STV be used to elect the Welsh Assembly

2006 - The Commission on Boundary Differences and Electoral Systems (The Arbuthnott Commission): Recommended that STV be used for European elections in Scotland, and that the MMP system for the Scottish be revised and reviewed in two years time to consider adopting STV.

2006 - The Power Inquiry: Recommended that STV be adopted for elections to Westminster

2007 - The Electoral Reform Society: Assessed all public elections in the UK and recommended the use of STV for Westminster, local government, the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly and Europe.

2007 - The Councillors Commission: Recommended that Local Authorities have the ability to pilot STV for local elections.

What will the Government review say?

The government review is a desk-based exercise and so is likely to draw on much of the existing analysis of electoral systems. The difference will lie in the priority attached to the attributes of various electoral systems, and the conclusions reached.

Essentially, we expect the review to do much as the ICPR paper did: present the analysis but conclude that the optimum voting system is then a matter of political judgement. Much will come down to opinions on coalition government - is it the key to consensual and diverse policy making or does it hamper effective government - and on the relative importance given to proportionality over simplicity in voting systems.

Conclusion

Despite a decade of reports and independent commissions recommending reform the Government's own review of electoral systems is likely to pose more questions than it answers, and very unlikely to propose any radical changes to the status quo.

There is scope for constitutional issues to be debated at the moment – but none of the Governance of Britain Green Paper consultations, the Constitutional Renewal Bill, or the Speakers Commission has a remit to look at our electoral system.

Government has consistently stated that, if there is a case for reform of elections to Westminster, this should be decided through a public referendum. The case for reform of the House of Commons has been cogently argued in many analyses and reports. So the question now is who decides whether there is a case - and how is a referendum question chosen? It was always the intention of figures such as Lord Jenkins that these questions would not be just for politicians – there is a need for a forum for public discussion and a wider public understanding of what is being considered.

The Electoral Reform Society is seeking a constitutional convention so that the public can have their say on the review and the wider debate on electoral reform. The convention would draw up a referendum question which could be put to the public in line with Labour's 1997 manifesto commitment.

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