

Electoral reform following the 5 May referendum on AV

By Magnus Smidak

Where next for electoral reform? The result of the 2010 General Election was extraordinary in a number of ways. The First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) electoral system, often admired for its tendency to return strong single-party governments, completely failed in its duty this time around.



Magnus Smidak is research and information officer in the Electoral Reform Society (ERS). First known as the Proportional Representation Society, the ERS was established in 1884. It works towards securing an electoral system which ensures the equal value of all votes, reflects all points of view in the electorate and strengthens the accountability of individual representatives to the voters.

For the first time in over 35 years, the British electorate woke up on May 7th to a hung parliament. Then in less than a week, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats agreed a coalition deal and a programme for government – Britain’s first coalition government outside wartime or emergency since 1918. For a country unused to coalitions and consensus politics this was surprisingly rapid. As it turns out, the deal breaker that made the coalition possible was a promise to hold a referendum on the electoral system – a long time Liberal Democrat goal. However, the only option that the Conservatives would countenance was the Alternative Vote (AV).

AV, sometimes known as Instant Run-off Voting, is not proportional representation, but rather a more sophisticated version of the Two-Round system which is widely used in France. For the Liberal Democrats – a party so often hamstrung by Britain’s electoral system – this was compromise on its preferred option of the Single Transferable Vote (STV-PR). As for the Labour Party, it had promised a referendum of AV in its election manifesto, although the party remained deeply split on the issue. The Conservatives have always opposed reforming the voting system. Herein lay the problem with the whole referendum campaign: it was for a change that no one really wanted.

What was at stake?

For the electoral reform movement, the stakes could not have been higher. The AV referendum was truly a once-in-a-generation opportunity to replace the discredited FPTP system with something different after so many false dawns. However, for some activists it was a very bitter pill to swallow because the cherished goal of proportional representation was not even to be considered. The Liberal Democrats had staked the reputation of its leader, Nick Clegg, and quite possibly its future electoral viability on winning the referendum vote. The party had sacrificed a considerable amount of support and goodwill by

joining forces with the Conservatives, and delivering electoral reform was supposed to have made it all worthwhile.

Conversely, David Cameron had staked his reputation on securing a No vote as many in his party, with an eye on their own seats, believed he had conceded too much in agreeing to the referendum pledge. Hence, the two governing partners found themselves on completely opposite sides of the debate. For the new leader of the Labour Party, Ed Miliband, it was arguable whether it mattered which side would win. The party’s commitment to reform is not deep and tends to fluctuate with its electoral fortunes. Although Miliband was committed to a Yes vote, he could not hope to impose his will on the rest of party and nor did he try.

What went wrong?

Voting reform is not an issue that typically resonates in Britain. It rarely bothers the top 30 most important issues facing the country in public opinion surveys, and more often than not languishes at the bottom of the list, that is if it registers at all (Economist/IPSOS MORI Issues Index, July 2011). Convincing a disinterested public to turn

out to vote in the first place and then vote in favour of a reform for which they have limited knowledge was never going to be an easy task. By the time the short campaign period started, even the anger over the expenses crisis which precipitated the demand for reform had dissipated. Add to the mix the fact that the majority of MPs were not in favour of AV, and the referendum itself was closely associated with the unpopular Lib

Dem leader Nick Clegg, the conditions for success were never bright.

Nevertheless, polling evidence at the start of the campaign suggested that a slim victory was possible. Hoping to capitalise on the expenses crisis, the Yes camp opted for a “peoples’ campaign” strategy. Although it succeeded in creating a very effective grass roots organisation, ultimately the campaign messages didn’t cut through and served principally to alienate potential supporters in parliament. With the exception of a few small-circulation broadsheets, the media, the majority of MPs and the Conservative Party machine weighed in against a Yes vote. The No camp was better organised, better resourced and unencumbered with trying to sell a difficult product to a sceptical public. Rather than defending the existing

FPTP system, the campaign focussed on sowing confusion and doubt over AV. Within a few weeks of the campaign, the Yes camp lost control of the agenda and found itself reacting to events as they unfolded. Once concerns over the cost and complexity of the new voting system were fixed in the public consciousness, the referendum could not

“There can be two readings of the result. The first is that there is no appetite for reform. The second is that AV was the wrong reform which came about in the wrong way.”

be won. The result was devastating: an overwhelming two to one vote against AV. Only 10 electoral regions out of 440 voted in favour.

The way forward?

There can be two readings of this result. The first is that there is no appetite for reform. The second is that AV was the wrong reform which came about in the wrong way. The referendum pledge was dealt as a bargaining chip behind closed doors to seal a coalition deal. Had there been a constitutional convention or citizen’s assembly (following the example of British Columbia and Ontario in Canada) tasked with exploring the reasons why reform is necessary, examining all the electoral reform options available and putting them before the public so they could make an informed choice, FPTP might be history by now.

Over six million people voted to change the electoral system because they felt it was unfair and unrepresentative. This does not indicate a lack of appetite for reform in Britain. Although it is reasonable to assume that reform for Westminster will be off the agenda for many years to come, if FPTP fails to return a majority government again in 2015, we could be revisiting this issue sooner than we think.



Ed Miliband, the Labour leader, campaigned in favour of electoral reform, but his party was divided.

For more about the ERS, visit their website at <http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/>