THE TRADE UNION CASE FOR POLITICAL REFORM

POLITICS FOR THE MANY
Trade Unionists for Political Reform

"Millions of votes are ignored under the decrepit, one-party-takes-all first past the post system – with only those citizens fortunate enough to live in a marginal constituency paid any attention by rival parties. A new democratic settlement – where your vote always counts and your voice heard – is vital for the change we need in this country." - **Lynn Henderson, former STUC president**

"There is a growing realisation that politics cannot continue as it is if we want it to work for the many. From replacing the broken Westminster voting system, to finally reforming the archaic House of Lords, there are big changes which are long overdue." - **Shavanah Taj, Welsh TUC President**

"In 2019, like almost every single General Election since the second world war, the left got more votes than the right. And still we were locked out of power. The gains workers make are all too often swept away by a system at Westminster that systematically benefits reactionaries against those who stand for real progress." - **Julian Vaughan, ASLEF rep**

"The further down the social grades, the lower the engagement and satisfaction with the state of politics in this country. This should be a call to arms for progressives across the labour movement to make the case for proportional representation in its strongest terms yet. Working class people have the most to gain from a political system that better represents them." - **Mark Serwotka, General Secretary, PCS union**

INTRO

The trade union movement has always led demands for greater democracy, empowering working people and communities, and offering a different vision of society. **Today, that demand for greater democracy is vital and urgent**.

The powerful levers of the state are being used to undo rights and freedoms, give jobs and contracts to cronies, and attack minorities.

We need to rewire the system to put wealth and power in the hands of the many, giving ordinary people collective control over the things that affect their lives. But we cannot build a country that works for working people unless we take on our unaccountable and dysfunctional state. **We need a political system that embodies the values of equality, fairness and representation**.

Empowerment is perhaps the most important thing the trade union movement can offer people. **Only by putting democracy at the heart of our agenda can we build an economy and society that works for all – a politics for the many**.

That means overhauling the warped electoral system at Westminster that silences millions of working people.

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HOW WESTMINSTER'S VOTING SYSTEM IS FAILING WORKERS

1. GOVERNMENT OF THE FEW BY THE FEW

First Past the Post - the system used to elect MPs - is a 'majoritarian' electoral system. It is designed to create single-party governments and ensures that parties get a majority of seats – almost always without them getting a majority of votes.

The system is meant to work when there are only two main parties contesting elections – when one party is likely to get a majority, or close to a majority, of votes.

However, with many more parties contesting elections in the UK, votes are being spread around much more widely. This has let the Conservatives hold on to power with a minority of the vote - in 2015 the Conservatives won a majority of MPs, enabling them to form a single-party government on less than 37% of the vote. The next election saw the hard-right DUP put the Conservatives back into power - with a combined 43% of the vote. And in 2019, the Tories won almost complete control of Parliament, again without a majority of votes. First Past the Post benefits the right time and time again.

2. UNCHALLENGED POWER

The structure of our political institutions and how they are composed makes a fundamental difference to who governs, and how: whether that system works in the interests of the many, or the few. From the unelected Lords to the warped voting system, these broken systems determine who has power, and who is shut out.

The one-party domination created by FPTP (nearly always on less than a majority of votes) means that there is a direct route to power for lobbyists, and the checks and balances provided by other parties are diminished. It makes the system more vulnerable to corporate capture - as we've seen during the pandemic.

The unelected House of Lords is itself a space for unrestricted lobbying access at the heart of parliament. The Prime Minister has the power to appoint whomever they choose to the House of Lords (recent appointees include the Prime Minister's brother and a Conservative donor appointed against the advice of the Lords Appointment Commission).[1] Lords have second jobs and are often employed by big business – some have business links to foreign states.[2] There are currently no Peers with a background in manual or skilled trades.

Voters should be able to kick out those who vote on our laws. As the late Tony Benn said, the question we must ask of powerful figures is: *"How can we get rid of you?"*

The answer in the Lords is: you can't. In the Commons, elections are too often an unfair lottery - where, as Labour saw in 1951, winning a majority of votes is no guarantee of victory.

3. ELECTORAL WASTELANDS AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Westminster's rigged voting system creates an incentive for governments to funnel public funding to a handful of swing seats that they need to take power. This means there is an inbuilt incentive to distribute resources to certain areas and not necessarily those with greatest need.

The Conservative 'Town's Fund' – a £3.6 billion fund to improve towns across England and 'level up' regions – has been investigated by the Public Accounts Select Committee and a report published by the National Audit Office over concerns about the distribution of these funds. The Public Accounts Committee concluded that, "the selection process was not impartial" and that "although departmental officials scored and ranked all towns across England against a set of criteria, such as income deprivation, the selection process gave Ministers discretion to choose which individual towns would be eligible to bid."[3]

1 PM rejects official advice in awarding peerage to Peter Cruddas The Guardian https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/dec/22/pm-rejects-official-advice-in-awarding-peter-cruddas-peerage

2 The Intelligence and Security report into Russia in 2020 found that "It is notable that a number of Members of the House of Lords have business interests linked to Russia, or work directly for major Russian companies linked to the Russian state – these relationships should be carefully scrutinised, given the potential for the Russian state to exploit them." p.16 HC 632 – Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament – Russia https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CCS207_CCS0221966010-001_Russia-Report-v02-Web_Accessible.pdf

3 Public Accounts Committee (2020) 'Selecting towns for the Towns Fund' report, 11 November. https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmpubacc/651/65102.htm

Academic research has shown that the 'Towns Fund' not only disproportionately favoured Conservative-held towns but specifically those in which the Conservative lead was marginal. The researchers also ruled out the possibility this was a coincidence – the Conservative marginals were not the most deserving areas. It found that "the success rate for Conservative-held towns in the *low* priority group was actually higher than the success rate for all other towns in the *medium* priority group. The bias in favour of Conservative-held towns was sufficiently large to over-turn civil service recommendations not just on fine distinctions within broad categories but concerning the drift of the scheme as a whole."[4]

We see this time and time again. A study earlier in 2020 showed that Labour councils have borne the brunt of local government cuts over the past decade.[5] And in 2019, the BBC found that Conservative-held constituencies were overwhelming beneficiaries of the government's increase in schools funding.[6]

4. TRADE UNION RIGHTS RIPPED UP

The see-saw of FPTP single-party domination in Britain has allowed for sweeping legislation that has eroded trade union rights.

Law on trade unions in Britain is frequently described as the most restrictive in the western world. Trade union rights have been the target of sweeping reforms by right-wing governments here when they secure power – what happens when we have such a centralised, elitist political system

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, and further reduce the potential challenge to power.

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 been introduced to parliament in less than seven months after the election. By contrast, all of the EU countries which have embedded trade union rights, and have high union density and collective bargaining coverage, are democracies which employ PR electoral systems.

5. RIGGED REPRESENTATION

The Westminster system is failing to represent the UK in the 21st Century.

In the Commons, 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. It's no wonder so many people feel disengaged from politics – in hundreds of seats, only one candidate seems to stand a chance.

It also means that despite measures to improve the diversity of candidates, the number of winnable or marginal seats that could possibly change are limited. The number of black and minority ethnic MPs has only recently reached 10%. The number of women MPs ever elected since 1918 has only recently (2016) surpassed the number of male MPs sitting in parliament right now – but still just a third of MPs are women.

The unelected House of Lords, despite the 1999 reforms, still guarantees 92 seats for hereditary peers. Not only are these positions in our legislature reserved for those born into privilege, they are also almost exclusively reserved for men as succession rules mean women do not inherit titles. Only 6.3% of the House of Lords membership are from black or ethnic minority backgrounds, and only 28% of peers are women. It really is a private member's club largely reserved for wealthy men.

Countries with proportional electoral systems are generally more representative. The top ranked democracies in the world for women's

4 Hanretty, C. (2020) 'The pork barrel politics of the Towns Fund', LSE Blog, 02 October 2020. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-pork-barrel-politics-of-the-towns-fund/

5 Lawrence, F., McIntyre, N., Butler, P. (2020) 'Labour councils in England hit harder by austerity than Tory areas', The Guardian, 21 June 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jun/21/exclusive-labour-councils-in-england-hit-harder-by-austerity-than-tory-areas

6 Chu, B. and Barnes, H. (2019) 'Tory and marginal seats benefit most from PM's spending, data shows', BBC Newsnight, 30 September 2019. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-49883367

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 such as 'zipping' in which party lists alternate genders.

Instead, with just one seat up for grabs in each area, First Past the Post benefits the already-powerful. Of the 2019 parliamentary intake, 29% of MPs had been educated privately, compared to about 7% of the population (41% of Conservative MPs and 14% of Labour MPs attended independent schools). Of the 173 MPs who went to independent schools, 11 went to Eton. Only just over half of MPs (54%) went to a comprehensive school compared to 88% of the population.[7]

6. CHAOS UNDER FIRST PAST THE POST

Defenders of First Past the Post often argue the system delivers so-called 'strong government'. Instead, it gives us erratic results and power-hoarding governments.

The built-in trade off within the First Past the Post system is that proportionality is sacrificed in order to artificially create the conditions for single party government. The system is designed to give a 'winners bonus' to ensure this – at the expense of voter choices.

The 2019 general election may have looked like business as usual for FPTP, with a strong two-party vote, but in many ways it was a continuation of the trend away from these certainties. Third parties gained a substantial amount of representation (82 seats) – further changing how FPTP functions in the UK; Scotland continues to depart from the rest of Britain transforming into a different party system like Northern Ireland; And a hung Parliament remains a very likely future prospect.

Professor John Curtice calculates that on current electoral geography and if third party support remains as it was in 2019, a range of results (from a Conservative lead of 5% to a Labour lead of 12%) would result in a hung parliament. At the same time, because of the bias in the system, it takes far more Labour votes than Tory votes to secure a Labour majority.

We have seen in recent elections that hung parliaments under Westminster's current system can lead to last-minute deals that voters are unaware of – but parties still campaign on the basis they will govern alone. Under PR, parties often discuss who their partners might be or even put together deals in advance – voters have a much greater awareness of what might happen after the election.

Because FPTP rewards parties with a geographically concentrated vote (in 2017 the DUP got 10 seats for their 292,000 supporters whilst the Greens got one seat from their 526,000 strong support), the system increases the likelihood of deals with parties that are strong in specific areas but which lack widespread national support. This happened in 2017 with the Conservatives agreeing a 'confidence and supply' support agreement with the DUP for £1bn.

First Past the Post means that the tail can 'wag the dog' as the larger party is almost entirely reliant on one other party to prop up their majority. Under PR – with more accurate representation of public opinion – there are more potential partners to work with and if the demands are too high, the larger party can shop around for new partners.

For decades, all the trends are that people want to vote for a range of parties but with a two-party voting system that produces warped outcomes, and it is benefitting the Conservatives time and time again.

7. FAIRNESS

Under FPTP elections are fought in just a small number of marginal (swing) seats. Moreover, the number of these swing seats is in long term decline. Whilst Labour lost in some of its heartland seats in 2019, this did little to affect the number of overall marginal seats (calculated as 88 – similar to 2017).[8] Very few seats are in fact 'up for grabs', with the rest of the country often viewed as a write-off.

As in the US, under the UK's Westminster system there is a huge amount to be

7 Sutton Trust (2019) 'Parliamentary Privilege 2019: educational backgrounds of the new House of Commons', 13th December 2019. https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/parliamentary-privilege-2019/

8 Curtice, J. (2020) 'A Return to 'Normality' at Last? How the Electoral System Worked in 2019', Parliamentary Affairs, 73(1), pp29-47. https://academic.oup.com/pa/article/73/Supplement_1/29/5910288

gained by spending big in these marginal constituencies. But experts have argued that the UK is more vulnerable to financial influence than the US as a lot can be gained by relatively small amounts.[9] This not only means that wealthy individual donors have an outsized influence on our politics but it creates an incentive to circumvent campaign regulation to funnel money into marginal constituencies.

The growth in online campaigning and lack of regulation means this is increasingly easy to do, leaving our elections vulnerable. In this environment, dark money has crept into UK politics leaving it wide open to the influence of foreign governments and wealthy individuals.[10] The government's most recent proposals for campaign regulation[11] will tighten UK based campaigning activity for charities and Trade Unions, whilst doing nothing to stop corporate donations from shell companies and unincorporated associations funnelling money from overseas – loopholes that the Electoral Commission has been warning about for years.[12]

Closing campaign donation loopholes is important but when complete power can be won by swinging a small number of marginal constituencies, without reform of the electoral system, the UK's democracy will always be more vulnerable to the influence of wealthy individuals.

WESTMINSTER'S SYSTEM & THE CHALLENGE FOR THE LABOUR PARTY

ELECTORAL BIAS

The electoral system now substantially favours the Conservative Party and works against Labour.

Electoral bias is where, if two parties win the precise same number of votes, one party wins more seats than the other. The 2015 election saw FPTP electoral bias move substantially in favour of the Conservatives, favouring the Conservative party as much as in the 1950s.[13] There are four types of electoral bias. Each of these poses a problem for Labour.

What this means is that even given an equal number of votes, Labour is likely to lose to the Conservatives. Professor John Curtice calculates that, on the basis of 2019 geographical distribution of party support, should Labour and Conservatives gain the same vote share, the Conservatives (with 290 seats) would be 23 seats ahead of Labour (on 267 seats).

A change in electoral system need not hinder Labour electorally – in fact, given the increasing electoral bias towards the Conservatives, it may well be an essential shift for progressives.

GAMING THE SYSTEM

The smaller parties that favour electoral reform tend to be aligned more closely with Labour. This means Labour stands to gain from changing the system but is being punished under the current one.

Analysis of the 2021 English local elections shows more candidates being fielded from the left of centre than the right. Conservatives are dominating the right of politics whilst the left of centre parties are competing with each other. In nearly half of wards (48%), there was one unified 'right' party (the Conservatives) standing candidates against all three of the 'left' parties (Lab/LD/Green).[14]

There are a further 32% of wards where there is one 'right' party (always the Conservatives, apart from one ward in Derby where it is UKIP) standing candidates against two of the largest 'left' parties (either Labour, the Lib Dems or the Greens).

The trend for voters to try to 'swap' their votes at elections is another example of the system forcing voters to try to work around the system. Parties themselves are also forced into discussions of how to game the system through alliances and candidates standing down. This would be unnecessary under PR: you could always vote for who you support.

9 Geoghegan, P. (2020) Democracy for Sale, London: Head of Zeus.

10 openDemocracy has revealed that pro-Tory campaign groups spent more than £700,000 in the 2019 general election campaign without declaring a single donation (disappearing after the election). https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/pro-tory-campaigns-spent-over-700000-without-declaring-a-single-donation/. Unincorporated associations (which can be used to cover the true source of political donations thereby avoiding permissibility requirements) have donated £12.7m in the past five years, £4.1m since Johnson was elected - the majority going to the Conservatives https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/shadowy-groups-face-no-risk-for-breaking-uk-election-law-experts-tell-mps/.

11 Elections Bill 2021 https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/elections-bill

12 Electoral Commission (2018) 'Digital campaigning: increasing transparency for voters' report, 01 June 2018. https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/changing-electoral-law/transparent-digital-campaigning/report-digital-campaigning-increasing-transparency-voters

13 Pattie, C. and Johnson, R. (2015) 'Electoral bias in the UK after the 2015 General Election', LSE blog, 18 June 2015. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/electoral-bias-in-the-uk-after-the-2015-general-election/

14 Politics for the Many https://politicsforthemany.co.uk/englands-progressive-vote-more-split-than-the-right-in-85-of-council-wards/

SUPPORT FOR CHANGE

Calls for change are growing louder in the labour movement. In May, the ASLEF union became the latest to back change to Westminster's warped voting system.[15]

Latest polling shows 83% of Labour members believe the party should support changing the UK's electoral system to proportional representation, up from 76% less than two years ago.

The poll of nearly 1,000 Labour members, conducted by YouGov for Labour for a New Democracy,[16] showed that just 10% say Labour should not support the switch from First Past the Post to a form of proportional representation (PR). Hundreds of Labour branches and CLPs have now passed motions calling for electoral reform.

From the PCS to the TSSA, from Momentum to Compass, more and more in our movement recognise that we cannot secure the lasting redistribution in power in this country without an overhaul at Westminster.

Politics for the Many is supported by leading trade unionists across all Labour-linked unions and beyond, and we want to step our campaigning up a gear.

Get involved here: https://politicsforthemany.co.uk/

Can you pass a motion in your union backing proportional representation?
Get in touch: admin@politicsforthemany.co.uk
Twitter: twitter.com/politics4many
Facebook: facebook.com/PoliticsfortheMany/

15 https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/aslef-joins-the-growing-number-of-unions-who-have-put-their-support-behind-proportional-representation

16 http://www.labourforanewdemocracy.org.uk/