



Report - Grassroots for Europe - Round Table #13 - Tuesday 23rd March 2021

Voting Reform

Executive Summary

Many members of the public, as well as pro-EU Campaigners realised that the outcome of the 2019 General Election could have been very different with an alternative to the current first past the post voting system. Three different organisations, each of have been campaigning in different ways to improve our voting system; the Electoral Reform Society, Make Votes Matter and Labour for a New Democracy gave us their thoughts on what next.

Introduction, Lord Andrew Adonis, Chair, European Movement

Brexit was in many senses a symptom of not just the wrongs with what government can do, but also what is wrong with how it does it. In order for greater political accountability, and the gap that has opened up between voters and the elected to close, a range of changes are required to the way the country is governed. The Centre and left of politics need a broad-based coalition of organisations, including those from the green movements, on constitutional changes to be brought about.

This should be similar to the changes that came from the formation of Charter88, which led to a consensus and the grassroots political and civil society movement of the mid 1990's. This resulted in constitutional changes after 1997, when the left had been out of power for 20 years. Many of those aims remain outstanding. We are at ground zero. Partnerships across organisations and campaigns are crucial and the European Movement remains strongly supportive of the Round Table initiative in pursuance of this joint working.

For European Movement, the main three priorities are as follows:

- (1) It needs to be a mass-membership organisation, with 2-300,000 members, as it used to be in the 50's and 60's when the first applications to the join the Common Market were made.
- (2) It should be the "go-to organisation" for commentary about Europe, which enables all the main political parties to discuss Europe publicly, and not avoid or stay silent.
- (3) It should become a seriously strong campaigning organisation. There is scope for discussion on strategy. At the moment the outline seems as follows: building a step-by-step approach, which begins with specific practical measures to ease the damage caused by Brexit, e.g., rejoining ERASMUS+; agreeing phytosanitary equivalence for food exports; a work visa for artists, performers, and musicians. This could lead to manifesto commitments from opposition parties for closer relationships at the next general election, eg through Customs Union and or Single Market Membership.

The contributions from the other speakers are summarised as follows.

The UK's system of governance is an anachronism, rooted as it is in the ruling of a global empire during the 19th Century, with all the power centred on and concentrated around Westminster. A brief contact with the electorate every four or five years is insufficient accountability. The public has a perception that the country is more democratic than is in fact the case, due to the narrative and stories told through the media by the political establishment.

The UK's constitutional infrastructure was reformed during the 1990s with a form of PR introduced alongside devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. These resulted from constitutional change infrastructure. like combined civil society and political "conventions" created well before 1997. The Electoral Reform Society promotes

a variety of changes to improve the accountability and effectiveness of democracy. It is prepared to work with all organisations, like the pro-EU network or national and grassroots groups in pursuance of those aims.

Plans are afoot for a new citizen's assembly for Scotland to sit alongside the Parliament as a forum for people who are not party politicians to have a say in the national debate. There is a need for discussion, debate and promotion of other mechanisms of increasing the accountability of our politicians.

Make Votes Matter (MVM) is entirely focused, laser-like, upon promoting a fairer form of voting for UK elections. It was created in response to the unequal outcomes of recent UK General Elections. The three strands of their work are as follows:

- (1) Creating a grassroots movement for local action.
- (2) Developing an alliance of politicians, activists, organisations to support fair voting.
- (3) Supporting the Labour Party to adopt a policy and manifesto commitment to fair voting.

MVM would like to have as many local MVM groups established across the country as possible. They would like MPs lobbied, written to and street stalls organised and leafleting undertaken. MVM avoids discussing the technicalities of different systems of PR, as most people are not interested in them and could even be put off.

Labour for a New Democracy has a clear focus to enable voting reform for general elections to be adopted as party policy and included in the 2024 manifesto. It works with a range of other groups under a broad umbrella to achieve this aim. Most of the other groups are within the Labour Party, but some are cross-party, like MVM. The approach has been to encourage all local Labour Party groups or constituency parties to adopt a motion in favour of Proportional Representation to be debated and adopted by the party at the 2021 annual conference. Over 200 local parties have already adopted such motions.

From the perspective of internal Labour Party dynamics, it will be quite important that the drive to change the party's approach and adopt a policy in favour of Proportional Representation is wholly internal and not perceived to be driven from the outside by pro-European elements or other political parties. This could be counter-productive.

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