

Compass Coffee Morning

January 14 2023

GETTING PR DONE!

Battling the wind and rain to get there, Compass supporters packed tight into the Cornerstone's loft room to hear two of our guest speakers - Jess Garland from the Electoral Reform Society (ERS) and Lena Swedlow from Compass Head Office - and then to discuss the issues raised by our speakers. *We concluded that proportional representation delivers grown up politics and is urgently needed to tackle the long-term and complex problems that affect the United Kingdom.* This is the message we must get across to doubters and to those progressives who are still resisting electoral reform.

Jess gave us some ideas about explaining PR as the *key to unlocking solutions to the big problems our country faces* such as climate policy that consistency, not the constant stops, starts and U-turns, a consequence of majoritarian governments that may represent a minority of voters. *A challenge is the timing to introduce PR:* some people are likely to say that we should not waste parliamentary time on constitutional matters and instead focus on solving other problems. In fact, getting a better electoral system is key to unlocking solutions to the big issues from which our country suffers. Opinion polling shows people think politics is broken- Labour have started to talk about this which is an important shift. The British Social Attitude survey shows attitudes are shifting in favour of PR because it leads to coalition or cooperation. They are now getting used to the idea that one party doesn't have a monopoly on ideas and that PR allows multiple voices to be heard. *There is nothing alien or foreign about Proportional Representation:* for example we already have PR in the Welsh and London assembly, as well as in the Scottish Parliament and [in answer to questions] there is evidence of good cross-party cooperation, particularly in Wales and PR makes politics nicer: look at Germany and how a coalition consensus systems do lead to better policy. And as to a point raised made that PR lets extremists into Parliament, this can be controlled with a threshold system relating to the proportion of votes received. And even in majoritarian systems, there are instances of a government being led by the extremist wing of the majority party.

There are different advantages/disadvantages to the two systems currently used in the UK - (i) Additional Member System and (ii) Single Transferable. Both have a constituency link which is important for many voters and their MPs. Later in the morning Jess was asked to provide more

details about these two systems and coincidentally (or otherwise) the ERS posted [a neat summary](#) of everything we need to know about the technicalities of PR.

Lena explained how previous work by Compass was on the progressive alliance and building support for democratic reform. For long term climate action and social reforms, we need a different type of politics altogether. To get PR done requires (1) to get rid of the Tories because they don't support PR and never have and 2) a Labour-led government to implement PR. There is significant support within Labour for PR- many CLPs had voted for motions in support of PR, and Win as One polling has shown that there is upwards of 70% of Labour voters support it. Unfortunately, First Past The Post (FPTP) guarantees Labour second place and so we need to get MPs and candidates to explicitly support the policy and for groups like Labour 4 New Democracy to continue working inside the party.

Some opinion polls are suggesting that Labour might have 400+ MPs but there are 6 main reasons why this might not so likely be the outcome:

- *Odds against progressives*- Labour need the biggest swing ever, even bigger than in 1997 to get a majority. However, a uniform swing of less than 4% would achieve the same effect.
- *Constituency boundary changes* suggest there will be an extra 12 seats for Conservatives, which makes it harder to advance
- *Voter ID* will likely suppress progressive turnout
- *Many don't know in polls*- "the wavering wall" who tend to vote Tory when pushed
- *Sunak is still polling above Starmer* in 'best PM' polls
- *Polls narrow* as elections come closer

Also, the Tory election machine has yet to kick into action! They are one of the most effective election forces in history and the current predictions are likely to be significantly over-estimating the change of Labour majority.

Referring to Compass' [Win as One](#) campaign Lena said that once we've won the argument that FPTP is a problem it is easier to persuade people to vote for change. She urged us to not to canvass for a parliamentary candidate where we live if they don't back PR but work in a neighbouring constituency for a candidate who does. There is local opportunity for cross party working in places like Lewes and Win as One is about building relations with activists from other parties so that we can work for better collaboration in the long term. [In answer to a question] Labour should put PR in its manifesto and avoid a referendum. There is no constitutional requirement to have one.

Feedback from group discussion

It would be helpful to have more information to use with voters on the *link between PR and important policy areas* that matter to them like the health service and housing. In response Jess stated that solutions to big policy areas like this takes time and for solutions to work you need consistency. PR will mean that longer term changes can happen because of more stable governance. Lena thought it would be a good idea to demonstrate how PR reform affects individual policies such as immigration, housing etc. and will talk to the others in the Win As One team to see what can be done.

Devolution is an important part of the conversation alongside electoral reform. Andy Burnham, for example, has done good work with housing in the Greater Manchester area. Lena responded that the recent proposals about devolution by Gordon Brown doesn't explicitly mention PR but does acknowledge the need to shake up the Westminster system. PR is the start of reform alongside devolution.

The vitriol between parties and the tribalism that exists locally is a big barrier to making progress, however, there are positive examples like the rainbow coalition in Lewes which has held together for nearly 4 years now. It would be good to hear from representatives there to understand how they have made it work [Note B&H Compass hosted a Zoom meeting on this point during the pandemic in ?] Could a hung parliament actually be the best option if Labour then has to form a coalition and work with Lib Dems?

An important argument for PR is that it implements policies that have broad support amongst the population rather than policies which may be only supported by the minority of the population who voted for the party that won most constituencies on a FPTP system.

Those of us in the Labour Party must target the national executive committee if we want to get PR done.
