

Building a Politics for the Many: The union campaign for political reform

Electoral Reform Society and Politics for the Many – June 2019

A legacy of pro-democracy struggles

Throughout history, the labour movement has been at the forefront in demanding political change – helping tip the scales in favour of working people.

200 years ago in Manchester, tens of thousands of people at St Peter's Square changed history when they stood – and many fell – fighting for Parliamentary representation.

Democracy isn't static – it must be defended and remade for every generation. Today, the UK faces a democratic crisis. Voters are unrepresented, Westminster appears out of touch and distant, and power is still held by a few. Without fixing our broken political system, the scales will always be tipped back in favour of the already-powerful.

From an unelected House of Lords to the fact that millions of votes go ignored, Britain's Victorian constitutional structures silence working people.

If we do not fix our broken politics, we simply cede the narrative to more cynical forces. We need a vision for a democracy where people feel their voice is heard, where ideas can be tested and debated on a level playing field, and where our institutions – local and national – are responsive and accessible to the millions. The centralised 'Westminster model' stands in stark contrast to everything unions fight for.

Now new analysis by the Electoral Reform Society, backed by Politics for the Many, sets out a vision for a democracy that works for workers.

Five calls for a fairer politics

The ERS' report "Westminster Beyond Brexit: Ending the Politics of Division" makes five key recommendations for how to build a new democracy:

1. We need to move beyond the centralised 'Westminster model' of governance, towards a consensus model. Power should be dispersed across our democratic institutions, bringing power closer to people and enabling governments to work together to develop policy for the long term and in the interests of the whole of the country.
2. The next government must overhaul the House of Lords as a priority. There is a growing movement for change, with polls showing that two thirds of voters wanting to scrap and replace the Lords with fairly-elected representatives.
3. An elected second chamber must serve as the forum in which the four nations – and England's localities – can work together in the 21st century. This reformed chamber would be where UK-wide, sub-national, and cross-border issues are discussed.
4. An English Constitutional Convention – led by the people – should 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.
5. 'Citizens' assemblies' should be used at the local level as a core part of how we do politics, helping bring people together to deal with complex and contested issues. The public should be involved in politics throughout the decision-making process – not just on polling day.

Taking on the current crisis

From a lack of trust in our institutions to the toxic polarisation paralysing parliament, the UK's broken Westminster system lies at the root of the problems we see in politics today. Westminster's outdated voting system and unelected House of Lords put our politics out of reach of working people. When voters in 'safe seats' go ignored and one half of Parliament remains locked in class-based privilege, our national debate is dangerously skewed.

The UK remains one of the most centralised countries in Europe. England in particular remains highly centralised, with devolution so far having been a top-down project – with no space for communities to discuss how they actually want to run their areas.

Voters are left powerless and distant from where decisions are made with no real say over who represents them. It is no wonder that just 4% of people they have a lot of opportunities to influence decision at Westminster.

The only way to tackle this crisis of alienation is to tackle it head on. We need our nations and communities to have a stronger representation, through replacing the unelected Lords.

We need a political culture that encourages the trade union tradition of negotiation and dialogue. And 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 in their communities.

It is essential that workers and citizens as a whole are brought into the debate about their constitutional future – but this will only have meaning if there is a commitment at the top to change.

Get involved

On August 31st Politics for the Many will hold a major conference in Manchester – 200 years since Peterloo – to debate a new vision for democracy today. Join us.

Sign up to Politics for the Many and our democracy conference here: politicsforthemany.co.uk

The full ERS report is available at:

electoral-reform.org.uk/westminster-beyond-brexite-ending-the-politics-of-division