

# Electoral Reform Society Annual Report 2014-15



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# Electoral Reform Society

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**September 2015**

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# Foreword

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**First Past the Post may have produced a single-party government this year, but the General Election could hardly have been a worse advert for our broken voting system.**

There is no hiding the fact that we, along with almost everyone, were not expecting a majority government. That made it harder to pursue one of our key goals – local electoral reform. Without power-sharing negotiations, reformers are at the mercy of whichever party takes power. And as we all know, the two big parties remain non-committal at best about voting reform.

But everything else about the election suggests that reform is well and truly back on the agenda. The degree to which seats did not match votes – particularly for the Greens and UKIP – was unprecedented. The UK is increasingly divided by a voting system that exaggerates differences. And the idea that we could ever go back to a two-party system is, in the words of Radio 4 Today presenter Jim Naughtie, ‘for the birds’.

While much of this is down to historic forces, the ERS can take credit for shifting the narrative towards reform. Six months from the election we set the terms of the debate with our work on the future of the political party (**Open Up**) and the chaotic nature of a two-party voting system in a multi-party world (**Lottery Election**). This helped to cement the idea that FPTP simply does not work when more than two parties are commanding decent chunks of the vote.

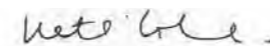
Closer to the election, our quick-footed work on predicting the number of women in the new Parliament (**Where are the Women?**) and calling the winners in 368 seats (**Reading the Tea Leaves**) weeks before the vote took place helped bring to life the unfairness of FPTP. And our fantastic media reach in the weeks before, during and after the election (most notably with our General Election 2015 report) gave us the last word on our broken voting system.

Meanwhile we have continued to reinforce our position as the UK’s leading democracy commentator with high-profile work on Lords reform (**House of Lords: Fact vs Fiction**) and party funding (**Deal or No Deal**). And by leading the campaign for a Constitutional Convention, we have placed ourselves at the forefront of discussions about the future of Britain’s democracy. Exciting developments in Scotland’s democratic culture are being led and shaped by ERS Scotland, and ERS Cymru continues to dominate the democracy sector in Wales.

Perhaps one of the clearest indicators of our success this year has been the enormous increase in our audience. Membership has doubled and our mailing list now numbers over 150,000. All told, we have a committed and engaged audience of a quarter of a million. Clearly, our message is getting across.

We would like to thank our staff team whose huge efforts this year have been at the heart of our success. Thanks also to our Council members, Ambassador Dan Snow, our Advisory Committee members for their unstinting support and above all to our members and supporters who play a vital role in our work.

The next five years hold big challenges, but also big opportunities. With major shifts taking place within both major parties, change is afoot. And with change comes opportunities for reform. Thanks to the hard work of the last four years since the AV referendum, the ERS is perfectly positioned to seize those opportunities.



**Katie Ghose**  
Chief Executive Electoral Reform Society



**Amy Dodd**  
Chair Electoral Reform Society

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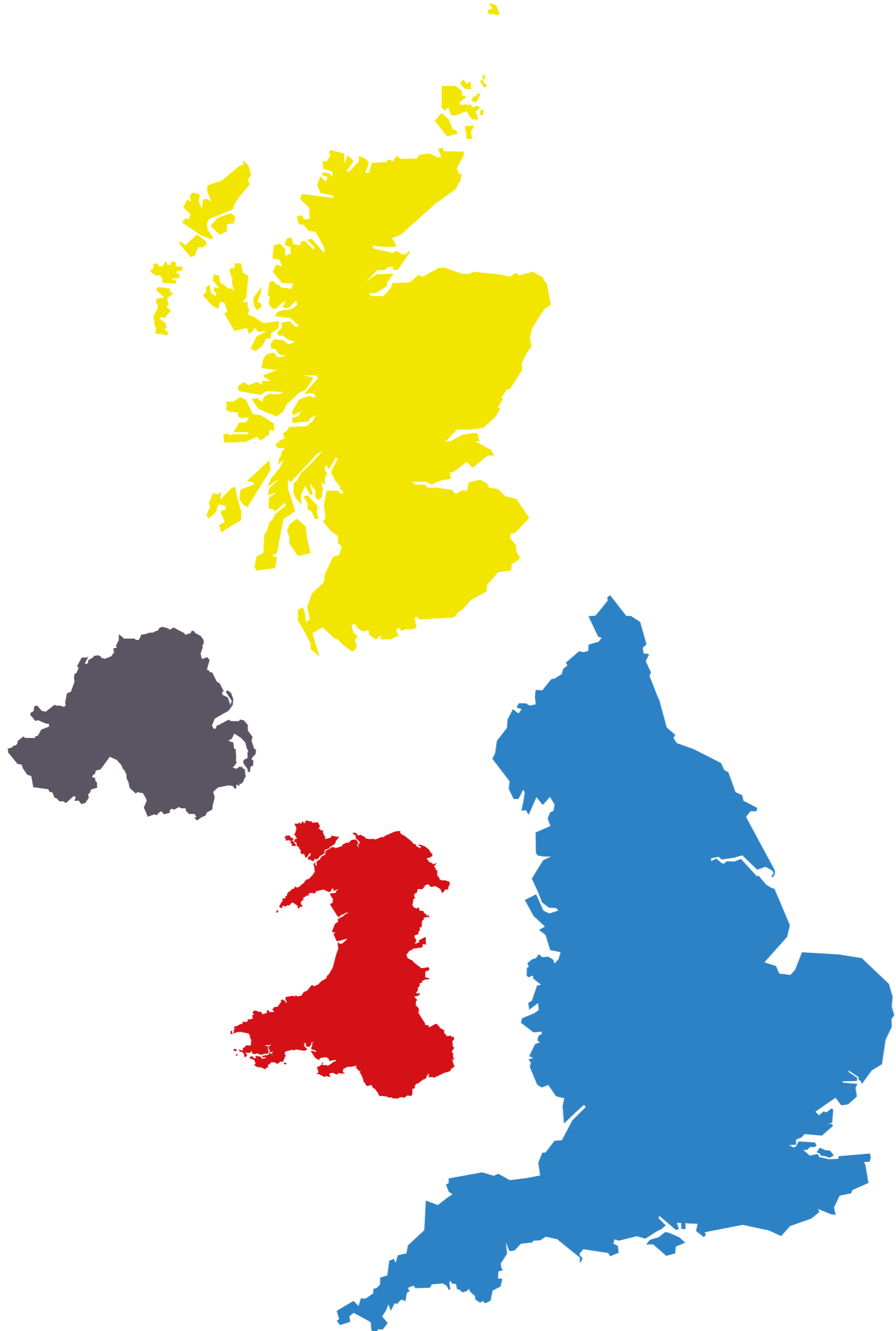
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# Campaigns



**This year the Electoral Reform Society has taken advantage of one of the most unfair and unrepresentative General Election results in history to help put electoral reform firmly back on the agenda.**

While the election and voting reform have been our campaign focus for the year, we have also campaigned and commented in several other key areas including the future of the political party and the campaign for a Constitutional Convention, votes at 16, voter registration and boundary reform.

## General Election 2015

The General Election resulted in a scenario virtually no one was expecting – a single-party majority government. While this made immediate prospects for electoral reform more distant than we had hoped, it did allow us to open up the subject of reform to a wider political and public audience than ever before.

### What we've done

In early 2015 we joined forces with Professor John Curtice to examine the potentially chaotic effects of our broken voting system on the General Election result. Our report **Lottery Election** showed how tiny swings in the vote could have dramatic effects on the result.

In preparation for an assumed hung parliament, we published **Working Together** – a collection of reflections from leading politicians with experience of coalition and minority government.

A month before the election we predicted the number of women likely to be elected to the new Parliament. Our report **Where are the Women?** predicted 192 female MPs – just one out! It also set out how a fairer voting system would improve female representation.

We also felt confident enough to 'call' the winners in 368 'safe seats', weeks before the election. Our broken voting system directly leads to the blight of safe seats, which discourage voters and make a mockery of democracy. Our prediction, called **Reading the Tea Leaves**, garnered widespread media interest – and when the results came in, we only got five wrong.

On election night itself we provided live, result-by-result coverage and media commentary, exposing the vagaries of First Past the Post and the biggest electoral injustices. This work fed into extensive media coverage of the broken voting system on the following weekend.

On 8th May, the day after the election, we launched a major petition with Unlock Democracy called **Make Seats Match Votes**. After combining with other organisations and individuals we had over half a million signatories. We then joined forces with leading figures from the Liberal Democrats, UKIP, the Green Party, the SNP and Plaid Cymru to hand the petition into No.10 Downing Street.

Finally, we combined our analysis with a major post-election poll to produce **The 2015 General Election**. This set out to reveal a voting system in crisis, and to show what the result would have been under alternative voting systems.

## Party funding

Once again, this year has seen scandal after scandal when it comes to party funding. The ERS has been at the forefront of efforts to highlight the problem of party funding and move to a fairer, more transparent way of financing political parties.

### What we've done

In February 2015, in response to the latest cash-

for-access scandal, we published **Deal or No Deal**. This set out the results of our survey work showing public distaste for the current funding system, and presented a pathway to real reform.

## Tomorrow's Party

Britain's political parties are caught between two trends – declining popularity and membership, combined with massive increases in support for challenger parties. The ERS has set out to examine the future of the political party. We believe that parties should be part of the solution to political disengagement, not part of the problem as they are often seen.

### What we've done

In December 2014 we published **Open Up**, our initial examination of the prospects for political parties, which was nominated for Political Campaign of the Year by Westbourne Communications. Based on a survey of members and supporters, the report sets out some of the conflicts facing parties as they seek to modernise, and makes recommendations for parties to open up to members and the wider public. This is the start of a long-term investigation into the future of parties.

## Time for a Convention

The Scottish independence referendum threw all the pieces of the UK constitution up in the air. But if there is one thing which the referendum made clear, it was that people want a say in how those pieces should be put back together again. Citizens want to be able to influence the shape of the country – that's why we're calling for a citizen-led Constitutional Convention.

### What we've done

Shortly before the Scottish independence referendum, we co-ordinated 19 democracy experts to write to the Times calling for a Convention. This kicked off the campaign, which received an immediate boost when four of the five largest UK-wide parties committed to a Convention following the referendum result.

In October we gathered 28 civil society and academic signatures for a letter to William Hague, and later in 2014 we handed in a 15,000-strong petition with Unlock Democracy to No.10 Downing Street.

We are continuing to fight for a citizen-led process, helping to organise and deliver two fully funded pilot Conventions in Sheffield and Southampton and supporting Lord Purvis' Bill to establish a UK-wide Convention.

## Lords reform

Despite Parliament's failure to pass Lords reform in 2012, the issue is firmly back on the agenda. This is partly owing to the ever more absurd numbers of Lords appointments and scandals involving existing peers, and partly owing to the pressure put on the system by the ERS and other campaigners. We are now in a position to argue robustly that Lords reform is urgent, and that only elections can truly solve the problem of the Lords' lack of legitimacy and accountability.

### What we've done

As well as jumping on every scandal and round of appointments to make the case for reform, we published **House of Lords: Fact vs Fiction** in August 2015. This set out how the House of Lords is not as independent and expert-filled as supporters claim, and that the financial cost of the endless procession of appointments to the Lords is starting to spiral out of control.



# Work in Scotland



Natalie Bennett and Nigella Farage, leaders of the Green Party and UKIP, sign our Make Seats Match Votes Petition on 18th May 2015

**In the wake of the independence referendum, ERS Scotland has cemented its position at the forefront of democratic change. Through interventions at the Scottish and UK level, we have helped to shape new developments in Scotland's democratic culture.**

## General Election

The society's Scottish office assisted in the UK General Election campaign strategy. The main approach was to amplify the narrative around the end of two-party politics and keep pointing to the failure of FPTP to be able to cope with this fundamental shift. We worked closely with Professor John Curtice at the University of Strathclyde in producing **Lottery Election**.

The promotion of the electoral reform message was greatly assisted by the multi-party TV debates and the smaller political parties supporting democratic and electoral reform. ERS Scotland appeared on Scotland Tonight (STV) and Scotland 2015 (BBC) several times over the election period as well as numerous slots on national and local radio. We were able to point out the unfair, unrepresentative nature of an SNP landslide, securing 56 of Scotland's 59 seats on 50% of the vote – a distortion caused largely by FPTP.

Despite the system benefiting them now, the SNP's policy remains firmly in favour of electoral and democratic reform, and we were delighted to see Nicola Sturgeon reaffirm this within days of the election. We liaised with party figures to ensure that the SNP was well represented at the petition for electoral reform hand-in once Parliament re-convened.

We also monitored the gender balance among the candidates for election in Scotland, with our work picked up by the National and the Herald. Since the election the SNP have voted

to introduce All Women Shortlists and used them in every retiring MSP seat for selection for the 2016 vote; new Scottish Labour leader Kezia Dugdale has pledged a 50:50 balance for all new Labour candidates; and Willie Rennie, Scottish Liberal Democrat leader has started a process to review Liberal Democrat policy on positive measures. Also of note is a 50:50 gender balance in both the Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet in Scotland.

## Local electoral reform

At the start of the year when a hung parliament looked highly likely, we held a parliamentary briefing and provided speakers for fringe events at spring conferences to use Scotland as an example where the Single Transferable Vote in local government works smoothly and fairly. As the UK Government develops its devolution agenda, the arguments for adopting a proportional system grow stronger. Scotland remains a working model of vital importance to show and tell the benefits STV brings.

## Scotland Bill

In the heat of the referendum debate the major UK parties pledged that Scotland would have more powers were the Scots to vote No. This pledge was taken forward in the process of the Scotland Bill. ERS Scotland was involved in commenting and giving evidence at various stages and opportunities as the draft clauses of the Bill evolved. Our central critique was of the means by which devolution is carried through elite forums such as the Smith Commission. The referendum campaign showed a real hunger for people to be engaged in policy making, especially large-scale constitutional change.

## A Democratic Society

The independence referendum and various social and technological changes have created new democratic expectations in Scotland. ERS's earlier work on **Democracy Max** was part of this change in thinking. There have been attempts to respond to this demand for more democracy by the SNP Government. As First Minister Nicola Sturgeon set out on page 78 of her programme for Government:

"[We want to] draw more people more deeply into the way that the decisions that matter to them are taken. We want Scotland to be an open and truly engaging country, where the creativity and wisdom of all its people help to shape our future. We will work collaboratively with COSLA, a range of existing experts in participative democracy, the wider public sector and communities to identify the best ways to achieve this."

ERS Scotland has been working with civil society and government in Scotland to explore ways that we can take policy making and service delivery beyond expert forums and civil servants. Our approach is that if representative democracy is to acquire new vigour and trustworthiness, it might come from connecting it with participative and deliberative processes. We are developing real credibility and expertise in this area, with several groups approaching us for partnership work in the fields of inclusion and participation.

## Consultancy

This growing interest in broadening democracy has led to us being commissioned to support several pieces of work. We were contracted to write a report for Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) around **Participatory**

**Democracy and Civil Society** and as part of a consortium we have recently won a contract to run the Scottish Government's participatory process of developing their key policy on **Social Justice**. This latter will be a key test for the Scottish Government of participatory techniques and, if successful, should see a roll-out of further exercises in innovation.

## The next five years

Scotland has been a place of rapid political change over the past few years. This began with devolution, was assisted by local electoral reform and is now driven by the democratic awakening of the referendum debate and the landslide won by the SNP at the general election. If there are any political certainties in Scotland they are new ones, and likely to be short-lived. It is up to ERS Scotland to analyse and make sense of this shifting ground. The fact things are changing offer great opportunities for those that think a 21st century democracy can be a better democracy. A democracy where more citizens are involved in politics and in policy making, so that they can shape their own lives and communities.

Evolved systems and structures of politics are vital to take us towards this goal, but so are more democratic processes throughout the running of government and public services. A better democracy might also include the civil society spaces where we support and care for each other, and the spaces of economic activity where we produce and sell. Our aim is to interpret and make sense of these changes so that we are at the forefront of shaping 21st century democracy in Scotland.

# Work in Wales

**Our work in Wales has continued to focus on three aims: strengthening devolution; achieving STV for Local Government; and promoting diversity, engagement, and participation in politics.**

## Devolution

During the passage of the Wales Bill 2015 we worked hard to engage the UK Government and the Welsh Government, as well as the parties, to sign up to our main asks. We asked Westminster for:

1. Devolution of elections (both Assembly and local) to the National Assembly;
2. Devolution of powers over the franchise so the Assembly can vote for votes at 16 in Welsh-only elections and referendums;
3. Powers over the size and electoral system to be devolved to the National Assembly, with changes subject to a two-thirds majority of all AMs.

All four main parties signed up to all these demands in the St David's Day Announcement in March 2015, and these changes will form a central part of the Wales Bill that will go through Westminster in the next two years.

This work follows our 'Size Matters' report arguing for a larger National Assembly. The St David's Day Announcement demonstrated our achievement of reaching a cross-party consensus that the Assembly is too small. Our next piece of work will be to argue for – and persuade the parties to adopt – the best voting system for a larger Assembly (STV), which will be finished for the Autumn in partnership with Cardiff University's Wales Governance Centre.

## Local government

The Welsh Government plans to reduce the number of councils in Wales, and we have used this as an opportunity to renew our call for STV for local elections. We have secured cross-party agreement that the National Assembly should have power over local elections (currently, this is the job of Westminster). And we have been highlighting the practical benefits STV brings, as well as showing why the one-party states created by our outdated First Past the Post electoral system are bad for Wales – as well as bad for democracy.

Due to strong engagement with the process of Local Government reorganisation, the Welsh Government has adopted a raft of our proposals on Community Engagement and Participatory Democracy, and on devolving power to local communities.

There is still a need to persuade Labour on STV for Local Government. However, we have helped strengthen support for STV by Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats, and will look to ensure that this will remain a red-line issue for both parties.

## Diversity

Following our work on gender over the past few years, this year we have focused on Youth engagement. In April, we released our 'Wales Power Report II: The Power and Voice of Young People in Wales'. Drawing on a strong evidence base, this report called for action on youth engagement, with proposals such as youth mayors, a youth parliament for Wales and better citizenship education.

Welsh Government have supported Youth Mayors. There is work still to be done to convince

Labour on the need for a new Youth Parliament, but this is a live issue on which we will continue to campaign. Following the Donaldson review of the Welsh curriculum, there are opportunities to press for better citizenship education, and we will be looking to work with partners to ensure that Donaldson's commitment to 'critical, informed citizens of Wales and the world' is followed through.

## The next five years

As well as holding governments to account on the above, and ensuring that our constitutional programme is followed through, we will look to develop a strategy responding to the current climate, and how to strengthen democracy in a time of austerity – in particular in response to changes in local and community governance in Wales, citizen engagement and youth participation. We will continue to be strategic and responsive to the political context in promoting our aims and values.



Guests at our Annual Summer Reception in Westminster, 15th July 2015, included new SNP MP Mhairi Black (below centre)



# Members & Supporters

**One of this year's biggest success stories has been the ERS's hugely increased audience, both in terms of membership and wider support.** This has been driven partly by the unfairness of the 2015 General Election, but also by our proactive recruitment strategy.

Over the last year our membership has doubled to 3,600, and our subscriber base has grown by 102,460 supporters to 167,632. Activity surrounding the 2015 General Election was the main driver for recruitment, with thousands coming from two campaigns in particular – namely our pre-election safe seat calculator **Reading the Tea Leaves** and our joint petition with Unlock Democracy, **Make Seats Match Votes**.

## Major campaigns

Our pre election campaign **Reading the Tea Leaves** saw 62,000 people discover whether they live in a safe or marginal seat. By teaming up with Mail Online we introduced new potential supporters to the problems of First Past the Post, and thousands subscribed to our mailing list.

Our joint **Make Seats Match Votes** petition with Unlock Democracy was launched on the day of the general election and saw 140,000 people sign up for a proportional electoral system. The Make Seats Match Votes slogan was designed following focus groups with BritainThinks, and is still being used by activists and campaigners.

## Specialist campaigns

Following the Scottish independence referendum and the launch of the Smith Commission, nearly 600 people joined us in October asking Lord

Smith to recommend full participation from the Scottish public in considering his proposals. Later that month, 3,100 people joined us asking William Hague to use his position as chair of the Devolution Committee to recommend setting up a Constitutional Convention for the UK. And a further 15,000 people signed a petition to the same effect.

In February, 625 people contacted their MPs to argue for party funding reform to be a top priority in 2015.

## Social media

We have seen huge growth in our followers and subscribers over the last year, with a 170% increase in likes on Facebook (taking us to 36,000) and a massive increase in our Twitter audience – which stands at over 21,000.

The General Election was an extremely successful time for us, with over four million people seeing a single post on Facebook. Our most successful tweet – on the numbers of voters per MP for each party – was retweeted 4,323 times. On average in May we earned 840 retweets per day and our tweets earned 4.2 million impressions.

## Optimisation

As well as larger campaigns we have been working on optimising the website to better catch potential supporters who find us via our popular pages on Google. New subscription forms on our First Past the Post and Proportional Representation pages have gained us 1,000 new supporters. Over the next year we will be undertaking a full redevelopment of the website.

# Staff

## Building a better democracy

**The Society's team is based in our offices in London, Edinburgh and Cardiff.**

We were pleased to welcome several new members to the team this year. Josiah Mortimer, Communications Officer, joined us in February. Doug Cowan, Digital Communications Officer, Charley Jarrett, Policy and Public Affairs Officer, and Edward Molloy, Research Assistant and Nexus Officer joined us in March. We also welcomed Sean Keane who recently joined us part-time as Finance Officer.

Many thanks to Sarah Allan and Nick Tyrone who left us during the year, and to Juliet Swann and Davina Johnson who will be leaving us in the autumn.

## Current staff

Katie Ghose  
Chief Executive

### Campaigns, Research & Policy

Darren Hughes  
Deputy Chief Executive  
Will Brett  
Head of Campaigns & Communications  
Jess Garland  
Research Advisor

Chris Terry  
Research Officer

Doug Cowan  
Digital Communications Officer  
Josiah Mortimer  
Communications Officer  
Charley Jarrett  
Policy & Public Affairs Officer  
Edward Molloy  
Research Assistant / Nexus Officer

### Operations

Kate West  
Chief Operating Officer  
Stuart Thomas  
Operations & Membership Officer,  
Executive Assistant to the Chief Executive

### ERS Scotland

Willie Sullivan  
Director  
Juliet Swann  
Campaigns & Research Officer

### ERS Cymru

Stephen Brooks  
Director  
Owain Llyr ap Gareth  
Campaigns & Research Officer

Thanks to all staff for their hard work and dedication, and thanks also to the staff of Electoral Reform Services Ltd for their work and support during the year.

# Governance

## The Council

The Council is the Electoral Reform Society's governing body. It is made up of 15 members who are elected by our membership every other year and serve for a two-year term.

Elections took place this year and a newly elected Council will take office at the close of the Society's AGM on 5 September 2015.

Between 13 September 2014 and 5 September 2015, the following members served on the Society's Council:

Amy Dodd, *Chair*  
 Jon Walsh, *Vice Chair (Management)*  
 Andy May, *Deputy Chair (Campaigns and Research)*  
 Clare Coatman, *(Treasurer)*  
 Crispin Allard  
 Jess Asato  
 Chris Carrigan  
 Stephen Curran  
 Sarah Hyde  
 Tim Knight  
 Michael Meadowcroft  
 Paul Pettinger  
 Ken Ritchie  
 Keith Sharp  
 Damien Welfare

No Council member received any remuneration for services as a Council member during the year.

## The Advisory Committee

Our Advisory Committee draws on a wide pool of highly talented individuals to provide intellectual vitality and advice to our organisation.

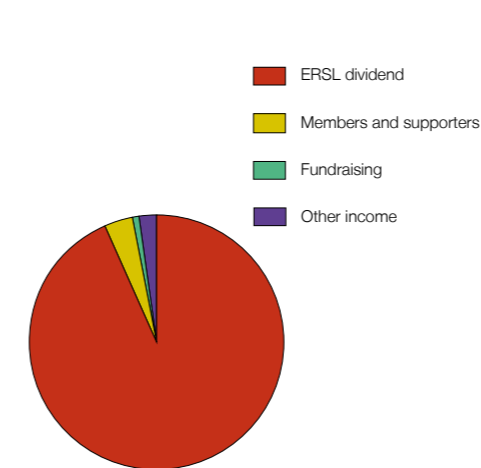
Between 13 September 2014 and 5 September 2015, the following members served on the Society's Advisory Committee:

Fi Glover, *journalist and presenter*  
 Billy Hayes, *leader of the Communication Workers Union (until April 2015)*  
 Deborah Mattinson, *founder of BritainThinks*  
 Jonathan Porritt CBE, *environmentalist and writer*  
 Alan Renwick, *political scientist*  
 Esther Roberton, *Scottish political affairs specialist*

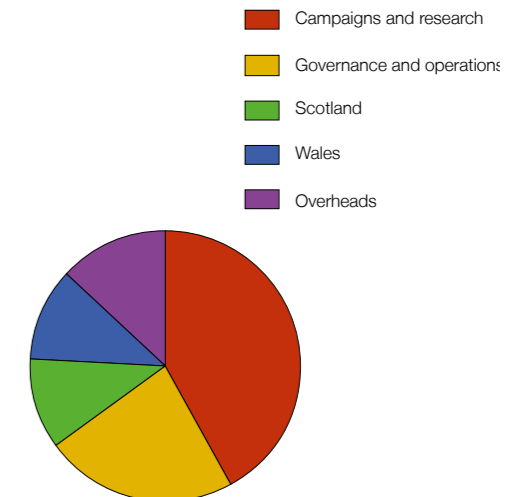
We are also proud to have the historian Dan Snow as our official Ambassador. Dan has done fantastic work supporting ERS and its goals, both online, in print and broadcast media, and in our fundraising work.

# Finance

**Income (2014)**  
£889k



**Expenditure (2014)**  
£1.02m



Full accounts are available online at:  
[www.electoral-reform.org.uk/finances](http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/finances)

Due to restrictive income projections for 2013-2015, and to sustain our level of activity in the run up to the General Election, the Society's Council intentionally built a loss into the Society's 2014 strategic plan, which saw us draw on our reserves. We plan to rebuild our reserves to their previous level within the next three years. 2015 also saw the Society become debt-free for the first time since the AV referendum in 2010.

The Society continues to build a sustainable and secure foundation for the future. We have been working to find ways to diversify our funding, looking at property investment, grants, individual donors and contracts. This year, we received funds from the Economic & Social Research Council to assist with staff costs of a project to run two pilot Citizens' Assemblies. In Wales we are working with a partner organisation on a substantial funding bid focused on increasing young people's participation in decision-making.

In Scotland we have been commissioned by the Scottish Council for the Voluntary Sector for a piece of work on 'Civil Society and Democracy' and are part of a consortium of NGOs commissioned by the Scottish Government to carry out a deliberative policy making process involving Scottish citizens.

The Society's second Democracy Dinner was hosted by our Ambassador Dan Snow in November 2014. Around 120 members and supporters gathered in London for the event, raising over £4,000 towards the Society's campaigning fund. We are grateful to all of those who attended and to those who kindly hosted tables.

We would like to say a huge thank you to our donors for their generosity throughout the year. We have received over £12,000 from members and supporters in regular and one-off donations.

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The Electoral Reform Society is campaigning to build a better democracy. This report covers the period September 2014 to August 2015.

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