

POLITICS FOR THE MANY



THE TRADE UNION CASE FOR POLITICAL REFORM

Briefing

April 2018



The trade union movement has always been at the vanguard of political change in Britain. And furthering economic equality goes hand in hand with political institutions that deepen political equality.

To ignore the role of the political system (which concentrates political power in a minority of voters in a minority of seats) in driving political inequality, is to miss the potential for radical political change.

To truly shift power closer to the people on a long-term basis requires more than changing the underlying economic structures. Embedding changes in the political system would allow for a change in the very way we do politics, securing better social and political outcomes.

Politics for the Many: The Trade Union Case for Political Reform sets out the opportunities for the labour movement as a whole in uniting behind a broad platform of progressive political reform.

Key findings:

- Proportional representation is linked to greater economic equality and democratic quality
- The Westminster model of government has allowed for sweeping legislation, eroding trade union rights in the UK.
- The Westminster voting system is increasingly working against the progressive majority forming the next government

1. THE WESTMINSTER SYSTEM IS BAD FOR TRADE UNIONISM

The see-saw of majoritarian government in Britain has allowed for sweeping legislation that has eroded trade union rights.

‘Strong’ single-party government associated with winner-takes-all, First Past the Post electoral systems works against policy stability, creating a tug-of-war with our rights and legislation.

Lacking the need to build coalitions of support around policy change, single-party governments can rapidly undo the work of previous governments.

The electoral system and culture it encourages, incentivises parties to create sweeping reforms, setting a new policy direction and even going further and faster in the opposite direction. Nowhere is this more evident than in legislation affecting trade unions.

Law on trade unions in Britain is frequently described as the most restrictive in the western world. As the pendulum of majoritarian government swings between parties, trade union rights have been the target of sweeping reforms. Over the last forty years successive UK governments have played tug of war with the rights of trade unions. The list of statutory obligations on unions has grown exponentially as majority governments (some with significant majorities) have sought to restrict and heavily regulate trade union activity.

Since 1980 there have been no less than fourteen employment and trade union acts restricting and then, to a degree, clawing back union rights. Many of these acts, in particular the Employment Acts of 1980, 1988, Trade Union Acts of 1984 and 2016, and the Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Act 1993, have been introduced swiftly after General Elections. In all cases the legislation has reached second reading in less than seven months after the election.

From removing union immunity in 1982 to changes to political funds in 2016 the pendulum of majoritarian government has worked against union interests. There is a clear contrast here between the Westminster model and democracies in the consensus model such as New Zealand (post 1993) and Germany and the Nordic states.

2. A FAIRER VOTING SYSTEM IS GOOD FOR SOCIAL OUTCOMES

Governments elected through proportional representation tend to be more left wing and create better social and democratic outcomes. Westminster's system by contrast encourages public money to flow to marginal seats rather than social need.

The safe seat culture created by First Past the Post means the governments have a greater incentive to direct public funds at a handful of winnable seats rather than towards where the need is greatest – particularly close to elections.

Academics find that central government grants to English local authorities have been greater to local authorities containing marginal constituencies than would be expected on the basis of social need and population. Similarly a relationship between areas with marginal seats and fewer hospital closures has been established.

In contrast to the political economy created by majoritarian systems, consensus democracies have a higher democratic quality in several areas: higher turnout, lower perceived corruption, higher satisfaction with democracy, and a closer proximity between voter and government in terms of policy preferences.

These findings are replicated across the academic literature. Consensus democracies also have lower rates of inflation, unemployment, higher spending on welfare and social programmes, energy efficiency, lower rates of prison incarceration, and higher foreign aid spending and lower levels of economic inequality (associated with higher political equality).

3. THE WESTMINSTER SYSTEM IS WORKING AGAINST THE LABOUR VOTE

First Past the Post works against a progressive majority – but PR could work in the left's favour

The hurdles facing Labour in achieving a majority at the next election are considerable. Assuming a tied vote, the Conservatives would be largest party by 12 seats. Labour would need to do 0.8% better than the Conservatives to become largest party and would need a lead of 7.4% to win a majority compared to 3.4% for the Conservatives.

This problem would be exacerbated if new boundaries were introduced, which on their current form would increase the bias as such that the Conservatives would need only a lead of 1.6% to win a majority (less than they won in 2017) and Labour would need a lead of 8.2%.

The increasing concentration of the Labour vote, the impact of SNP and UKIP as third parties in seats and votes as well as boundary changes make a Labour majority a much harder target.

Bias in the system can create 'wrong winner' elections as in 1951 when Labour won the most votes (48.8% vs. 48.0% for the Conservatives) but the Conservatives won a parliamentary majority. Indeed, recent projections suggest that this remains a possibility for the next election. Electoral Calculus project that on 40.7% of the vote for Labour to 40.5% for the Conservatives, Labour would still lag 18 seats behind the Conservative Party.

The last three elections have seen two hung parliaments and a very thin majority. This is in part due to the rising support that third parties have enjoyed through most of the post-war period. Of course, that support was reduced in 2015 and 2017 as the Liberal Democrats collapsed, but nonetheless third parties hold a historically high number of seats between 12 remaining Lib Dems, 35 Scottish Nationalists, 4 Plaid Cymru, a Green and the 18 seats of Northern Ireland which are completely uncompetitive for major parties.

Social and economic changes have vastly shifted Labour's base. New class

divides, tied strongly to security, age, education and values see Labour support coming from younger and more educated groups. These groups are increasing but the change in demographics not swift enough to have a significant impact on the next election.

In order to win an absolute majority at the next election, Labour will need to win an additional sixty-four seats - more than twice Labour's net gain of thirty at the 2017 election – in the face of these difficult electoral circumstances.

A change in electoral system need not hinder Labour electorally. Projecting the results of the 2017 General Election under alternative electoral systems (where people were also asked if they would vote differently under these systems) the Electoral Reform Society projected that Labour would have won 286 seats under AV, 274 under AMS and 297 under STV, up from 262.

4. THE WESTMINSTER SYSTEM IS BAD FOR EQUALITY

Gender equality in Parliament is being held back by Westminster's voting system.

With the majority of union members now women – and with unions leading the way in opposing the gender pay gap – equality is a core focus for the labour movement.

Yet dozens of seats in the House of Commons are effectively 'reserved' by incumbent men. Of the 212 currently-serving MPs first elected in 2005 or before, just 42 (20%) are women. In contrast, of the MPs remaining who were first elected in 2015, there is near gender parity – 45% are women.

The prevalence of 'safe seats' under Westminster's voting system, means that once a seat is in an MP's hands, it may be theirs for decades. This means despite measures to improve the number of women candidates, the number of winnable or marginal seats that could possibly change are limited.

Systems with proportional electoral systems are generally more representative in terms of descriptive representation.

The top ranked democracies in the world for women's representation – the Nordic states, Mexico, South Africa and Spain - all use forms of PR in their legislature. In addition, PR is an enabler of techniques for increasing women's representation.

Labour has used 'zipping', in which party lists alternate genders, to help elect more women in list elections in the UK. For this reason Labour's group in the PR elected European parliament is 50/50, and this has helped contribute towards representation in the London Assembly (50/50) which used a mixed system, Welsh Assembly (majority women group with 52% women) and the Scottish Parliament (46%) which use proportional electoral systems.

The full *Politics for the Many: The Trade Union Case for Political Reform* is available at: politicsforthemany.co.uk

ABOUT POLITICS FOR THE MANY

Trade unionists seeking 'root and branch reform' of British politics have joined forces in a bid to bring about democratic change.

Politics for the Many is campaigning for measures including an elected House of Lords, a fair voting system where seats match votes, and extending the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds across all elections. Such a comprehensive remaking of Westminster might be done via a constitutional convention.

The group will also seek an overhaul of electoral registration, to ensure more people are signed up to vote, and redrawn constituency boundaries based on all eligible voters.

The following list of individuals are supporting Politics For The Many:

- Nancy Platts – Politics for the Many Campaign Co-ordinator
- Mark Serwotka – General Secretary, PCS
- Howard Beckett – Assistant General Secretary Unite (in a personal capacity)
- Billy Hayes – Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform
- Ian Hodson – President, BFAWU
- Sam Tarry – Political Officer TSSA and President of CLASS Mike Kirby – Scottish Secretary, Unison