

Labour Party Justice and Home Affairs policy commission

How to make Westminster work for the many:
Labour's response to the democratic crisis

27th June 2019

1. Polling by BMG for ERS, 7th - 10th May 2019, Sample: 1541 GB adults aged 18+. Vote intention weighted sample sizes (Labour: 341; Conservative: 297; Brexit Party: 115).

The backdrop of the current Brexit impasse is a crisis of democracy in the UK. Only 4% feel they have a lot of opportunities to inform and influence decisions made by MPs at Westminster¹. That includes supporters of the big parties: 62% of Labour voters and 64% of Conservative voters feel they have very few or no opportunities to influence and inform decisions at Westminster, increasing to 85% among Brexit Party supporters.

There is a huge opportunity for a political party that seeks to give power to the many by overhauling Westminster's broken, centralised structures.

The need for a wholesale renewal of our democracy is now more urgent than ever. Brexit has exposed the failings of our political system, but Brexit is not the cause of our political crisis, it is rather the symptom. It is the UK's broken Westminster system that lies at the root of most of the problems we see in politics today, from a lack of trust in our institutions to political polarisation.

Westminster's broken voting system and centralising tendencies give almost unrestrained power to the leader of the government, however few citizens voted for them, while the House of Lords continues to perpetuate class-based hierarchy and to represent the interests of the few.

For too long, Westminster's political system has been for the few and by the few. With millions of voices excluded from the conversation, the interests and concerns of the UK's nations and areas outside of London have been pushed to the margins. Such an atmosphere of alienation is a recipe for distrust.

However, the Brexit impasse could be the UK's long-awaited constitutional moment, serving as the impetus for thorough review and reform of Britain's constitutional structures.

Making Westminster work for the many

Electoral systems

The Westminster system is propped up by a majoritarian and increasingly dysfunctional First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system which is increasingly failing on its own terms. The system has been pushed to its limit and in two of the last three general elections, this majoritarian system has failed to deliver majority governments, much less stability.

Volatility in voter choice and party system fragmentation have put the system under strain, causing it to operate erratically and disproportionately. The 2017 election saw the second highest aggregate level volatility² – the movement of votes between the parties – since 1931 (with the most volatile year being 2015), and with a system unable to accommodate for these changes in voter behaviour, results have been unpredictable and disproportional.

Recent opinion polls show a potentially unprecedentedly close race between four parties, meaning a few percentage points up or down could be the difference between a party becoming the largest party in parliament or getting only a handful of MPs.

2. Aggregate volatility is measured as the combined change in vote shares for each of the parties divided by two.

3. Los, Bart, Philip McCann, John Springford, and Mark Thissen (2017). The mismatch between local voting and the local economic consequences of Brexit. *Regional Studies*, 51 (5), 786–99.

Spicer, Jason S. (2018). Electoral Systems, Regional Resentment and the Surprising Success of Anglo-American Populism. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 11 (1), pp. 115–41.

The failure of majoritarian electoral systems to represent the views of places left behind by globalisation has exacerbated regional inequality creating a ‘geography of discontent’.³ Locality-specific concerns have been pushed to the margins as the system has encouraged a focus on the national ‘median voter’ and those in often-unrepresentative ‘swing’ seats. Reforming the voting system for the Commons would better represent voters’ choices and give parties representation across the country, reducing the false geographical divides created by FPTP. With Labour more frequently piling up support in ‘safe’ seats, these extra votes would be reflected in guaranteed representation under a proportional alternative.

The Single Transferable Vote (STV) system embodies the principles of fairness and local representation, and has long been the ERS’ preferred electoral system. STV operates in small multi-member constituencies, generally of around three to six MPs. It is used in the UK to elect Scottish local councils, and all representatives in Northern Ireland except Westminster MPs. STV has many advantages, producing broadly proportional election results while combining this with powerful constituency representation and ties.

House of Lords reform

The House of Lords starts from a place of maintaining class-based hierarchy rather than working for voters. No amount of tweaking its size can cover for the fact that it fails on almost all democratic principles. Twenty years on from the House of Lords Act 1999, reforming the House of Lords remains firmly unfinished business.

Reforming our second chamber can improve the health of our democracy by allowing for the fair and equal representation of the UK’s nations and localities, particularly in this post-Brexit era. The ERS propose a second chamber elected on a territorial basis to serve as a forum in which the four nations (including English localities, depending on how they choose to be represented at the national level) can work together in the 21st century, supplementing our current inadequate mechanisms for intergovernmental relations.

There has been consistent and high levels of public support for reforming the House of Lords for nearly two decades.⁴

International experience shows that there are a variety of ways in which a territorial second chamber can be constituted to perform its functions. In Germany, for example, members of the state governments sit in the federal second chamber, while in Australia and the US senators are directly elected by the people on a territorial basis. Territorial second chambers can represent the interests of the sub-national legislature, the sub-national executive, the people themselves, or a mixture of these; they can be directly or indirectly elected; and territory-specific powers can be granted through vetoes/exclusive powers over legislation, seating and voting arrangements, extra powers in debates and committees, the power to initiate legislation, accountability to territorial institutions.

Whatever the end formation, radical reform of the second chamber can help to rebuild politics post-Brexit in a way that represents the whole of the UK not just the titled few.

Enhancing democratic participation

Power and a clear voice for voters cannot be achieved without bringing politics closer to people, meaning bottom-up citizen involvement is necessary to ensure the legitimacy of, and trust in, our institutional set-up and democracy more broadly.

4. <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/publications/westminster-beyond-brexit-ending-the-politics-of-division/#sub-section-10>

Forms of deliberative democracy, especially citizens' assemblies and constitutional conventions, are being used more frequently around the world as a way of providing for citizen input in the policy-making process. These ideas have well and truly entered the mainstream now as an inspiring method for deepening and aiding democratic processes.

We must deal with the toxic polarisation of our politics by building mechanisms to bring people together to hear each other's views as well as expressing their own and we have to create opportunities for citizens to influence politics, both at the national level and closer to home, giving people a voice in shaping the future of their communities.

An English Constitutional Convention – led by citizens – should be established to consider devolution within England, building upon the work of local citizens' assemblies and other deliberative democratic processes to give people a say on how they are represented.

In addition, a UK-wide constitutional convention should consider the democratic future of the union in a holistic manner. The work of sub-national conventions and assemblies could feed into the UK Convention, which would then focus on the broader constitutional questions such as the relationship between the constituent parts of the UK.

People should also be involved in politics throughout the decision-making process, not just at election time. Multiple entry points for democratic participation should be created at different levels to address local policy issues.

It is vital all parties develop a response to the 'hollowing out' of democracy we have seen over the past decade. Alongside existing policies in support of extending the franchise and promoting citizenship education, such policies will help to create a democracy fit for the 21st century.

Read the ERS' recent report on how to make Westminster work for everyone:
<https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/westminster-beyond-brexite-ending-the-politics-of-division>

See more on the Single Transferrable Vote here:
<https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/single-transferable-vote>