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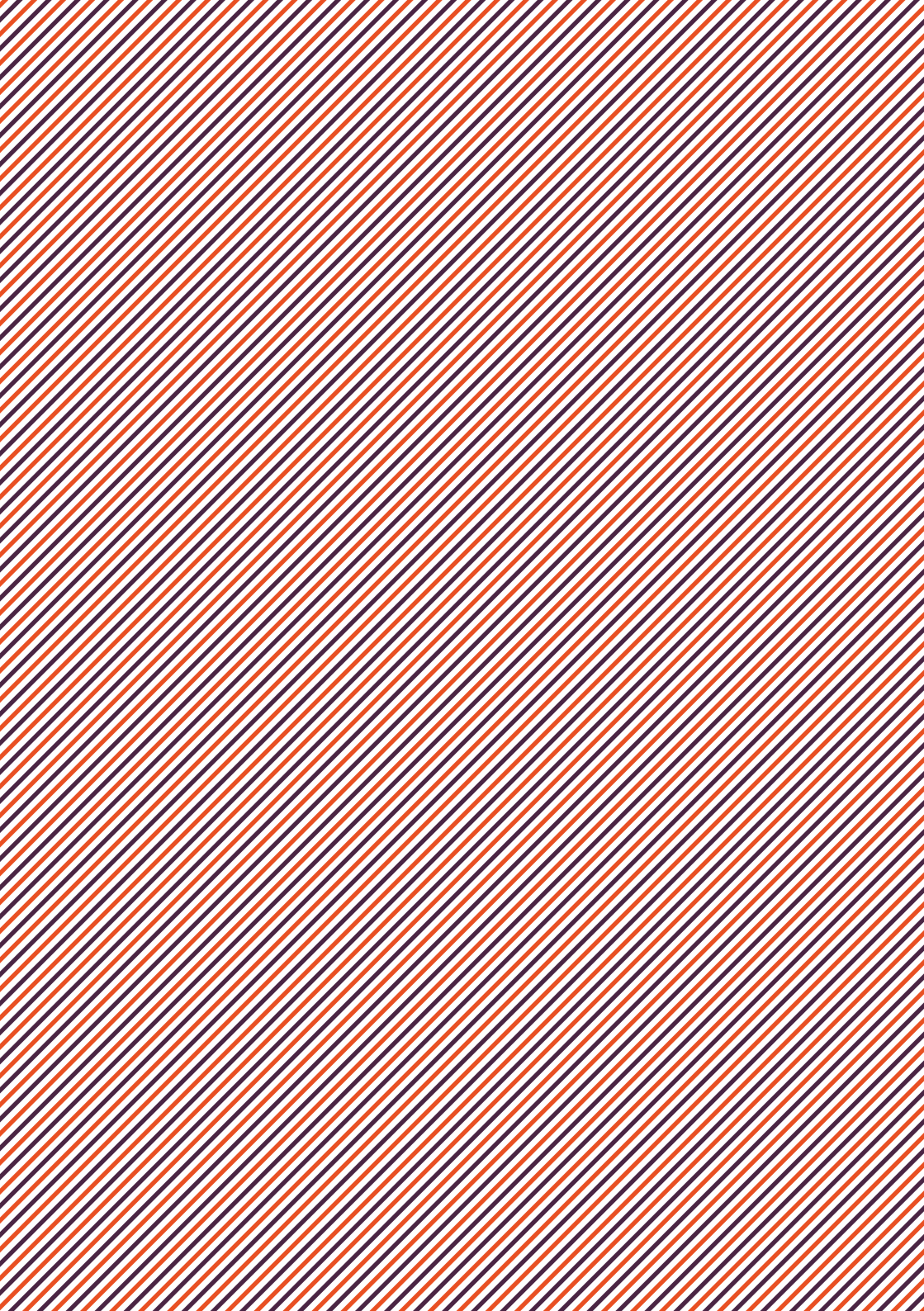
Electoral
 Reform
 Society

TOWARDS ONE NATION

The Labour case for
local electoral reform

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FOREWORD

By Phil Collins

It is an axiom of British institutions that, if they did not exist, we would not choose to invent them. It is true of the monarchy and it is true of the electoral system. For half a century of two-party politics, the First Past the Post system, which awards too clear a victory to the largest party in the land, worked well enough. Besides, as long as power switched between the two beneficiaries there was little appetite for change.

That era may now be over and, in this paper, Lewis Baston and Will Brett make a persuasive case for electoral reform in local government which, they point out, has some particular features which make it hospitable to reform. They argue from an unashamedly Labour point of view but not only from that perspective. Their case is also that it is bad for democracy that Labour voters in rural areas have no representation at all. The same point can be made of Conservative voters in the major cities.

The 69 district and unitary councils which had no Labour representation at all in 2011 is chastening. Some of these are the contemporary equivalents of the rotten borough. In 2011, in at least 24 local authorities, at least 10 per cent of the seats were entirely uncontested. Remarkably, in both 2007 and 2011, Fenland council in Cambridgeshire had already been won by the Conservatives before a single vote had been cast, so few contests were there.

This is terrible and its counterpart, the fact that some parties enjoy unimpeded success in some areas, is not much better. Baston and Brett trace the journey that councils take when they face no democratic pressure. An initial period of complacency leads to autocratic decision making. The ensuing errors then produce splits

in the party, electoral collapse and incompetent local government. There then follows, finally, a period of scandal and recrimination. It is a common but not a salutary story.

Finally, Baston and Brett effectively take apart the case against reform. In turn, they shatter the accusations that a new electoral system would corrode existing Labour majorities, that it makes local government unstable and that it automatically awards its prizes to the Liberal Democrats. After a fight with Baston and Brett, who come armed with detail and convincing numbers, especially from the example of Scotland where a new electoral system emerged out of the coalition negotiations in 2004, the traditional case comes off very badly indeed.

Starting with Keir Hardie himself, electoral reform has always had its Labour supporters but it has never been a majority pursuit in a party which benefited from an unfair system. It is time it was. It is good for the health of the Labour party and it is good for the health of politics more widely.

Acknowledgements

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INTRODUCTION

Whenever the opportunity has arisen, Labour has recognised the importance of choosing fairer voting systems over First Past the Post (FPTP). The first Blair government made a positive choice to endow new democratic institutions – both the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly – with electoral systems considerably fairer than Westminster's. And in 2007 a Labour-led coalition introduced the Single Transferable Vote (STV) for local elections in Scotland.

Yet the Labour Party has had a tortuous relationship with electoral reform. At times, the party has seemed hostile to the introduction of a more proportional voting system, particularly at the Westminster level. At other times, it has led the way in introducing fairer systems. But throughout its history there have been high-profile and consistent supporters of electoral reform, from Keir Hardie to Alan Johnson via Robin Cook.

The referendum on the Alternative Vote in 2011 was a bitter experience for the party, which more or less split down the middle on the issue. Yet electoral reform at the local level is a different ball-game. **Many of the traditional arguments made by opponents of electoral reform simply do not hold at the local level.** And the effects of introducing a more proportional system for local elections are more likely to unite the party around some of its core issues and themes than cause another rift.

Since Ed Miliband's conference speech in 2012, Labour has been campaigning under a 'One Nation' banner and seeks to represent the whole country, not just parts of it. Yet the stark reality is that the party is effectively locked out of whole sections of the country. Where Labour is relatively weak – such as in the south of England and in rural areas – FPTP ensures that Labour voters do not get their fair share of Labour councillors. This creates **electoral deserts** where Labour voters do not see their votes reflected in the make-up of their councils, and the party is unable to maintain a presence.

This translates into weak activist bases which undermine the party's ability to campaign effectively in national as well as local elections. It is a debilitating state of affairs both for the party and for its supporters.

Another central Labour theme since 2010 has been about party renewal. The party has been experimenting with new models of community organisation in order to widen its appeal, and is seeking to transform its relationship with affiliated union members. But these efforts are not felt in parts of the country where Labour lacks an activist base. Local electoral reform would not only give southern and rural Labour voters fair representation – it would also give Labour a crucial foothold in places currently considered no-go zones.

These themes of 'One Nation' and 'party renewal', designed to re-energise and unite the party, would be given a crucial helping hand by the introduction of the Scottish system (STV) for local elections in England and Wales. Perhaps the time has come for the party to grasp the nettle of electoral reform once again.

This paper sets out the main reasons why Labour should support electoral reform at the local level. It is a policy which is:

- **Good for the party** – it puts meat on the bones of Labour's One Nation argument by giving Labour representation across the country, and:
- **Good for voters** – it empowers those who support Labour in its weaker areas by giving them the levels of representation they want and deserve

Moreover, this paper shows how many of the assumptions traditionally made about proportional representation – particularly by Labour supporters – in fact do not hold. Local electoral reform:

- **Does not** destroy Labour majorities in areas where the party is strong
- **Does not** make for unstable local government, and
- **Does not** have a built-in bias towards the Liberal Democrats

We show that Labour's super-majorities in urban areas, far from being endangered, could well be strengthened by the introduction of local electoral reform. Under FPTP in local elections, Labour has lost

control of 58% of the councils which it dominated in the mid-1990s. And **after the introduction of STV in Scotland in 2007, Labour remains in government in 19 Scottish councils – four more than under FPTP in 1999.** We also show that there are several factors specific to local government that fatally undermine the argument that electoral reform would make for unstable government. Finally, we banish the common misconception that there is something inherent in proportional systems which favours the Liberal Democrats over Labour.

Within the Labour Party's history is a strand of reforming zeal that goes all the way back to its origins. By supporting electoral reform at the local level, Labour would be both putting itself on the side of democratic equality, and going a long way towards living up to its One Nation ambitions.

What is the Single Transferable Vote?

The Single Transferable Vote (STV) is a form of proportional representation. Under STV voters are invited to place the candidates on the ballot paper in order of preference by placing a '1' against the name of the candidate they prefer most, a '2' against the candidate who is their second preference, etc. Voters are free to choose how many candidates they rank.

Under STV, constituencies have more than one representative, as is already the case with the majority of council wards in the UK at present. Candidates need to get a set share of the votes known as a 'quota' in order to be elected. If your preferred candidate (ranked 1) has no chance of being elected or already has enough votes to be elected, your vote transfers to your second preference candidate (ranked 2). Your vote counts only once.

What does campaigning under STV look like?

Under STV, parties are most successful if they are able to appeal to a wide range of people and if they work hard to secure support from every corner of society. Concentrated areas of support are not as over-rewarded as they are under FPTP, and even relatively low levels of support translate into a degree of representation proportional to the number of votes received.

Any party that seeks representation across the whole country and wants to reach out across all parts of society will find it easier to do so under STV.

1

ENTERING THE WILDERNESS

Now what does it mean to the Labour Party to be One Nation? It means we can't go back to Old Labour. We must be the party of the private sector just as much as the party of the public sector. As much the party of the small business struggling against the odds, as the home help struggling against the cuts. We must be the party of the south just as much as the party of the north. And we must be the party as much of the squeezed middle as those in poverty. There is no future for this party as the party of one sectional interest of our country.

Ed Miliband, Leader's Speech to Conference, September 2012

The current electoral system makes it hard for Labour to live up to its desire to be a One Nation political party. The lack of representation for Labour voters in the south and in rural areas, both at the local and national level, militates against this desire.

Labour under Tony Blair and Ed Miliband has taken steps to listen to southern and rural Labour supporters, and campaigners such as John Denham and Bob Blizzard have done much to raise the profile of the East and South regions in Labour circles. But the task is harder than it needs to be because of the lack of strength in these regions. More local representation across Labour's weaker regions, not just in local 'red islands' like Hastings or Exeter, would help both Labour and the south to understand and appreciate each other. The advantages of having elected Labour representatives – at a local level, across the country – should be obvious.

Labour has done well since 2010 in getting candidates to stand in local elections even in the party's weaker areas in rural England. The party has been less successful in actually winning seats in these electoral deserts, even in some councils where there was

always a Labour presence before the losses of the 2006–09 period. There are in fact 69 district and unitary councils which did not elect any Labour councillors in the last full set of elections in 2011 (see Figure 1).¹

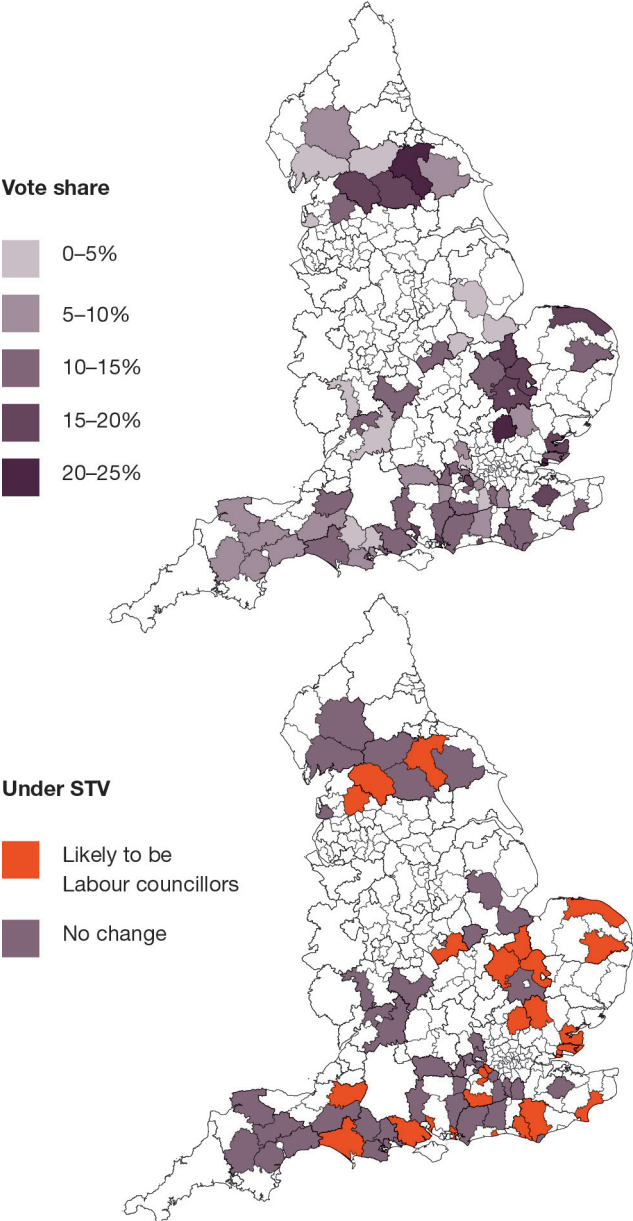
In 27 of these 69 Labour-free zones², the problem is not so much a lack of Labour votes – 2011 was an ‘even year’ where the two big national parties were more or less level-pegging in support. Instead it is the distribution of that vote, and the electoral system which fails to give fair representation to parties with a relatively small share of the electorate. Introducing the STV form of proportional representation in local elections, even without any further increase in Labour support from 2011 levels, would put Labour on the map in more than a third of these wilderness areas (see Figure 1).³

In some of these councils, local electoral reform would probably result, in the first instance, in small Labour groups or lone councillors. In Wealden, for instance, Labour won one seat in 1973 and has never won anything since, so a presence is probably as much as the party could initially aim for. In other councils, where there is a Labour vote which is poorly organised and spread out, electoral reform could produce larger initial gains. Labour could confidently expect to win councillors in places such as:

- Hertford (East Hertfordshire)
- Northallerton (Hambleton)
- North Walsham (North Norfolk)
- March (Fenland)
- Rural areas of North Norfolk
- Clitheroe (Ribble Valley)
- Lutterworth (Harborough)
- Chertsey (Runnymede)

- 1 In some of these, there were also elections in 2012. Labour’s stronger national performance in 2012 meant that the party won council seats it did not take in 2011 including a ward in Maidstone. In others, like Havant, the more Labour-inclined wards were not up for election in 2011.
- 2 The 27 Labour-free zones which would likely have Labour representation under STV are: Castle Point, Craven, East Cambridgeshire, East Hertfordshire, Eastleigh, Fenland, Hambleton, Harborough, Havant, Huntingdonshire, Lewes, Maldon, Mendip, New Forest, North Norfolk, Ribble Valley, Rochford, Runnymede, Shepway, South Norfolk, Spelthorne, Uttlesford, Waverley, Wealden, West Dorset, Woking, Worthing.
- 3 The calculations are based on either a) a three-member ward where Labour support is at or close enough to the quota of 25% to win a seat; or b) a combination of wards that would make a 4-member ward where Labour is at or close enough to the quota of 20% to win a seat; or c) by moving from annual elections in one-member wards to all-out elections in multi-member wards, Labour support is near enough to the required level in a ward or wards. Not all the borderline cases have been allocated one way or another.

FIGURE 1: LABOUR-FREE COUNCILS IN 2011



Gaining a toehold

There are a considerable number of other councils where Labour's presence amounts to only one or two councillors in an authority dominated by the Conservatives and/or the Liberal Democrats. It is possible, even in some of the less promising areas, for such small groups to make an impact, as Labour councillors such as Ben Cooper in South Hams and Mike Le Surf in Brentwood have demonstrated. While there are disadvantages to being a one- or two-person presence on a council, such as lack of the resources which are provided to recognised party groups, it is possible to use such toeholds creatively, build on them in contacting the electorate and associate Labour with vibrant, authentically local campaigning.

The election results in 2012 in Aberdeenshire show what is possible for Labour in areas of historic weakness. Before then, there had never been Labour councillors on this large unitary council. In elections for the previous authorities in the area from 1974 to 1994, Labour had won a grand total of two ward contests out of 379. There was hardly any point in standing, and this had an effect on morale, activity and organisation.

In the second set of local elections after the introduction of STV in 2007, Labour – by running popular local candidates with an intelligent electoral strategy – elected two councillors in the SNP heartland of Aberdeenshire. The shares of the vote in multi-member wards were not huge – Labour's vote overall in Aberdeenshire was 6.8% and the highest share in any ward was 21.5%. But the two Labour councillors are now part of the administration, a startling achievement given the history of the council. Labour now has an opportunity to build up strength in an area which had previously seemed 'no-go'.

Having local councillors in place in the party's weaker areas has helped Labour consolidate recent advances in places such as East Renfrewshire and Dumfries, retaining the Westminster and Scottish Parliament seats against the Tories while other apparently safer seats have been lost.

Uncontested seats

Electoral reform would, in England and Wales as it has in Scotland, end the undemocratic phenomenon of councillors being 'elected' unopposed. In 2011, there were 24 local authorities that saw at least

10% of their seats go uncontested⁴. In Wales in 2012 there were 96 uncontested seats⁵.

Uncontested seats fail to give the voters a chance to choose, and they also undermine the councillors thereby elected because they lack a proper mandate. Uncontested elections do not happen much in Labour heartlands – they are more to be found in Conservative and Independent-dominated rural areas. In some of these the problem has reached morbid dimensions, as with Fenland council in Cambridgeshire which was held by the Conservatives before a single vote had been cast in both 2007 and 2011 – despite having been won by Labour in 1995.

If Labour is serious about ‘One Nation’ politics, then the party’s own aspirations – however sincerely pursued – are not going to be enough. Parties only have limited resources of finance and activism, and people understandably grow tired of throwing their money, time and effort at a hopeless cause. The more committed activists may be willing to travel to campaign in a marginal seat, but most people prefer to be active in their own community. By tolerating these electoral deserts, Labour is colluding in alienating people from political activity. There is another way, and reforming the local electoral system is a vital first step.

4 See Electoral Reform Society, *English Local Elections 2011*.

5 See Stephen Brooks, Director of Electoral Reform Society Cymru, *143,000 Reasons for Reform*, available at: www.electoral-reform.org.uk/blog/140000-reasons-for-reform

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TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

But what about the areas where the electoral system gives Labour council seats out of proportion to the votes cast? Will Labour not be losing lots of seats there if local electoral reform is introduced?

In some places this may be true. But the case for reforming Labour's 'safe' areas is not just about democratic principle. It is also a matter of enlightened self-interest. One-party councils are not only bad for the voters – they can be bad for the dominant party as well.

As Sir Francis Pym, then the Conservative Chief Whip, incautiously observed on the eve of the 1983 election, “landslides don't on the whole produce successful governments”. Most party professionals would acknowledge, privately, that councils where a party has an overwhelming majority of seats are rarely good advertisements for that party.

The existence of an opposition provides an opportunity for policy development. Even if control does not change hands, the scrutiny an opposition can provide makes for more honest and effective local government. It may be satisfying, particularly for election organisers and candidates, to win all or nearly all the seats on a council, but it is like gorging on a whole box of chocolates. It may be sweet just after it has been accomplished, but it can leave one feeling sick and does not do one's long-term health much good.

Losing super-majorities

One might expect councils which have been 90% or more held by Labour to be utterly loyal, but in practice Labour has very often ended up losing control of such one-party states at some point in the last 20 years. The table below (Figure 2) shows the local

authorities that had 90%+ Labour majorities in the mid-1990s, and what their political history has been since that moment of apparently unassailable Labour triumph.

Of the 39 councils with Labour super-majorities in the mid-1990s, 21 have at some point been lost – a loss rate of 58% in supposedly ‘safe’ local authorities.

FIGURE 2: LABOUR’S 1990S SUPER-MAJORITIES NOW



Note: Three councils have since been abolished

When the inaugural elections for the unitary councils were held in 1995 and 1996, Labour won 59 seats out of 60 in Hull and 60 out of 60 in Stoke-on-Trent. Labour lost both councils in 2002, an exceptionally rapid decline. Both cities suffered from years of mismanagement, decline and poor local leadership before and after Labour lost power. In Hull the Liberal Democrats took over, until losing power in 2011. In 2012 they held a surprising number of seats, based in part on a campaign warning of the consequences of Labour winning another landslide majority on the council. In Stoke there was chaos, including the rise of the BNP, a myriad of Independents and small parties, and the adoption and abolition of the mayoral system in two referendums.

Stoke and Hull are the two most disastrous cases. But in other councils what appeared to be unassailable Labour domination proved to be brittle and vulnerable to attack. Islington fell to the Lib

Dems. Mansfield elected an Independent mayor and from 2003 to 2011 the council was also controlled by Independents. In Ashfield Labour lost control of the council in 2003 thanks to gains by Lib Dems and Independents, and came perilously close to losing the parliamentary seat in 2010 before regaining the council in 2011. Lincoln Labour were relatively fortunate in seeing a massive majority turn into Conservative control in 2007, but bouncing back into power four years later in 2011.

There have been a few Labour councils with overwhelming majorities in the 1990s which have retained this status all the way through since then without serious challenge. This may be because the conditions have not come together locally for political opposition to coalesce or because there has been a strong demographic trend in Labour's favour, or exceptionally strong local Labour loyalties. Some councils have survived without much challenge to massive Labour majorities because they have provided good local services, their leadership has been responsive and the party organisation has been maintained. The continuous Labour super-majorities in places such as Newham, Bolsover, Tameside, Stevenage and South Tyneside show that it can sometimes be done over the long term.

The next best scenario involves another mainstream party or local Independent group gathering sufficient strength on the council to achieve critical mass as a plausible opposition and exercise scrutiny, and therefore also make Labour raise its game. Labour's control of councils such as Gateshead, Sunderland, Wakefield and Salford has continued despite opposition gains since 1996. Labour campaigning has sharpened up and there have been strong improvements in local government performance.⁶ In Barking & Dagenham, complacency and neglect contributed to the rise of the BNP in 2006, in the absence of mainstream competition. After Labour had suffered the shock of seeing 12 BNP councillors elected, the party locally became much more hard-working, responsive and active, and the council improved. But it would have been better for community relations and the borough's reputation if the BNP had never won in the first place and if healthier forms of political opposition had been represented earlier. In a few authorities the Lib Dems became plausible opposition during the 2000s, but have been completely eclipsed since 2010 including Manchester and Knowsley.

⁶ As measured in Audit Commission Comprehensive Performance Assessments.

The challenge for Labour, particularly after the 2014 elections, is to deliver good politics and good government even with a near-monopoly on council seats.

The eight stages of loss

Councils with massive majorities can breed electoral complacency, neglect and a turning inward of political competition, sometimes resulting in ferocious faction fighting within the party. Unchallenged control interferes with modern ways of campaigning and engaging with voters and potential supporters, which is particularly necessary in core Labour constituencies and authorities. It is to the great credit of authorities like Stevenage, Wigan and Newham that they have managed the challenges of overwhelming majorities so well, but there are unfortunately far more examples of landslides leading to electoral disaster and bringing the party into disrepute.

The degeneration of a 'safe' council takes place in several clearly defined stages.

1. **Taking voters for granted.** In an environment where 40% of the vote on a 30% turnout is enough to win a ward, and usually a substantial council majority, a dominant party does not have to be particularly good at contacting the voters in its core areas. Turnout in those areas will tend to fall and the party's efforts will concentrate on squeezing the other parties out of their remaining footholds.
2. **Autocratic style of government.** The internal processes of debate and scrutiny on the council start to fail. When opposition parties become too small they will often fall short of the minimum size required to constitute a Group, and therefore lose administrative back-up for their activities. Small opposition parties will find it difficult to look beyond parochial ward issues and mount a full critique of the council administration. Official council business becomes formal, with decisions being taken at best at the majority Group level and often by a Cabinet or just a Leader, with the Group also acting as a rubber stamp.
3. **Bad decisions.** Concentration of power and a lack of scrutiny lead to bad decisions being taken, and an arrogant attitude towards people who question those bad decisions – be they from the small number of opposition councillors, the local media, independent local bloggers or from within the majority Group.

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4. **Splits in the ruling party.** Factional differences within the majority Group become more common and more divisive, sometimes leading to formal splits with some members going Independent. Nature abhors a vacuum, and a party with a local monopoly on power will often end up manufacturing its own opposition.
 5. **Hidden electoral weakness.** The lack of connection between the leadership of the council, and the lack of effort put into elections, leaves the council majority strong but brittle. Any crisis could trigger the coalescence of a local opposition movement and the lack of engagement with the electorate means that just by going out and listening to voters the new rivals will look good.
 6. **Electoral collapse.** The result will tend to be a sudden and indiscriminate collapse of the previous majority party, and the replacement political force may not be a constructive alternative.
 7. **Incompetent local government.** Electoral collapse will usually be followed by a chaotic period of poor local governance by inexperienced councillors.
 8. **Recrimination and scandal.** Skeletons start falling out of the cupboard about prior errors and scandals during the period of complacency.

This pattern of events, even if not every step of the process takes place, is recognisable in several authorities where Labour had previously held overwhelming majorities on the council including Doncaster, Hull, Stoke-on-Trent, Burnley and Slough. Labour's interests as a party would be better served by not allowing safe areas to degenerate in the first place. And, uncomfortable as it may be from time to time, a democratic opposition exercising its proper function of scrutiny can help Labour councils deliver honest, efficient local government in the interests of the citizens – particularly those most in need of public services.

Ushering in extremists

Effectively locking a proportion of voters – perhaps as high as 30% – out of representation is bad not only on democratic grounds, but because experience shows that the withering of opposition in many areas does not produce more wholesome politics. It can lead, as it has in South and West Yorkshire, to the rise of populist parties like the English Democrats and the BNP, to fill the void on the right of politics. Labour, and local government itself, could do without

voters turning in despair to such options.

It is obviously bad for Labour, as a party, to be excluded from representing its voters in rural areas and in large parts of the southern regions. But the damage done by excessive majorities in 'safe' councils is arguably even more damaging. It creates accidents waiting to happen, such as the decay of the party organisation in Bradford West that was successfully exploited by George Galloway, and many other apparent 'fortresses' that are weakly defended and vulnerable to surprise attack.

Weak organisation in 'safe' and 'hopeless' seats is not just bad for those areas themselves. It also brings the national party into disrepute when things go wrong, as they did in Bradford and in a couple of East Anglian seats in 2010 where the antics of Labour parliamentary candidates hurt the national campaign.⁷

Electoral reform will not solve all the ills of 'safe' and 'hopeless' areas at a stroke, but it will create incentives for Labour everywhere to do things better – to become a more outward-looking, welcoming and campaigning party, in constant touch with the electorate from the grassroots upwards. It would reward parties that can build up alliances within their communities – sometimes beyond strict party lines, as preferential voting means that if a candidate is widely popular they will gain first and second preference support from the voters. In short, local electoral reform would give Labour's commitment to wholesale party renewal a welcome helping hand.

7 Candidates in North West Norfolk and South East Cambridgeshire respectively courted and attracted publicity that the national party regretted. See D. Kavanagh & P. Cowley *The British General Election of 2010*, p272 and http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/election_2010/england/8644018.stm.

THE SCOTTISH ALTERNATIVE

“From the time of its foundation, Labour has been a party of democratic reform. It is a party that was built on the knowledge that social justice and democratic fairness go hand in hand. We are now in a position to return to our roots... As the MSP for the constituency in which James Keir Hardie was born, I am proud to share his conviction in and support for electoral reform. I am equally comfortable in subscribing to the words of the Independent Labour Party, which in 1913 stated: ‘no system of election can be satisfactory which does not give opportunity to all parties to obtain representation in proportion to their strength.’”⁸

Michael McMahon, Labour MSP for Hamilton North & Bellshill, 2004

In 2004 a Labour-led government in Scotland legislated for electoral reform for local government. In contrast to the confused processes that led to UK government initiatives such as mayors and big unitaries, this followed a long process of evidence-based policy-making and practical preparation. It was a controversial step within the Scottish Labour Party. But when the dust settled after the second set of local elections under the new system in 2012, it turned out that even in the most crudely partisan terms, electoral reform for local government had served Labour well.

Electoral reform has enabled Scottish Labour to avoid many problems that the party has faced in England and Wales over the last decade. Its positive outcomes for Labour include:

⁸ Official Report of the Scottish Parliament, 24 March 2004, as accessed 8 July 2013 www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=4503&i=33144&c=819868&s=single%20transferable%20vote

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- retaining a say in the government of a majority of local authorities in Scotland, while in England the party has still not recovered from its losses
 - cleaning up its act and dealing with complacency, poor performance and corruption in ‘safe’ councils rather than waiting for the electorate to punish the party
 - experiencing much less trouble in local elections with populist organisations capitalising on anti-politics and local grievances than it has had in England. There have been no equivalents to the English Democrats’ 2009 win in Doncaster or the rise of UKIP in many towns in Eastern England
 - expanding the number of authorities with Labour councillors and continuing to advance in rural areas

A Labour achievement

The new Scottish Parliament took over responsibility for local government in 1999 and with the Executive examined options for reform. Two official working parties, McIntosh and Kerley, reported on the principle and practicalities of electoral reform for local government. In the agreement between Labour and the Liberal Democrats renewing the coalition in 2003, legislation for electoral reform was promised before the next elections which were due in 2007.

It would be wrong to suggest that Scottish Labour was united on the issue of electoral reform for local government – there was passionate opposition from some councils and MSPs. But there was considerable support within the Labour Party, particularly from First Minister Jack McConnell – electoral reform was not just something that the Lib Dems insisted upon in coalition negotiations. It was a significant achievement of the Labour-led Scottish government of 1999–2007, and an example of enlightened long-term self-interest that is all too rare in politics. There was a distinct *Labour* case for electoral reform in Scottish local government.

The transition

The administrative changes needed for the change in the electoral system – new ward boundaries, detailed regulations for how to count the votes and so on – were all put in place between 2004 and 2007. Politically, there was much more uncertainty about what it

would mean. The election in 2007 came at a time when Labour's popularity was in decline and people would be thinking mostly about the Scottish Parliament election on the same day, at which the SNP was making a determined challenge for power. It was a difficult environment for Labour in Scottish and UK politics, and the SNP narrowly came top in the Scottish Parliament election. There was also confusion caused by changing the ballot paper for the Scottish Parliament, which led to a larger than normal number of rejected ballot papers in 2007.

With the change in system and the adverse political climate, Labour did lose ground in 2007. However, Labour avoided the sort of massive defeats that took place in England in 2008 and 2009. There have been no surges towards populism in hitherto safe Labour areas, in sharp contrast to the pattern in areas of England from Tower Hamlets to Doncaster. Even the established competitor party, the SNP, has gained representation but not power in the Labour heartlands and only achieved the upper hand over Labour in the city of Dundee, which has been closely contested since the early 1970s. The first elections in 2007 refreshed mainstream politics by giving the SNP representation in proportion to their vote across the central belt, while also allowing Labour to preserve its presence in marginal and weaker areas where the party might have been wiped out had First Past the Post still been in use.

Scottish Labour in local government

We have seen that the political history of English councils where Labour were running virtual one-party states in the mid-1990s has not been happy, in terms of both Labour partisan interests and good local government.

Thanks to local electoral reform, the story in Scotland is rather different (see Table 1). In 1991 there were three Scottish councils where Labour had more than 90% of the seats: Glasgow, Clydebank and Monklands. In the unitary elections of 1995 only Glasgow reached this benchmark, while several other councils (East Lothian, Midlothian, North Lanarkshire, South Lanarkshire) fell not far short. Yet significantly, Labour has maintained a majority in both Glasgow and North Lanarkshire (which includes the former Monklands council area) in STV elections since 2007. In West

TABLE 1: LABOUR IN SCOTLAND⁹

	1999		2013	
	Leader	Administration	Leader	Administration
Aberdeen City	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab-Con-Ind
Aberdeenshire		NOC	Con	Con-LD-Ind-Lab
Angus	SNP	SNP	SNP	SNP
Argyll & Bute	Ind	Ind	SNP	Ind-LD-Con
Clackmannanshire	SNP	NOC	SNP	SNP (minority)
Dumfries & Galloway		NOC	Lab	Lab-SNP
Dundee City		NOC	SNP	SNP
East Ayrshire	Lab	Lab	SNP	SNP-Con
East Dunbartonshire		NOC	Lab	Lab-LD-Con
East Lothian	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab-Con
East Renfrewshire		NOC	Lab	Lab-SNP-Ind
Edinburgh City	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab-SNP
Falkirk		NOC	Lab	Lab-Con-Ind
Fife	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab (minority)
Glasgow City	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab
Highland	Ind	Ind	SNP	SNP-LD-Lab
Inverclyde	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab (minority)
Midlothian	Lab	Lab	SNP	SNP-Ind
Moray	Ind	Ind	Con	Con-Ind
North Ayrshire	Lab	Lab	SNP	SNP (minority)
North Lanarkshire	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab
Perth & Kinross		NOC	SNP	SNP (minority)
Renfrewshire	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab

⁹ In Orkney, Shetland and Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar most or all council elections are non-partisan.

	1999		2013	
	Leader	Administration	Leader	Administration
Scottish Borders		NOC	Ind	SNP-Ind-LD
South Ayrshire	Lab	Lab	Con	Con-Lab
South Lanarkshire	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab (minority)
Stirling	Lab	NOC	Lab	Lab-Con
West Dunbartonshire	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab
West Lothian	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab (minority)

Dunbartonshire (which includes Clydebank) Labour did lose in 2007 but regained a majority in 2012.

In Glasgow and North Lanarkshire the 2007 elections resulted in a substantial SNP group on each council able to exercise scrutiny and indeed to be a plausible alternative administration of the council if Labour did not shape up. But in both cases Labour rose to the challenge and held the councils against an SNP challenge, in North Lanarkshire with an increased majority. Electoral reform has encouraged the essential processes of reinvention and renewal that Labour (and every other party) constantly needs. First Past the Post encourages a kind of politics that concentrates only on the marginal seats and fossilises party organisation.

There are some councils that electoral reform has made harder for Labour to rule outright, notably East Lothian, Midlothian and North Ayrshire. But it has also made it possible as never before for Labour to be part of the administration and influence councils well outside its traditional heartlands. Aberdeenshire and Highland, for instance, include Labour as part of their governing coalitions.

Labour has shown that it can campaign successfully in local elections under PR in Scotland, retaining control of Glasgow and North Lanarkshire ever since 2007, and adding Renfrewshire and West Dunbartonshire in 2012 (plus South Lanarkshire in 2013 after a by-election).

As well as the five councils under outright Labour control, there are another ten with Labour leaders including Aberdeen and Edinburgh, and another three in which Labour is a junior coalition

partner or supporter of the executive (South Ayrshire, Highland and, astonishingly, Aberdeenshire where the party was unrepresented before 2012). This gives Labour control or a stake in over half the 32 councils of Scotland including three of the four main cities and the most populated councils across the central belt.

Exerting influence

The policy agenda in Labour-led councils short of an overall majority reflects Labour policies to a substantial degree. In Edinburgh for instance, the coalition agreement contained Labour's key policy approach of becoming a Co-Operative Council and this was implemented in 2012. In 2013 Edinburgh became, by cross-party agreement, the first Scottish council to come out in favour of a financial transactions ('Robin Hood') tax. The SNP priorities incorporated into the coalition agreement were, to a considerable extent, things that Labour supported, such as an emphasis on carers.

The main issues dividing the SNP from Scottish Labour are those involving independence and the relationship between Scotland and the UK, which are not of direct concern to local authorities. The broadly social democratic priorities of both parties can form the basis for a considerable shared policy agenda at a local government level.

There are only three councils (East Ayrshire, Midlothian, North Ayrshire) where Labour had majority control in 1999 but are, as of 2013, entirely out of power. There are two councils (Aberdeenshire, Highland) where Labour has a share of power in 2013 where it did not in 1999. Although there are fewer Labour councillors than in 1999, Labour's influence in Scottish local government is not much diminished, in contrast to the sharp decline in England which has not yet been fully reversed despite a whole cycle of local government elections (2010–13) in which Labour has made gains.

Not everything in Scottish local government, of course, is perfect. The lack of financial independence is a problem for Scottish local government as well as in England. The SNP in government has displayed some centralising tendencies, for instance in making a council tax freeze a Scotland-wide election pledge. It pioneered the centralised control of finance that the UK coalition government has adopted since 2010. It has also centralised some local functions, notably by establishing a national police force. There are still

arguments in Scotland about reducing the number of councils.

But overall, local government electoral reform has helped Labour avoid some of the bear-traps that come with both 'safe' and 'hopeless' seats. Both categories involve taking the electorate for granted and can then bring the party into disrepute. It is no secret that there have been dubious undercurrents to politics in Glasgow and Lanarkshire over the years, and the overwhelming Labour dominance in these areas under the old electoral system encouraged an attitude of letting sleeping dogs lie. The serious risk, in the run-up to 2012, of Labour losing Glasgow encouraged the party to clean up its act and recruit a new slate of councillors who were more dynamic and effective servants of their communities than the old guard. Glasgow remains under Labour control, and a contrast in terms of good government to places such as Doncaster and Tower Hamlets.

4

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Many Labour members and supporters will be well aware of the problems with the local electoral system, but have doubts that reform will improve it. This chapter sets out a number of objections that Labour supporters may make to electoral reform in local government, and answers those objections.

A: Doesn't proportional representation (PR) make for unstable coalition and minority governments?

There have been unstable coalition and minority governments elected under PR, it is true. However, the same is true of First Past the Post (FPTP) systems as well. Some coalition and minority governments are stable and productive, and some single-party majority governments can be unstable. There is no automatic connection between the electoral system and stable government.

A number of features specific to local government further weaken the argument that PR creates instability:

1. **Elected mayors.** The 'unstable' argument is completely irrelevant in cases where government at the local level is run by directly elected executive mayors. With a separate mayoralty, two possible outcomes of council elections become all the more undesirable. One is an overwhelming majority for the mayor's party, which makes scrutiny and accountability almost impossible. The other is the mayor's party being reduced to such a small share of councillors that he or she finds it difficult to fill a cabinet and impossible to pass their own budget. Electoral reform would make both of these outcomes unlikely, and therefore contribute to better mayoral government.

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2. **Annual elections.** Annual elections mean that the political direction of some councils becomes unstable as it is. Control may shift rapidly from year to year, as it did for example in Welwyn Hatfield council in Hertfordshire where control changed hands between Labour and Conservatives in three successive elections from 1999 to 2002. Some councils become afraid of long-term policymaking because immediate unpopularity is so quickly punished under annual elections. In others, where a party knows it is approaching defeat at the next election, there is a temptation to indulge in ‘scorched-earth’ budget-setting to damage the incoming administration at the outset – as with the outgoing Lib Dem council in Sheffield in 2011.
 3. **Getting used to hung councils.** The drawbacks of councils which have no party with an overall majority are probably most apparent where it is expected to be a temporary state of affairs and parties are jockeying for that little bit of short-term electoral advantage that will put them over the winning line. However, once councillors know that no overall control is going to be the situation for a long time, they tend to settle in and work in a constructive fashion. For example, the metropolitan borough of Sefton was under no overall control, with little prospect of any party winning outright, for 25 years after 1986. At the end of this period, the Audit Commission rated Sefton a consistent four-star performer and assessed its performance as improving year after year. Politically, the long years of no overall control ended in 2012 when Labour won control for the first time ever.
 4. **Majorities are possible under PR.** A party that commands a high share of the vote (over 40 per cent), and has a large lead over its nearest rival, will tend to win a majority under many PR systems, including STV. Labour has majority councils in Scotland where support is strong enough to justify it. Majorities under PR will tend to be more responsive and accountable than in ‘safe’ authorities under FPTP.

B: What about the link between councillor and constituent?

In most local authorities in England and Wales, one ward will have several members already. In the case of councils that elect by thirds or halves, this is so that each ward will have an election every time there are partial elections.

However, even among councils with elections by thirds there are sometimes confusing anomalies – some wards in councils such as Reading, Hull and Plymouth have fewer than three councillors and therefore an irregular electoral cycle in which some parts of the local authority have elections but not others. Bristol has its own peculiar electoral cycle of two-member wards and elections by thirds.

In councils that elect all-out every four years, multi-member wards involve electors casting several votes to elect several councillors – this is the normal pattern in London boroughs, most shire districts and some unitary councils. Nearly everyone has multi-member representation already.

In this respect, transition to a new system would be easier than it was in Scotland where there was only one councillor per ward before 2007. The main difference people would notice is that the result would bear more relation to how they voted, and that good candidates of each party would have a bigger advantage over less diligent colleagues. It would mean an end to situations where a party dominates a ward's representation despite a low share of the vote. In Hounslow South ward in the London Borough of Hounslow, for instance, the Conservatives won all three seats in 2010 with 33 per cent of the vote. Under a more representative electoral system, 33 per cent of the vote would mean roughly 33 per cent of councillors – i.e. just one out of the three seats.

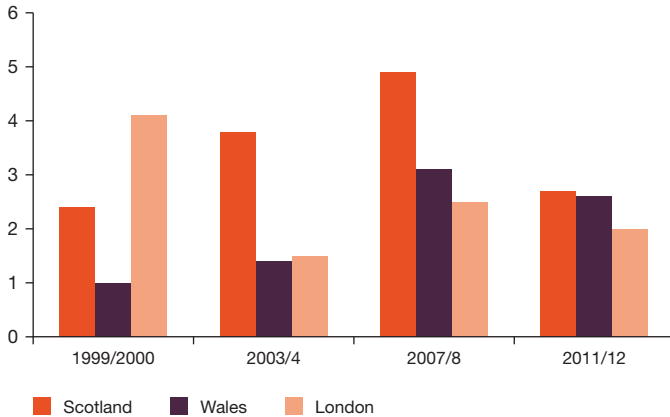
C: Doesn't PR just help the Liberal Democrats (and penalise Labour)?

It is a common misperception that proportional representation is simply a Trojan horse designed to empower Liberal Democrats, or that electoral reform has an in-built bias towards them. In reality, a party's electoral success under PR relies not on what party it is but on how effective it is at reaching out to a wide cross-section of society across a broad geographical spread. As these are precisely the attributes which the Labour party is seeking to demonstrate in its drive towards One Nation politics and party renewal, it should not be assumed that the Lib Dems are the only party capable of this strategy.

In addition, the evidence suggests that the Liberal Democrats in fact perform noticeably worse under PR conditions than under

FPTP. Elections to the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the London Assembly involve both a PR element (the ‘party lists’) and an FPTP element. In every single election to these three bodies since their creation in the late 1990s, the Liberal Democrats have received a lower share of the vote in the PR element than in the FPTP element. The difference in performance ranges between 1% and 5%, but the pattern is entirely consistent (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3: DIFFERENCE IN LIB DEM VOTE BETWEEN LIST AND CONSTITUENCY ELEMENTS (%)



There are a couple of aspects of PR systems which tend to work against the interests of the Liberal Democrats. Firstly, PR reduces or eliminates instances of ‘tactical voting’. Under FPTP, a common Liberal Democrat campaigning technique is to encourage supporters of whichever rival party is considered unable to win in a particular ward to vote Lib Dem tactically. This ‘squeeze messaging’ technique, which has proved extremely successful for the Liberal Democrats, would be rendered almost redundant by PR.

Secondly, it is incorrect to argue that even if the Lib Dems do poorly in votes, they will still be the pivotal party and a factor in any coalition under non-FPTP electoral systems. The outcome of the 2012 local government elections in Scotland shows that the Lib Dems are not always left holding the whip hand when it comes to forming council administrations. In that election, the Lib Dems lost more than half its seats. After the 2007 elections they had three

council leaders and took part in another ten administrations as junior partner. After their election losses in 2012, they had no council leaders and were part of the administration in just four council areas. The Lib Dems simply do not exercise power out of proportion to their level of support in local government in Scotland.

D: Won't it confuse people?

STV is not a complicated electoral system for the voter. It is no more complicated than deciding, if you really fancy an Indian meal but the restaurant is shut when you get there, whether you would choose the Chinese or the Italian on the same street. If a voter feels strongly that only one candidate is good enough, they are free to vote for that person and not give any other preferences.

When STV was introduced in Scotland in 2007, in circumstances that could have maximised confusion, the spoilage rate was much less than for the Scottish Parliament election. The official inquiry into the problems with the 2007 election, the Gould Report, concluded that:

“There is very little evidence to support the argument that the simultaneous local government election using STV contributed substantially to the higher rejection rates in the Scottish parliamentary election... There is very strong evidence to suggest that the combined Scottish parliamentary ballot sheet was the main cause of this problem.”¹⁰

The benefits of the new electoral system (particularly the fact that every ward was contested) meant more voters had a say, and many more saw their votes translate into elected councillors.

In FPTP elections currently, just over half the votes are cast for candidates who do not win. In the general elections of 2005 and 2010, for example, 52% and 53% of people who voted did not see their vote help elect an MP. This proportion will tend to rise the more parties get significant amounts of support, so it has risen over recent years. It reached 60%, for example, in the Essex county council elections in 2013. While there must be winners and losers of elections, for the system to give 60% of people nothing for their trouble when they go and vote is verging on ridiculous.

¹⁰ *Scottish Elections 2007 The independent review of the Scottish Parliamentary and local government elections of 3 May 2007*. Edinburgh: Electoral Commission, 2007.

Local elections in Scotland are very different. In 2007 74% of voters saw their first-choice candidate elected, and in 2012 that proportion rose to 77%.¹¹ Once lower preferences are taken into account, the number of people who saw a candidate they supported get elected rises to about 90%. Voting in a Scottish local government election means that you are almost certain of affecting who gets elected on the council. In English councils, that is not true.

E: How will Labour campaign under a new system?

As membership declines, so do the number of activists, although there are some campaigning constituency parties which beat the averages. A more responsive and democratic system is more demanding for a party, particularly in formerly 'safe' or 'hopeless' seats, where the need to listen to the electorate and work the area may be a strain. It is not unreasonable to worry about party capacity.

However, changing the system will produce huge opportunities to develop the party in weaker areas and prevent it decaying in 'safe' areas. It will be worthwhile for active, campaigning Labour candidates to do the work wherever they are, from Surrey to South Yorkshire, because that work will be meaningful and rewarded. It will make campaigning less futile, and therefore more attractive to more people.

Fairer local elections will also have a considerable effect on the culture of constituency Labour parties. A more campaigning, outward-looking mentality will make party activity more attractive. The party may not like to admit it, but there is a strong element of truth in the stereotypes of:

- The 'safe' CLP which spends all its time in the comfort zone of intricate discussions about committee allocations on the council, internal procedural wrangling, jargon and personal feuding
- The CLP in a 'hopeless' seat which has interesting theoretical discussions but a zero contact rate and no councillors

Electoral reform will not solve all the cultural problems with local parties. But it would work in the same direction as the party's attempts to modernise, such as Refounding Labour and the drive towards community organising spearheaded by Arnie Graf.

The current local electoral system works against these efforts to change the party so that it is suitable for the times we live in.

¹¹ Curtice, J. *2012 Scottish Local Government Elections*. Edinburgh: ERS.

F: Is electoral reform good for women?

Women are under-represented in all elected offices in Britain, and local government is no exception. In the 2011 local elections 30.4% of candidates were women, which is better than the House of Commons (22%) although not as good as in the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly (34% and 42% respectively).

In making the argument for electoral reform, one has to be realistic. The evidence from Scotland does not suggest that electoral reform is a ‘silver bullet’ that transforms the gender balance of an institution. The initial reform in 2007 left the proportion of women Scottish councillors more or less what it was in 2003 (22%), although the proportion rose a bit to 24.3% in 2012.¹²

A large part of the problem is that the parties in Scotland are not putting up enough women candidates. In the 2012 Scottish local elections the proportion of women candidates fielded crept forward from 22.5% to 23.6%, compared to 31.1% of candidates in the English local elections of 2011 being women. There are complex issues of party culture and practice that need to be addressed before major progress can be made on women’s representation in local government, particularly in Scotland.

As with the general issue of changing local government for the better, electoral reform is not a panacea for the under-representation of women, but it can be part of a package of solutions.

What one can say is that electoral reform will not harm women’s representation. Countries and institutions with PR tend to have significantly higher proportions of women elected, particularly if parties of the left (which tend to take action on gender equality most seriously) do well. Multi-member representation encourages parties to select a balanced slate of candidates, and makes it easier for political parties to enforce gender balance rules. If a party is selecting two candidates at a time for a seat, it can specify that at least one should be a woman. Part of the problem in Scotland has been that the seats are relatively small (with three to four members) and that in many cases a party will only run one candidate.

G: Does electoral reform improve diversity?

As with women’s representation, whether electoral reform improves the diversity of the candidates elected will depend on the actions

¹² Scottish Parliament SPICE Briefing 12/38 *Local Government Elections 2012*, p13.

that parties take. While progress is not inevitable, it can make it easier for parties which are trying to do better.

However, in local politics there is a particular reason why electoral reform may improve diversity. Under FPTP, the priority in a ward is to address the concerns of, and nominate candidates from, the largest local community. After all, given the electoral system, it makes sense to concentrate on the majority community. An example of this is in Bradford. The city council has 30 wards, but in only two of them is the delegation mixed between white and Asian councillors. The parties tend to nominate white candidates for 'white wards' and Asian candidates for 'Asian wards', despite the fact that no ward in Bradford is exclusively one or the other. The electoral system therefore polarises communities, rather than representing the diversity that exists among the population. It also tends to favour a power-broking style of local politics that has proved unhealthy.¹³ A fairer electoral system would mean that more minority communities would have electoral leverage.

13 Baston, L. *The Bradford Earthquake (2013). Liverpool: Democratic Audit.*

A ONE NATION DEMOCRACY

Councils are – or should be – democratic bodies, first and foremost. Yet nearly everyone concedes that the local electoral system is not working, in terms of turnout, representativeness (political or social), accountability or effective scrutiny. The system can create councils that become complacent, decrepit, even corrupt fiefdoms for one party or another. It can polarise, rather than unite communities at local and national level.

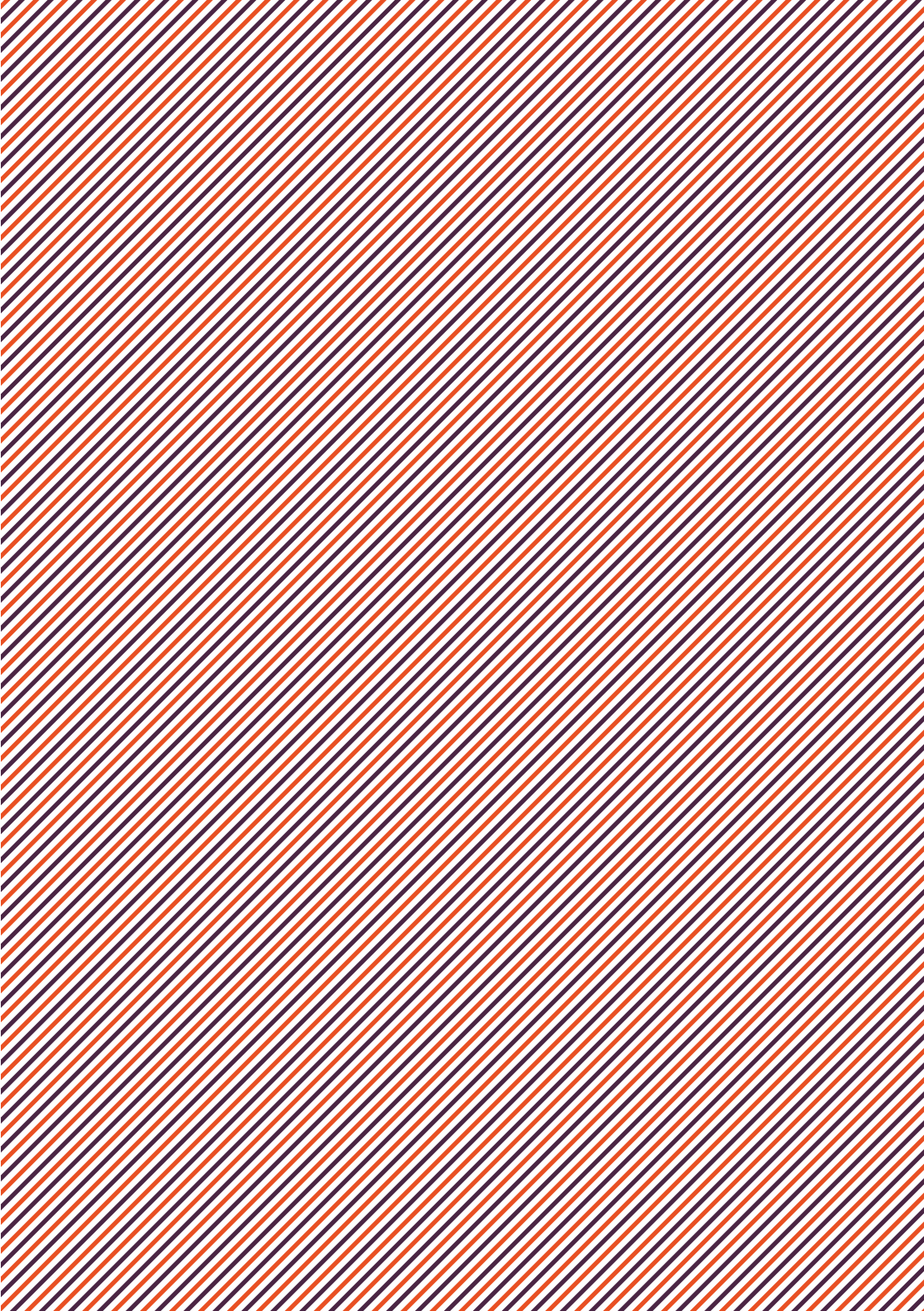
We have seen how the current system hinders Labour’s aspirations for One Nation politics by creating electoral deserts in some areas and absurdly excessive majorities in others. We have also seen how well the Scottish Labour party has coped with PR in local government. It is clear that PR has done less damage to Labour’s control of, and representation on, councils than the alternatives, and we are starting to see the positive benefits. Labour majority councils such as Glasgow have sharpened up and can govern confident of their electoral mandate. Labour-led councils such as Edinburgh can deliver Labour policies. Labour has advanced into areas that have up until now been ‘no go’, like Aberdeenshire and the affluent suburbs of Newton Mearns. The Liberal Democrats have been punished even more harshly in Scottish local PR elections than they have in English FPTP council elections.

There are a couple of fall-back options which are short of a full change to STV for all local elections. It has been suggested (for instance by the Roberts Commission¹⁴) that councils might be given the option of choosing different electoral systems. The drawback here is that the councils which choose to reform the electoral system will probably be the ones that need it least – places that

14 <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.communities.gov.uk/councillorscommission/>

have some political diversity and are willing to innovate. Another possibility would be to introduce it for councils with directly elected mayors (using the Greater London Assembly as a model) – after all, ‘strong government’ (the traditional argument for FPTP) is completely irrelevant to council elections in such places where the mayor runs the executive. A bit of political pluralism helps scrutiny work a lot better. But, as the Scottish example shows, stable and progressive local leadership is perfectly consistent with executives formed from councils elected by PR.

A fairer electoral system is not only better for voters and better for local government, it is better for Labour. This reform should be part of Labour’s agenda for revitalising local government, renewing the party so it reaches out to a wider cross-section of society and brings power closer to the people.



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