

CHARTIST

Trade union supplement 2022

Electoral reform decision time?



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Trade Unions in the vanguard

Lynne Armstrong and **Mary Southcott** highlight the role of the trade unions in making the case for electoral reform

Since the founding of the Labour Party by the Trade Unions and Socialist Societies in 1900, there have been only four periods when the idea of changing the electoral system from First Past the Post (FPTP) to proportional representation (PR) has had a chance of becoming law: in the 1920s after discussion flowing from the 1910 elections and when the franchise was extended to all men and some women in 1918, in 1944, the 1990s and now the 2020s.

In the early 20th Century, when other European countries were already using PR, the rise of a third party, Labour, in the UK threatened FPTP. A secret 1903 Lib-Lab pact, operating for the 1906 and two 1910 elections, allowed the number of Labour MPs to grow from two to 42. Many Trade Unionists and party members agreed with Keir Hardie that Labour should not have to be dependent on a pact. Resolutions in favour of PR were passed at the TUC in 1911 and 1913, the Scottish TUC in 1912 and the ILP conference in 1913. At the TUC, Will Thorne, leader of the General and Municipal Workers, said it was difficult to understand why a proposal so pronouncedly democratic should ever have been regarded with any coldness by members of the labour and socialist movements.

But the Fabians were hostile emphasising the need for strong government and a voting system which would “accentuate the majority”.

At a special Labour conference called in 1914 to resolve the issue, delegate Fred Knee of the London Trades Council pointed out that in a large number of cases if a Liberal candidate was put up at the next election, the sitting Labour MP would be ousted, adding “A Labour man ought to be dependent on Labour votes only and that could be done under proportional representation”. But then leader Ramsay MacDonald opposed reform and the motion was lost, 1,400,000 to 700,000. Although Labour voted at its 1918 conference in favour of PR, this was not included in the 1918 manifesto. The resolution was moved by the National Union of Clerks, which in 1989 merged into the GMB. The TUC went on to vote for electoral reform in both 1921 and 1922.

In the 1922 general election the Conservatives won a huge majority on only 38.5% of the vote. In 1923 the Tory vote fell by just half a percentage point, but they lost. After one year of Labour government the Party's vote was up from 30.7% to 33.3% in the 1924 election, but its number of seats fell from 191 to 151. Nevertheless, it was the collapse of the Liberal vote by 11.9% and 118 seats that

handed the election to Stanley Baldwin as in 2015.

The issue returned at Conference 1943 when Leyton Trades Council delegate H R (Reg) Underhill called for an inquiry into electoral systems: “Many of you from rural or semi-rural areas know that there are millions of voters today who are not adequately represented. In the Southern Councils there are about 79 seats of which Labour holds nil, and yet we have a vast number of voters in those areas. We want significance given to every single vote cast by the electorate”. Keir Starmer said much the same in 2020: “We’ve got to address the fact that millions of people vote in safe seats and they feel their vote doesn’t count”.

In 1990 Neil Kinnock was behind the move to widen the remit of the Plant Commission to include the system of electing the House of Commons, with backing from the AEEU's Gavin Laird, NUM's Arthur Scargill, and TGWU's Ron Todd. The 1997 manifesto promised proportional systems for the devolved authorities and the European Parliament and a commission to recommend a PR system for the Commons. The Jenkins Commission recommended Alternative Vote Plus (AV+) but this was not put to a referendum. PR was prioritised and debated at Labour's 2021 Annual Conference.

Lynne Armstrong and Mary Southcott are executive members of the Labour campaign for electoral reform (LCER)

Mark Serwotka (General Secretary, PCS) agrees

“Adopting PR for future general elections would make every vote count in all parts of the country. It would force parties to change how they behave, as well as how voters cast their ballot and stop them taking the majority for granted. PCS wants to see a more progressive politics which more closely reflects the spread of views of the public. From the Chartists pushing for universal suffrage to the Scottish TUC campaigning for a Scottish Parliament, trade unions have often been at the forefront of demands for a better democracy that puts working people at the centre.”



Unite the Union backs PR



“Today, Unite policy conference voted to support proportional representation for the first time in our history. ... Our political class has failed working people and our system is broken. It is time to change our democracy.”

Sharon Graham, Unite general secretary, October 2021

Extract from Unite Policy Conference resolution – October 2021

Conference believes we need a Labour government to reshape society in the interests of workers and our communities. But it is imperative to realise that the current voting system offers no protection against later Conservative governments tearing up these hard fought gains as they have in the past.

Conference therefore resolves:

- to adopt a policy of opposing First Past the Post and instead supporting moves to explore, select and introduce a new voting system for the UK

- to hold regional educational events to give members information about how different electoral systems can enable or hinder the left of politics, and how they impact on the kind of policies and outcomes a society ends up with, and to promote debate and discussion amongst members
- to ask the Executive Council to consider reports back from these events which include feedback from members
- to call for the Labour Party to support moves to explore, select and introduce a new voting system, to promote discussion and education amongst its membership, and to commit to including the voting system for general elections in the remit of its planned constitutional convention.”

Adam Herriott explains the campaign inside the union

Unite for PR is part of the Labour for a New Democracy campaign to get the Labour Party to back electoral reform/PR for Westminster elections. The group formed in mid 2021 in the lead up to the Labour Party 2021 conference in September, to raise the profile of Proportional Representation by engaging pro PR activists, opening conversations at branch level and reinforcing the link between more proportional voting systems and a better deal for working people. Pre conference Unite's policy was supportive of First Past the Post so Unite delegates voted against the PR motion. There was 80% support from CLPs but some of the larger unions voted against the motion or abstained and it was defeated.

The Unite Policy Conference followed in October 2021 and due to lots of hard work by Unite members that support PR and the new General Secretary Sharon Graham's support of PR, Unite the

Union passed a motion opposing First Past the Post and instead is now “supporting moves to explore, select and introduce a new voting system for the UK”. Sharon Graham commented on the vote by saying "Today, Unite Policy Conference voted to support Proportional Representation in Westminster elections for the first time in our history. Our political class has failed working people and our system is broken. It is time to change our democracy."

I believe electoral reform and the introduction of PR would result in less Tory governments and more progressive governments that would run the country in the interests of workers and ordinary people. This would help reduce inequality and poverty, tackle climate change, improve employment opportunities and housing availability, reduce corruption and reverse the 40 year attack on worker and trade union rights. We would then be able to reverse the 40 year privatisation of the NHS, so the NHS is publicly

funded, publicly managed and provided, with democratic accountability to local people. I also think it would make constitutional reform possible: House of Lords reform to a full elected chamber, votes at 16 and finally create a British constitution.

Since the conference season, Unite for PR has been meeting every couple of months. We have been encouraging PR supporting Unite members to get active in their Unite branches, join their local Area Activist Committees and generally become more active within Unite. We are also sending out speakers to Unite branches. I am cautiously hopeful that even more trade unions will support a PR motion at the Labour Party 2022 conference.

Adam Herriott is a Unite the Union and Labour Party member and helped found LCER South West

Contact: hello@labourforanewdemocracy.org.uk

Facebook group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/417028143275118>

Affiliated unions set to back PR in Liverpool?

Stuart Hill reviews TU membership both affiliated and non-affiliated

Today there are about 2 million workers affiliated to the Labour Party through 11 trades unions. There are another 37 trades unions affiliated to the TUC but not the Labour Party. These include huge and important unions like the NEU, National Education Union (450,000) and the NASUWT, The Teachers' Union (300,000). There are also very powerful unions outside even the TUC such as the RCN, Royal College of Nursing (465,000), the BMA, British Medical Association (110,000) and the Police Federation (130,000).

Other important unions include: UCU, University and College Union 113,000; RMT, Britain's Specialist Transport Union 86,000 (previously affiliated); EIS, the Education Institute of Scotland 55,000; Equity, the Creative practitioners union 47,000; POA, Prison, Corrective and Secure Psychiatric Workers 31,000; NUJ, National Union of Journalists 30,000; FDA, First Division Association 18,000 and BFAWU 16,000 (previously affiliated).

Considerable resources have

been focused on winning support for Proportional Representation (PR) at the Labour Party Conference. This effort is likely to succeed at the Liverpool Conference in 2022. The battle of ideas, against First Past the Post (FPTP) in CLPs and trades unions, has been largely won. Getting a PR commitment in the next General Election Manifesto from Labour may prove to be much more of a challenge.

Unlock Democracy supports the continuing efforts of Labour 4 New Democracy, as part of their coalition, but is more ambitious for fundamental democratic change in our society. We believe that civil society needs to be engaged and won for PR in workplaces up and down the country. All trade unions could, and should, play their part. This is whether they are affiliated, or not, to the Labour Party.

The membership of Unlock Democracy includes Liberal Democrats, Greens, SNP and other parties, including Labour, as well as many not in any party but committed to PR. Many of these members are in trade unions and professional associations. We are presently con-

sidering how they can be better organised to exercise their democratic trade union membership rights to campaign for PR.

It will not be enough to win a paper victory, regarding Labour's Conference and General Election Manifesto unless there is massive support for introducing PR within wider society. This will reduce the chances of PR dropping off Labour's Manifesto.

Between now and the next General Election there is the opportunity to mobilise public opinion through unions and workplaces in favour of PR. The TUC's own local and regional structures provide ready-made campaigning organisations.

A key obstacle to overcome, in all the unions, is the belief that democracy is less important somehow than "bread and butter" industrial issues. There is an enormous gap between adopting a pro-PR policy and popularising it among the membership. There needs to be widely distributed materials, magazine articles, briefings and press articles at all levels, and in all parts, of the trade union movement.

Stuart Hill,
member of the
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TULO, the Trade Union Liaison Committee

The Trade Union and Labour Party Liaison Organisation is a Labour organisation in the United Kingdom that was set up in 1994 by a motion to the Labour Party's Annual Conference.

All 11 trade Unions that affiliate to the Labour Party are represented in TULO, also called the Labour Unions. Mick Whelan, the ASLEF General Secretary, is the current elected Chair and the other Chair is the Labour Leader, Keir Starmer.

There are national TULOs in Scotland and Wales and Regional TULO Committees in the English Regions.

Trade Unions are represented on the Labour National Executive Committee (NEC) and on Scottish, Welsh and Regional Executives.

Not to be confused with TULOs, TU Liaison Officers on Constituency Labour Party Executive Committees where trade unions are affiliated at constituency level. See <https://labourunions.org.uk>



Referendum Promises

After the Plant Commission reported in 1993, the late John Smith said “the people should decide” the voting system they use to elect MPs. Labour had policy, supported by Tony Blair, to hold a Referendum but not agreement on which side it would be on. In essence, the offer was a Labour fudge. “We are committed to a referendum on the voting system for the House of Commons. An independent commission on voting systems will be appointed early to recommend a proportional alternative to the first-past-the-post system.”

2001, 2005 and 2010 saw the pledge watered down until Gordon Brown offered referendums on AV and an elected House of Lords. This led directly to the disastrous 2011 AV referendum, the wrong system, at the wrong time.

Do we need a referendum?

To change the voting system what is required is simply to form an administration committed by its manifesto, introduce the legislation, choosing the specific voting system, organising boundary changes and fighting the subsequent general election which would reward votes with seats and would not have the unrepresentative 80 seat majority on a minority vote.

Depending on the Labour position in our Manifesto, it should be clear that a Conservative victory means the voting system stays and any other combination of result will lead to a change of voting system. The new voting system needs to be in place by the subsequent general election so if people want to be consulted on the voting system, there will be no time for a lengthy process as in New Zealand but there could be a consultation with other parties, with the electorate or a Citizens' Assembly on the voting system.

Are we fixing democracy?

Labour is moving toward electoral reform because we see that politics is broken and fewer people are joining political parties, turnout is dropping and most people have votes outside marginal constituencies which do not count. We want to see a change of political culture. We take up the cry of enfranchisement from the Chartists, the early Trade Unionists, the Suffragettes and all those who won the vote, who wanted a meaningful vote.

The Conservatives have over the last century fixed the system by uniting the right whereas the left is clearly split depending on the geography, metropolitan, town, rural, southern or northern England, Wales, Scotland. Their manifesto and legislative commitment to first past the post is clearly because the current system favours their party. They are the ones preventing politics from changing and fixing our democracy in the 19th century.

Who chooses the new voting system?

After the Second World War, the Allies chose Additional Member System for a divided Germany. In the UK all the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and London, were elected by a form of Additional Member System, all confirmed by referendum. In Scotland the system came from the Scottish Constitutional Convention, in Wales from Labour's Welsh Executive and Conference in 1997 similarly in London, Minister Nick Raynsford used the IPPR, Institute for Public Policy Research, to consult and decide.

The Scottish government, Labour and Liberal Democrat working together chose Single Transferable Vote (STV) for Scottish Local Government in 2007. The Welsh Senedd is allowing Welsh local government to choose.

The process

The easiest way is for a majority party to adopt the system it likes best and announce it will legislate in the first Queen's Speech. Minority parties need to take other parties into consideration but decisions can be done without wide consultation. A UK People-led Constitutional Convention has been Labour's default position and devolution has been handed over to the Brown Constitutional Commission whose remit is not electoral reform but devolution. There is agreement about Votes @ 16.

What is clear is that we need to pin down the fairly ambiguous “open and inclusive process” and decide if a system needs to be named in the Manifesto? What is clear is that a system has to be chosen before the first past the post can be ditched. The fear would be that nothing would be in place for the subsequent general election.

The Make Votes Matter Good Systems Agreement

An attempt to find consensus has arrived at the Good Systems Agreement, here: <https://www.makevotesmatter.org.uk/good-systems-agreement>. This narrows down the choice to effectively Additional Member System, including the Jenkins' Commission's AV+, and Single Transferable Vote. It also stipulates that the AMS needs to be as or more proportional than the Scottish form of AMS. It specifies “a citizen-led, deliberative process to choose a new system”.

Some are suggesting that Labour should decide on an AMS system which it helped introduce in UK internal elections and is a hybrid PR system which builds on an MP-single member constituency link. And there is an ingenious suggestion that 50 MPs should be added for the first general election so that the electorate get used to the idea of top up members. Then adjustments could be made to reduce the number of MPs at subsequent elections through boundary changes increasing the ratio of additional members to actual constituency seats.

Why proportional represent

Professor Robert Ford sets out the c

In Britain, the electoral geography is bad and getting worse for Labour for several reasons. The latest boundary review will decrease the number of MPs in Labour areas, by reallocating seats away from slow growing, Labour leaning areas such as Wales and towards more rapidly growing, Conservative leaning areas such as the Southeast. The fall of many low turnout, erstwhile Labour seats in the 'red wall' has also removed a traditional Labour advantage – their seats were often won with fewer votes than in high turnout Conservative areas. There are also more complex strategic problems: Labour loses more seats narrowly to a third party, usually the SNP, than the Conservatives do – all those votes cast for Labour do not return more Labour MPs. Conversely, the Conservatives have more seats where they narrowly beat a third party, usually the Liberal Democrats – these Tory votes add Tory seats. Last, but not least, is the problem of safe seats – an awful lot of Labour votes are cast in seats where the incumbent Labour MP already has a large majority. These extra votes add to the local MP's job security, but do not elect more Labour legislators. When we put these factors together, they add up to a large and growing disadvantage to Labour from the electoral system, with huge majorities in many urban core seats and narrow defeats elsewhere leading to a high number of votes 'wasted', in the sense that they do not contribute to returning extra Labour MPs.

Sir John Curtice has summarised the situation after the 2019 election as follows: "for any given performance, the electoral system is inclined to reward the Conservatives more richly than Labour." If the vote shares at the next election were even, Curtice predicts the Conservatives would have 23 seats more than Labour. It is also much harder for Labour to get a majority: the Conservatives need a 3.5 point lead in votes to get a majority at the next election, while Labour need a 12.3 point lead to do so. Therefore, there is also a large range of outcomes where Labour would have a lead in votes cast, but Conservatives would lead in MPs returned to Westminster.

Labour's disadvantage from the electoral system is not new, as figure 1 shows, from analysis by political geographers Ron Johnston and Charles Pattie, illustrates. In most post-war

elections, the electoral system favours the Conservatives. Only during the New Labour period was the voting system inclined to reward Labour more generously, and the unusual coalition of voters assembled in that period looks at present unlikely to be reassembled.

Very safe seats are a problem. Conservative majorities tend to cluster in 20-40% range – safe but not landslide majorities. By contrast, a quarter of Labour seats have majorities over 40%, and one in eight has a majority above 50% - seats where the Labour vote is not so much counted as weighed. These huge majorities are inefficient – adding to Labour's national vote share, but without any prospect of returning extra Labour MPs. The same problem is evident in 2019, when the ten largest majorities in percentage terms are all Labour held seats in Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and London. 19 of the top 25 majorities in the last election occurred in Labour seats.

Why the electoral system matters

In 1968, Giovanni Sartori pointed out: "[The electoral system is] the most specific manipulative instrument in politics." What he meant by this is that the rules applied to turn votes cast into seats allocated have a powerful impact on the kind of politics countries get. This impact comes through two channels. There is a mechanical effect, which is simply the impact of applying the system's rules to determine who gets elected based on the votes cast. But there is also a psychological effect: voters know the rules of the system, and this affects how they behave. For example, in first past the post systems, voters who favour smaller parties, or locally weaker parties, may recognise that their preferred candidate is a lost cause and back a second preference candidate instead.

The mechanical effects alone of our current electoral system are large, as illustrated in figure 1 below, which uses calculations from the Electoral Reform Society's publication: "Voters left Voiceless: The 2019 General Election". The only system which returns a Conservative majority is the FPTP electoral system currently used. The primary effects of shifting to any other system are to reallocate seats away from the Conservatives and towards smaller parties.

The only system which delivers a

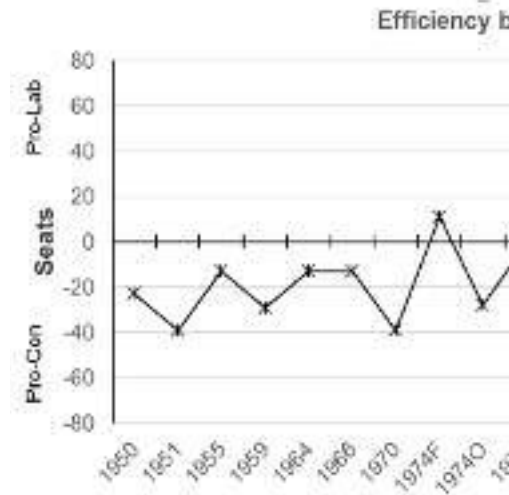


Figure 1 - The electoral system favoured Labour in 1999 but is unlikely to return barring a drastic change in current p

- Trade unions tend to have more i
- Looking at the International Trade Rights Index, all the top-rated d
- The UK is graded as 3 – Regular majoritarian countries including C

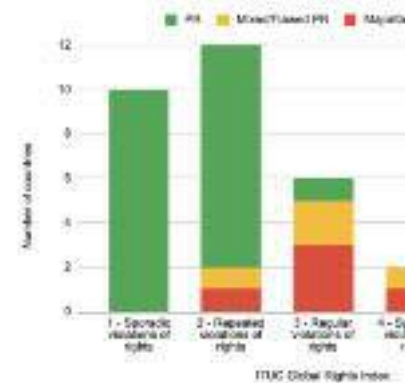


Figure 2 - Electoral systems and workers rights - Source: ITUC Global Rights Index

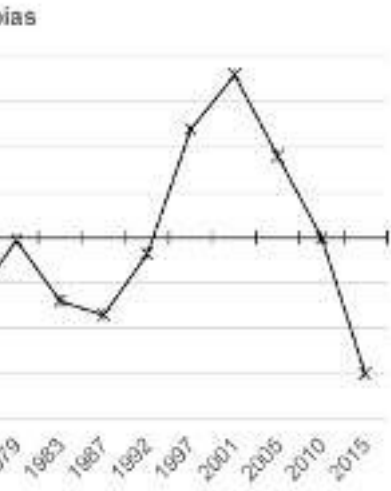
Commons majority for the approach to Brexit proposed by Boris Johnson is the system we currently have.

The Case for FPTP and why it now often fails

The traditional defence of FPTP proponents is that it is not a system designed to equally represent all those who stand for election, but rather a system which delivers strong, account-

Proportionality is better for workers

Case in Britain's current electoral context



2007-2010 - that advantage is party electoral coalitions



Influence under PR systems
 The International Trade Union Confederation "Global Rights Index" shows that developed democracies use PR. The UK is graded as 3 - Regular violations of rights, alongside other countries including Canada and Australia.



Source: International Trade Union Confederation "Global Rights Index"

able governments. Strong because it delivers legislative majorities even on a minority of votes. Accountable because it enables voters to remove one majority government and replace it with another.

However, FPTP has not consistently been delivering either outcome for some time, and is unlikely to do so again in the coming election. There has been only one substantial majority

government in four elections since 2005. This trend is likely to continue: territorial fragmentation has produced a large rise in 3rd party MPs, and geographical polarisation has produced a large decline in traditional Conservative-Labour marginals. The range of outcomes which would deliver another hung parliament at the next election is very wide indeed.

The case against FPTP

Several arguments are made against first past the post by proponents of reform. Most constituencies in an FPTP system are 'safe', meaning most voters do not get a meaningful choice at any election and as parties may safely ignore them in campaigning, they do not receive much attention from local or national campaigns. Instead, elections are mostly fought in a narrow set of 'marginal' seats, where activists and campaign resources are focused, while the voters of other seats are marginalised and forgotten. Swing voters in marginal seats therefore have disproportionate influence, but there is no guarantee that such voters will reflect the distribution of views in the country. FPTP also raises unfair barriers to smaller parties, therefore denying voters a meaningful choice and preventing effective representation of voter preferences. Turnout and engagement with the political system tends to be lower under FPTP. Comparative research has demonstrated that proportional electoral systems are associated with a large range of progressive outcomes including greater representation of women and ethnic minorities; greater representation of left-wing voters who tend to concentrate in urban areas; more left wing led governments; lower income inequality due to greater redistribution through welfare spending; higher trade union membership, coverage and influence; more progressive labour laws.

It is overwhelmingly accepted by academics that FPTP has a pronounced bias towards centre-right parties. Stanford Professor Jonathan Rodden says: "In every industrialised parliamentary democracy with majoritarian electoral institutions, averaging over the post-war period, the legislature has been well to the right of the voters, and in most cases, the cabinet has been even further to the right". This reflects the biases produced by voter geography - left-wing voters are

in most countries more inefficiently distributed as they concentrate in a small number of strongholds (usually large cities and towns with large working-class populations), while more evenly support enables right wing parties to win narrow majorities over a wider range of seats.

The right-wing advantage under FPTP also reflects voter psychology - risk averse middle-class voters are often willing to back centre-left coalitions under PR, but when forced into a binary choice between left and right, they tend to align more with the right. The cumulative effect of geography and psychology is large: countries with FPTP systems tend to have right-of-centre governments two thirds of the time, even though left-wing and right-wing parties have received a similar share of the vote on average over the long run.

Electoral systems and workers' rights

Trade unions tend to have more influence under more proportional systems than under first past the post. Looking at the International Trade Union Confederation "Global Rights Index", all the top-rated developed democracies use PR. The UK is graded as 3 - Regular violations of rights, alongside other majoritarian countries including Canada and Australia. See Figure 2: Electoral Systems and trade union rights

It is in the interests of trade unions to have a more proportional system, because more proportional systems deliver more left leaning governments and more progressive policy outcomes. On average, proportional democracies tend to have more government ministers from social democratic Labour-type parties (35% of ministers) compared with majoritarian/FPTP countries (23%). A more proportional system aligns with or advances many trade union goals and fair and equal representation of voters is itself a progressive goal.

Robert Ford FAcSS is Professor of Political Science at the University of Manchester. He researches elections, public opinion and British politics and is the author (with Tim Bale, Will Jennings and Paula Surridge) of "The British General Election of 2019" and (with Maria Sobolewska) of "Brexitland".

We need PR at Westminster for Labour councillors everywhere

Cllr Karen Constantine explains why

Time, surely, to consign the antiquated first past the post system to the past. We need to unlock activism, upgrade local democracy and ignite our passion for winning elections. In the face of seemingly unassailable Tory domination, the like of which we've haven't experienced before, voters and activists alike need to know that their votes actually count. Labour and trade unionists would benefit from an urgently needed watershed shift to a form of proportional representation. It is pivotal to dismantling Tory hegemony.

If we are going to unlock democracy we need to be focused, positive and decisive to rise to the challenge of winning elections based on PR. Many so called voters fail to engage with the ballot box, believing their vote won't make any difference. Others, volatile, naive, floating, veer red to green and in places yellow, in an earnest effort to depose the Conservatives. Often with the painful result that splitting the vote not only undermines Labour's chances of success but also rewards the Conservatives.

The collapse of the Scottish and Red Wall vote which Labour hopes



to reverse still leaves the urgent requirement to win coastal communities, and to build our efficacy, participation and activist base in local government. This isn't just about winning and declining vote share. Losing results in fewer councillors, fewer representatives for trade unions to engage with and diminished opportunities to win parliamentary seats. Local government gains pave the way to parliamentary wins. Losing means less local government experience and knowl-

edge inside the Party. Continual defeat exacerbates the feeling of the inevitability of losing, which in turn makes campaigning more daunting.

The unions need to show leadership and to debate what a proportional representation voting system really offers their membership. They are shut out of influence when Labour is not in office. They have reassurance an incoming Labour government is committed to rights at work from day 1, ending exploitative contracts and introducing a £10 minimum wage. A clear mandate to support workplace organising and building union recognition. Evidence also of the power of collectivism and the important trade union Labour link.

In an ideal general election, Labour activists would be able to hit the campaign trail invigorated by the prospects of knowing every vote counts. Enthusiastically campaigning to inform residents, that even in Tory dominated areas like Kent, this time, their red vote would make a difference. Voters want their 'X' to be a mandate to implement the policies that matter most to them.

It's not 'if, it's 'when' conference will adopt proportional voting, as a vital precursor to electoral success. As a councillor myself putting in the hard yards convincing voters to get out and vote, I'd say it's getting harder. If politics is the live, beating heart of democracy that impacts every person at every hour of the day, proportional representation is life support.

Karen Constantine, a long time national trade union officer, now living in Ramsgate, Kent was involved with others in thwarting Farage's 2015 parliamentary attempt.

She 'accidentally' became a councillor and was the first person to beat UKIP, who had control of Thanet District Council, their only power base, in a surprise byelection in 2016.

Karen is enjoying a second term as County Councillor and Deputy Leader of Kent's Labour Group. She sits on Labour's Better Jobs and Work Policy Commission and is a GMB member.

Join Unlock Democracy and the campaign for PR

Unlock Democracy campaigns for real democracy, protected by a new constitution.

We want a democratic society that ensures equality and justice for all, and a political system that reflects and upholds the values we collectively share.

Unlock Democracy is a member of the Labour For a New Democracy (L4ND) coalition. **We are working with others to secure a commitment from Labour to PR in their manifesto.**

We have members of nearly all the political parties, but Labour members are the most significant group. Many of our members are in trade unions and professional associations. We are presently considering how they can be better organised to exercise their democratic trade union membership rights to campaign for PR.

Join us if you would like to be part of our campaigns.

To join or find out more about Unlock Democracy email info@unlockdemocracy.org.uk or visit unlockdemocracy.org.uk



A Unison voice for change

Aileen McLoughlin speaks out

Our parliamentary and Westminster voting system is not serving workers. Trade unions know that workers' rights, collective bargaining, standards of living, the right to organise and our very democracy are under threat. Proportional Representation (PR) is known to deliver governments with better trade union policy and legislation and better protection for workers' rights.

Standing up as a voice against our First Past the Post (FPTP) system needs to be a priority. This system has given the Conservative government an 80-seat majority in the Commons with the ability to pass far-reaching damaging legislation such as the Election Bill, Crime, Police and Sentencing Bill and the Health and Care Bill. FPTP is the tool that the Conservatives are using to destroy the unions, to silence their voice and ensure they retain untrammelled power.

In the Commons opposition parties can argue their case but wield little power - for those that voted for them, their voice is not heard. Strong voices outside parliament are now more important than ever. Unions have a big part to play in protecting our futures from regressive policy and autocratic minority governments.

Working with Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform (LCER) South West, I helped to gain support for PR in my Bristol South constituency. After losing to the Green Party in the 2020 local elections, I decided to redirect my energy to making the argument for PR within my union, UNISON. I am told that in the past of the two of the three unions which went to make up UNISON, COHSE was in favour of PR, as were many NUPE members and NUPE Scotland.

I was recently elected to represent SW UNISON members on the National Labour Link Committee. Labour Link works directly with and takes policy to the Labour Party. It has a network of officers at all levels of the union and forums for democratic policy development. UNISON works closely with sympathetic MPs, who can bring early day motions or ask parliamentary questions related to union concerns, public services,



housing and trade union rights. Electoral Reform needs to be on this list

Supporters of electoral reform have been working together in a newly formed group UNISON For PR with support from Politics For the Many and Labour For a New Democracy. We are navigating the rules and deadlines along two pathways to seek UNISON policy change via: the National Delegate Conference (NDC) in June and the National Labour Link Forum in July. 12 local branches have submitted motions in support of PR to the NDC and we are pressing for Regional Councils and the NEC to prioritise motion 102 for discussion in Brighton in June. Pro-PR Labour Link motions are also being considered for discussion at the July forum.

Persuading the Labour Party to support a more proportional voting system should be a priority for Labour Link. Without Labour Party support we cannot get electoral reform. At the September 2021 Labour Conference, UNISON abstained due to lack of existing policy. This cannot happen next time.

In October 2021 UNITE passed policy rejecting FPTP and calling for members to examine the pros and cons of voting systems used outside Westminster and in other countries.

There are challenges. In the 2016 Trade Union Act the Tories

set out to make sign-up to political funds within unions much harder. Since the implementation of the Act in 2018 members have to opt-in rather than opt-out of the small additional payment to support political campaigning creating disincentives that have a big impact on campaigning funds.

UNISON workforces are exhausted from the pressures of the pandemic and pay packets frozen for over a decade. Workers are under attack from despicable policies like "fire and rehire" Recent ballots on pay have seen disappointingly low turn-outs.

In this climate it can be hard to convince fellow union members that electoral reform should be a key priority. It can be difficult to get members to engage and attend meetings to pass policy. But we need to win the arguments: that most people in this country support more progressive policies, only 43% voted for this government. PR will get us a parliament that reflects the views of all and will give us a chance to see the change we so badly need.

This is not a left-right issue. It is a positive policy union colleagues can work on together

We are no strangers to PR in UK elections. Now is the time when affiliated unions need to back the change in the way we elect MPs as soon as Labour forms a government after the next general election.

Aileen McLoughlin is a Labour and Unison Member and South West Representative on the National Labour Link Committee

Making votes count is key for unions

Don Flynn sees the Trade Unions on the move

With industrial action in defence of living standards being reported all across the UK there are good reasons for believing that the trade union movement is on an upswing.

In April 2022 the Guardian could report there were more strikes underway than at anytime in five years. As well as demands for wage increases large enough to protect working people from the corrosive effects of inflation which is expected to hit 10 percent later this year, workers are also facing up to employers over the fire and rehire strategies which aim to reduce rights previously written into employment contracts.

From the standpoint of wider public opinion there has been overwhelming public support for the seafaring unions against the scandalous behaviour of bosses at P&O in sacking its entire workforce in order to replace them with cheaper agency staff.

Trade union membership has also been on the increase in each of the last four years and now stands at 6.56 million according to the TUC. With things going so strongly in favour of a trade movement buoyed with confidence and ready to fight for working class people we should also be asking what needs to be done at the level of politics.

Trade unionists have always known politics is important because it is in that arena the gains won at the industrial level, for better pay and conditions, can be underpinned with legislation which will make it harder for bosses to take them away.

For the last hundred and twenty years the Labour Party has been seen as the principal vehicle for political activity which advances the interests of the working class. But the party has been on a downswing since 2005, with one exception in 2017 when Labour advanced to an almost neck-and-neck position with the Tories. The 2019 election result saw the party returning to its long-term trend of electoral decline.

The labour movement is now at the point where it has to reconsider exactly where it stands in relation to the needs of working class people both in relation to action in the workplace to arrest further erosion of living standards and job security,



but also at the political level, with regard to the way the country is governed.

There are many things that need to be fixed at this level. Too many people feel, with absolute justification, that their voices do not count when it comes to the political direction the country is taking. Much is made about working class votes going to the Tories in so-called Red Wall constituencies, but the issue that is really important is the growth of disenchantment with the whole political process and the growth of abstention when it comes to voting, particularly among young wage earners. Burdened with sky-high rent costs for accommodation and chronic job insecurity they are becoming a generation which has simply forgotten, or never knew, what it meant to be a staunch Labour supporter.

A radical reform of the way we do politics in the UK is a key part of the fight back to become relevant to most voters. High on the list of things that need to change is the voting system itself, which under First Past the Post, the system we currently use, allows MPs and councillors to be elected with majorities with only a minority of votes cast. It is a political scheme that allows cynical party leaders to game the system gearing their campaigns to the moods of the electorates in the minority of constituencies which are considered to be winnable if the right message can be crafted to the handful of voters

whose ballots matter. Outside a few marginal seats, where only the switch voters matter, the rest of us have to sit back and accept what the fates deliver.

But times are changing and the need for electoral reform is recognised by increasing numbers. The best indication of movement among trade unions is the decision of Unite, with its 1.5 million members, to open up discussion on what would be the best system to ensure that every vote counts.

Our democracy in Britain is marred by a whole number of defects. This is the reason why we keep getting governments with majorities in Parliament even though around 60 per cent of voters opt for parties other than the ones that get elected and form a government.

The trade union movement needs to be concerned about this predicament. Its ambitions for working people need to extend beyond the essential core of industrial organisation and have things to say about the functioning of democracy itself. Democracy ought to empower citizens and ensure their voices are heard when it comes to deciding how things are run. For it to have this empowering function we need to take up the call of our sisters and brothers in Unite, in ASLEF, TSSA, the Fire Fighters and the Musicians and take a long, hard look at the way the voting system works, and influence the Labour party to offer a plan to change the current system.

Don Flynn is a member of UNITE Community and the Labour Party

L4ND & LCER mobilise for change at Conference 2022

Billy Hayes (LCER Trade Union Officer) and **Caroline Osborne** (L4ND Political & Education Officer) report

Labour for a New Democracy is a coalition of ten organisations. It launched in September 2020 with the objective of securing a Labour commitment to Proportional Representation for UK general elections. L4ND is also part of the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform (LCER) which is committed to PR for all tiers of government, but has particular focus on PR for Westminster. Additionally, we are both working closely with the Politics for the Many: the trade Unionists campaign for political reform.

Other active members of the coalition are Chartist, Compass, Electoral Reform Society, Make Votes Matter, Open Labour and Unlock Democracy. We work with the whole spectrum of the Labour movement, from right to left, with all those who want to see the next Labour government introduce PR and those who simply want to know more about the issue.

Although at the 2021 Labour conference delegates representing the party membership voted over-

whelmingly to prioritise and support the motion on electoral reform, many trade unions were not yet ready to. Covid - and the delays it caused to trade union conferences - was a major factor in this. Both Unite and Unison would have had the opportunity to debate motions on PR before last year's Labour conference were it not for the pandemic.

In the end, four affiliated trade unions voted for the composite motion in Brighton - ASLEF, FBU, MU and TSSA, as well as the now-disaffiliated BFAWU. Two unions abstained: Unison and CWU. Community, GMB, UNITE and USDAW voted against.

But there are signs that this year could be very different. A month on from Brighton the Unite policy conference voted to oppose the current First Past the Post voting system and support electoral reform. Their new General Secretary, Sharan Graham, took it a step further, saying "Unite Policy Conference voted to support Proportional Representation for the first time

in our history. Our political class has failed working people and our system is broken. It is time to change our democracy".

Other unions are engaging with the debate in the coming weeks and months. We hope to join them at the Tolpuddle Festival, 15-17 July. CWU's conference kicked off in April, Unison will have both its National Delegates Conference and Labour Link in the summer, and the TUC and Labour conferences follow in September.

Labour members are clear: we need PR for Westminster in the next manifesto. Last year, they sent 150 motions to conference, got the issue firmly on the agenda, and created the space for the rest of the Labour movement to have this discussion. If more trade unions accept this invitation - and come out in favour of electoral reform - this year's Labour conference could be an even more momentous one for British democracy. We hope you will find this Chartist Supplement useful in your deliberations.

Find out more about Labour for a New Democracy - and or invite a speaker to attend your local branch - at: <https://www.labourforanewdemocracy.org.uk/>



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For democratic socialism

COVID-19: what would have been different under a more proportional government?

Cat Smith MP highlights some hazards of the current first-past-the-post system



Cat Smith is MP for Lancaster and Fleetwood

Debating electoral reform might be helped by reflecting on the events of recent years – Covid 19 and how it has been handled by a Conservative government with an 80-seat majority won under first-past-the-post (FPTP) led by a Prime Minister guilty of breaking his own lockdown laws.

Throughout most of the pandemic I served on Labour's front-bench responsible for Young People and Voter Representation, a witness to the disregard for young people by a Government who assumed a right to rule.

Thanks to devolution we don't have to look far to see how things could be done differently. Both the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments are elected using an element of proportional voting and have a history of parties working together and finding compromise. When we reflect back in the history books I am sure we will be able to find examples of where all governments could have done things better – but I am confident we will look to Westminster and wonder how on earth the Tories thought they could get away with it.

The fines which are being handed out for lockdown breaches in Downing Street will only further deepen public mistrust in politicians, and by extension democracy. As we know from 'Partygate' ministerial accountability is non-existent. Repeated calls for an independent inquiry into the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic are being ignored. Little wonder when the Prime Minister himself refused to believe scientists' warnings post-Wuhan, didn't bother to attend the early COBRA meetings (called to deal with potential national emergencies) and waved through super-spreader events like the annual Cheltenham horse-racing festival in March 2020.

Only overwhelming evidence of



infection, hospitalisations and deaths forced the Government to announce the first national lockdown.

Would such disregard for public health have been possible under a coalition government led by a prime minister obliged to listen to cabinet colleagues who may be from other political traditions?

Trade Union colleagues in the National Health Service and the Civil Service are all too well-aware of the Conservatives' neglect of contingencies for pandemic over the past decade. This is obviously speculation on my part, but I am confident that a Labour-led coalition government (elected through a proportional voting system) would have ensured sufficient intensive-care beds, adequate ventilators, personal protective equipment, and fostered good working relations between public health officials locally and nationally. Remember the way in which public sector pay has declined in real terms, staff recruitment and training has been undermined by Tories preferring private sector solutions to every aspect of daily life, they are all the product of our FPTP electoral system. That 'winner takes all' electoral system carries a terrible price for the public-spirited and community minded.

Electoral reform carries with it the prospect of eliminating the risk of governments with super-sized majorities which can lead to arrogance and a sense of 'right to rule'. I believe the key lesson of the pandemic is that none of us is safe and we must put contingencies in place to protect our democracy.

While Covid-19 enveloped the

globe, the Conservatives have been abusing their powers to rig the current electoral system in their favour – reducing the number of parliamentary constituencies in Labour areas (due in 2023), legislating photo ID requirements to vote (risking disenfranchising some three million people who have no photo ID), removing the second vote provisions from elections such as regional mayors and police and crime commissioners.

Labour has a chance to change the electoral landscape by passing a resolution at this year's annual conference in Liverpool supporting electoral reform. I hope TU delegates will join most of the Constituency Labour Party (CLP) delegates who support this move. Electoral reform alone will not fix the public's mistrust or disengagement with democracy – but it's a crucial piece in that jigsaw.

This supplement has been edited by Mary Southcott and produced by Peter Kenyon.

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