

**LABOUR
FOR A NEW
DEMOCRACY**

Everything but the Commons

**Why Proportional Representation is essential if
constitutional reform is to address Britain's crises of
democracy, inequality and the union**

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“Until very recently, the US looked like the West’s most divided and dysfunctional democracy. Now, those on the other side of the Atlantic would be excused for pointing the finger in our direction. It is too early to say whether Britain will break up, but we can say already that it is breaking down.”

Gordon Brown¹

Introduction

Keir Starmer's announcement of a Constitutional Commission in December 2020 was welcome news to those who believe the UK's current democratic system is not fit for the 21st century. The changes he hinted at, as well as those trailed since then, range from a fresh wave of devolution to an elected Senate of regions and nations. We know from our discussions with thousands of Labour Party members and trade unionists across the country that these are of significant interest.

However, our discussions have also highlighted growing concern that if Labour is to tackle the UK's crisis of democracy, it must place reform of the electoral system at the heart of its agenda.

The Labour Party remains the only socialist or social democratic party in the developed world to support the continued use of First Past the Post (FPTP) for general elections. The *Labour for a New Democracy* coalition brings together Labour Party members, trade unionists, campaigners, and elected representatives from across the Labour movement who believe that this distinguishing feature of Britain's constitutional setup is a serious impediment to achieving Labour's objectives with regards to our democracy, our society and the future of the union.

At the time of writing, no information about the remit, scope or methodology of the

Constitutional Commission – also referred to as the ‘Brown Commission’ – has been officially published. However, the Labour Leader’s remarks during and since its initial announcement in December 2020 indicate three clear objectives: to renew British **democracy**, address economic **inequality** and strengthen and defend **the union**.

This report sets out why Proportional Representation (PR) for the House of Commons is essential in order to deliver the objectives of Labour’s Constitutional Commission – of a more democratic, equal and united UK.

Why PR is key to a more democratic, equal & united UK

Labour's Constitutional Commission ('the Brown Commission') has three broad objectives: to renew British **democracy**, address economic **inequality** and strengthen and defend **the union**.

In terms of the impact of electoral systems, there is no contest. The global evidence shows that comparable countries with proportional electoral systems consistently outperform those with winner-takes-all systems (including FPTP) both in terms of public satisfaction with democracy and economic equality. Introducing a form of PR would improve British democracy in the eyes of its most important stakeholders – the voters – and would remove major barriers to a more economically equal society.

Other constitutional changes can make a contribution but they will not achieve the objectives of reform if FPTP is retained for general elections. Whilst devolution has increased satisfaction with Scottish and Welsh democracy, both nations are now *less* satisfied with UK-wide democracy

than regions with no devolution. Comparable countries to the UK with very advanced levels of devolution sometimes enjoy significantly higher satisfaction with democracy and economic equality, but *only* in cases where they also use PR for general elections. Those which combine maximal devolution with majoritarian electoral systems perform little better than the UK on both counts.

Nor is there evidence that replacing the Lords with an elected Senate, in the absence of a proportionally elected Commons, would achieve the Brown Commission's democracy and equality objectives. Public dissatisfaction with the Lords is only a little higher than that with the Commons. Australia - the comparable nation combining a proportional upper house with a winner-takes-all lower house - performs similarly poorly to the UK on both satisfaction with democracy and economic equality.

If Labour is to renew British **democracy** and address economic **inequality** it must introduce a form of PR. But the third objective - to strengthen and defend **the union** - makes an urgent existential case for electoral reform. As the First Minister of Wales has warned, the continuation of FPTP threatens to prise the UK apart. It acts as a centrifugal force in British politics, pitting the politically diverse nations against unrepresentative and overbearing Westminster governments. Reforms that retain a House of Commons elected by FPTP but strengthen other parts of the system will escalate, rather than resolve, conflicts between genuinely representative bodies and a fundamentally unrepresentative primary chamber and executive.

“The Commission will make the positive case for the UK and it will champion devolution, but beyond that it will rule nothing out and I will look at the conclusions without preconceptions. It will have one overriding priority: to push power closer to people. And to deliver a more democratic and socially just United Kingdom.”

Keir Starmer²

In December 2020, Keir Starmer announced that the Labour Party would launch a Constitutional Commission in early 2021, describing it as *“the boldest project Labour has embarked on for a generation”*. Also known as ‘the Brown Commission’, after its chair the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, its composition has not been made public, nor – at the time of writing – have its remit, scope, approach or deliberations. Nonetheless, the Labour Leader’s remarks during and since the announcement of the Commission indicate several clear objectives.

These are, firstly, to renew and improve British **democracy**: *“To empower. To democratise”*. *“It’ll consider”, he said, “everything from how people can have more of a say in what happens in their community, to how we can break down barriers to democracy and participation”*.

Secondly, to address economic and social **inequality**. When announcing the Constitutional Commission, Starmer was clear that, *“For Labour, devolution has never been about power itself, but a means to build a fairer, more socially just society. Under my leadership, that will be our focus again.”* More recently, during his July 2022 speech on economic growth, he linked the Commission’s work to Labour’s levelling-up strategy and response to regional inequality in particular.³

Thirdly, to strengthen and defend **the union**. Constitutional reform has often been presented as a direct response to the threat of Scottish Independence in particular. The work of the Commission is seen as the means *“to make the alternative case for a devolved and socially just Scotland in a modern United Kingdom”*.⁴

“Our research shows a significant and disturbing decline in public trust in politicians and democracy in the UK. More people than ever are convinced that MPs are primarily looking out for themselves, rather than their country.”

Harry Quilter-Pinner, IPPR⁵

Dissatisfaction with UK democracy

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The UK is undergoing a “*significant and disturbing*” decline in satisfaction with democracy.⁶ Dissatisfaction is at its highest rate since the 1970s.⁷ Trust in MPs is low, having fallen 5% since 2014. Two-thirds of the public believe politicians are “*merely out for themselves*”. Britain is far from alone in experiencing this trend but it is notable that the developed countries worst affected by rising dissatisfaction with democracy are those with majoritarian electoral systems like FPTP.

Cambridge University’s *Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report* found that public satisfaction has plummeted in all of the ‘anglo-saxon’ democracies which use such winner-takes-all voting systems while satisfaction has risen in New Zealand, the only anglo-saxon democracy to use PR.⁸

Indeed, while the general international trend is rising dissatisfaction with democracy, the Cambridge report notes that a number of countries had experienced the opposite - with satisfaction rising sharply, in some cases to record highs. Notably, every one of the countries with both high and rising public satisfaction with democracy (dubbed “*islands of contentment*” in the report) uses a form of PR.

To account for this, the report cites the extensive body of academic literature which finds that, as a general rule, “*satisfaction with*

democracy is lower in majoritarian 'winner-takes-all' systems than in proportionally representative democracies." Voters in countries with PR are not only more likely to believe that their elections are fair and to report greater satisfaction with the system overall but are also more likely to describe politicians as being responsive to their concerns.⁹

The report also notes that dissatisfaction rises as economic inequality increases and that this impact is particularly strong when combined with an intrinsic feature of FPTP – namely when geographical areas feel their needs *"have been ignored by political parties due to the prevalence of either gerrymandered or 'safe' seats"*.

In launching the Constitutional Commission, Keir Starmer has noted the unhappiness British people feel with the remote and exclusionary nature of our democracy. There are no international examples of comparable countries with majoritarian electoral systems successfully addressing this kind of dissatisfaction. The evidence therefore suggests that a proportional electoral system is necessary, albeit of course not sufficient, in order for the UK to address its own democratic malaise.

There is also a clear underlying logic to the idea that FPTP contributes to the dissatisfaction and lack of agency people feel they have in our democracy. Under FPTP, the vast majority of voters can reasonably expect their votes to have no material impact on the outcome of an election in their parliamentary constituency.

“During the election I had to stand on doorstep saying to people ‘your vote here in Putney matters more than most in the country’ because it was such a marginal seat – and that didn’t seem very fair... The fact that not everyone’s vote is equal really feels dishonest to me.”

Fleur Anderson¹⁰

PR for general elections would greatly increase the say people have in the decisions that affect their lives – locally, regionally and nationally. As the Labour Leader has stated, millions of people currently do not feel they have a voice that counts.¹¹ As FPTP is based on each voter having only one MP to represent them at a parliamentary level on local, regional and national issues, the lack of voice produced by the system cuts across their entire experience of representation at Westminster.

Under any electoral system, all votes can be said to ‘count’ in a moral or emotional sense: a feeling of self-expression, the discharging of a duty or the honouring of the sacrifice of past generations. However, under PR, votes also count in another, more fundamental, sense – as voters can also reasonably expect their vote to have a material impact on the result of the election.

The widespread feeling that, in this sense, many votes simply do not count under FPTP is borne out by the statistics:¹²

- In the 2019 general election, 71% of votes made no difference to the result in the constituency in which they were cast. These votes either went to losing candidates and were therefore disregarded, or went to winning candidates over and above what was needed to win that seat.
- 213 seats (a third of the total) have not changed hands since the Queen's coronation in 1952.¹³ On the eve of the 2019 general election, the average constituency has not changed hands for 42 years.¹⁴ Many voters in these seats have not experienced a change in the affiliation of their MP in their lifetime, regardless of how they vote, or whether they vote at all.
- In 2019, 14.5 million people (45% of voters) voted for candidates who did not win and consequently are represented in Parliament by an MP they did not vote for and, in most cases, who does not broadly share their political views. In nine out of the previous ten general elections the percentage of voters in this situation was even larger. In many general elections, for example 2005, 2010 and 2015, most voters end up represented by an MP they did not vote for.
- One in three voters reported that they planned to vote tactically in 2019, instead of choosing their preferred party or candidate, in an attempt to avoid wasting their votes.

It is sometimes claimed that FPTP allows voters to choose a strong local champion to act as their representative. However, this is not the experience of millions of voters who have no meaningful say in who will represent them and frequently find themselves politically at odds with their sole representative in Parliament.

The systems of PR in use in the UK – including in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – all provide for local as well as national representation. This is either accomplished by combining single member constituencies with a regional top-up, as for the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Senedd and London Assembly, or using small multi-member constituencies, as for the Northern Ireland Assembly as well as the newly proposed system for the Senedd.¹⁵

In each case, the proportional systems demonstrably provide more voters with more of a say over who will be their political representative. In the proportionally elected Scottish Parliament, 93% of voters are directly represented by at least one MSP who they voted for at the last election. This compares to just 46% of Scottish voters with an MP they voted for in the last general election. Following the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly election, 71% of voters have at least one MLA for whom they gave a first preference vote – with significantly more voters represented by at least one MLA to whom they gave a lower preference vote. Meanwhile just 45% of NI voters have an MP who they voted for. A similar pattern applies to Wales. England is the only one of the four nations in which a majority (56%) now have an MP who they voted for.

Percentage of voters represented by a member who they voted for

Election	System	Percentage
UK Parliament (2019)	FPTP	55%
Scottish voters (2019)	FPTP	46%
Welsh voters (2019)	FPTP	46%
Northern Irish voters (2019)	FPTP	45%
London voters (2019)	FPTP	57%
Scottish Parliament (2021)	PR (AMS)	93%
Welsh Senedd (2021)	PR (AMS)	81%*
NI Assembly (2022)	PR (STV)	71%**
London Assembly (2021)	PR (AMS)	88%

* **Approximate.**

** **First preference votes only.**

The systems of PR in use in the UK give voters a measurably stronger say than FPTP over who represents their interests and takes decisions that affect their lives. This not only helps increase satisfaction with democracy and break down barriers to participation it also helps combat the alienation and apathy which makes fertile terrain for the far right. Studies consistently find that elections under proportional systems have a 5-8% higher turnout, relative to the same election held under FPTP.¹⁶

“The Westminster system has created England’s North-South divide. Over centuries, it has denied us both the investment and the power to act for ourselves. And if the status quo has created the problem, it can’t, by definition, supply the solution.”

Andy Burnham¹⁷

Wealth and prosperity

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The Labour Party is not only interested in the redistribution of power but also how wealth, prosperity and economic opportunity can be brought closer to the people and shared out more equally. The UK currently suffers from acute levels of inequality, both between regions and between individuals. We have the worst regional inequality of any comparable developed country¹⁸ and the second worst income inequality in Europe.¹⁹

Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham has recently advanced the argument that, “Westminster in its current shape has created the north south divide,” and that, “it is currently hard-wired to create regional inequality”.²⁰ A key part of the solution he proposes includes a proportionally elected House of Commons that is better able to represent voters on a regional basis.²¹

It is no coincidence that, as the only democracy in Europe to use FPTP, the UK has developed the highest levels of regional inequality. Successive governments have failed to make anywhere near sufficient progress in addressing the north south divide, despite repeated promises to do so. By contrast, it is notable that Germany has achieved so-called ‘leveling up’ on a vast scale over the same period under PR. From 1990 to 2014, German governments succeeded in radically narrowing the gap between poorer eastern and richer

western federal states by investing an average of £71 billion per year.²² As well as benefiting from a strong, devolved federal system, Germany's proportional electoral system has consistently incentivised effective redistributive action from successive governments, whilst the UK's FPTP has manifestly failed to do so. Under PR, votes, people and communities matter to election outcomes whatever their location - and politicians are therefore not able to neglect them for years or decades at a time.

While the impact of different electoral systems on regional inequality would benefit from further detailed study, there is already an abundance of academic evidence about their impacts on other forms of economic equality. Countries with PR tend to have significantly lower levels of income inequality than those with majoritarian systems²³ and lower levels of poverty.²⁴ They tend to spend 2-3% of GDP more on social security and welfare compared to majoritarian systems.²⁵ Trade unions in countries with PR are more influential, subject to more favourable trade union laws, have larger shares of workers with union membership, and conduct collective bargaining through more centralised and advantageous processes.²⁶

Academics ascribe these relationships to two broad causes. Firstly, PR establishes incentives, power dynamics and cultures that are significantly more likely to lead to redistributive policies. This includes necessitating an equal focus on voters across the whole country rather than an imperative for *"narrowly targeted programmes bene-*

fitting small geographic constituencies". The government's allocation of the Towns Fund is a particularly stark example of these perverse incentives in action. Analysis of this found that *"there is robust evidence that ministers chose towns so as to benefit the Conservatives in marginal Westminster seats"*.²⁷ PR also provides for more diverse parliaments which fairly represent otherwise marginalised communities and interest groups²⁸ and a *"collective veto point"* which helps reduce partisanship and improve responsiveness and long-term decision-making.²⁹

Secondly, majoritarian electoral systems such as FPTP lead to worse economic inequality than proportional systems because they exhibit a right-wing bias, leading to significantly higher frequency of right-wing governments. Because PR has no bias in either direction, proportional democracies have left-wing governments significantly more of the time. Furthermore, in majoritarian democracies, both parliaments and cabinets are on average more right wing than the voters who elect them, while proportional parliaments and governments fairly reflect the political leanings of their electorates. This matches the UK's experience, where most votes went to parties to the left of the Conservatives in 19 of the last 20 general elections, despite which they have been in power for two-thirds of that time.

For a fully referenced discussion of the right-wing bias of FPTP and its causes, see the recent article in the *New Statesman* by Labour for a New Democracy's Joe Sousek and Laura Parker.³⁰

The evidence suggests that FPTP is itself a barrier to combatting income inequality, poverty, underfunded public services, restrictions on trade unions and the erosion of social equality over time that all of these things entail. The link between FPTP and 'leveling up' merits further study - but a compelling case has been made by one of Labour's most senior public office holders that FPTP has a similar effect on regional inequality.

“If you want to restore trust in politics, you can’t just do it by moving power much closer to people – you’ve got to do it by cleaning up the centre. That’s a phrase Gordon uses quite a lot.”

Unnamed shadow minister quoted in the New Statesman³¹

Devolution was a major achievement of the last Labour government. Whether it takes the form of additional powers and resources for cities, towns and regions or introducing a fully federal structure to the UK, the extension of devolution undoubtedly has an important role to play in achieving Labour's current ambitions. However, there are strong grounds to believe that further devolution in the absence of electoral reform will fail to either renew British democracy or effectively combat economic inequality.

I. Devolution has not increased satisfaction with Westminster

Whilst the devolution implemented by the last Labour government has led to Scotland and Wales having higher satisfaction with their own internal democracy, this has nowhere improved satisfaction with UK democracy as a whole. According to data from the British Election Study, both Scottish and Welsh voters are more satisfied with Scottish and Welsh democracy than they are with UK democracy. In Scotland, 53% were dissatisfied with UK democracy compared with 42% with Scottish democracy. In Wales, 43% were dissatisfied with UK democracy compared with 36% with Welsh democracy. In England - where there is no devolved national assembly or executive - 41% were dissatisfied with both UK democracy and 'English' democracy.³²

So not only are the places with devolution more satisfied with their internal democracy than they are with UK democracy, but they are also less satisfied with UK democracy than places with no devolution. It stands to reason that the stark contrast between properly functioning devolved government and a clearly broken Westminster actually undermines satisfaction with the UK's national democracy.

It is reasonable to assume that further devolution is capable of giving people greater confidence in those decisions which are made closer to them by devolved bodies. But the evidence does *not* suggest that devolving further power will address the problem of UK democracy not working as people would want. Devolution alone is not enough to redress dissatisfaction with Westminster.

II. Highly devolved democracies with FPTP also have falling satisfaction

Secondly, where devolution without PR has been employed elsewhere, it has not led to improved satisfaction with national democratic systems. In the following discussion, we adopt Arend Lijphart's definition of federal systems (see footnote 16).

Australia, Canada and the United States are all comparable countries with federal systems, in which more power is devolved to state governments, and on a more uniform basis, than is currently the case in the UK. All three countries continue to elect their federal legislatures using majoritarian electoral systems (FPTP in the US and Canada; AV for

Australia's lower house). They therefore offer some indication of what the results may be if the UK implemented further devolution whilst retaining FPTP for general elections.

It is notable that all three have experienced the same collapse of satisfaction with democracy as the UK, as documented in the *Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report*:

“While the proportion of Americans who are dissatisfied with democracy has increased by over one-third of the population (+34 percentage points) since the mid-1990s, this amount has also risen by one-fifth of the population in Australia (+19 percentage points) and Britain (+18 percentage points), and by almost a tenth of Canadians.”

On the other hand, there are several comparable countries which use full federal systems but also elect their federal legislatures using PR: Austria, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland. Of these, Austria and Switzerland are both in the group of countries rated as having record levels of satisfaction with democracy, with the latter topping the world index. Satisfaction with democracy in both Belgium and Germany is not far behind, and on an upward trajectory.

III. Highly devolved majoritarian democracies are still unequal societies

Furthermore, and in keeping with the impact of majoritarian electoral systems on inequality (as set out in section 3), none of the group of majoritarian democracies with full federal systems are strong performers in terms of economic equality.

Canada is judged to have mediocre income equality, an area in which the UK, US and Australia are notably poor performers.³³ All four countries are in the bottom half of OECD nations in terms of the poverty rate.³⁴ Similarly, they are all rated poorly on the International Trade Union Confederation's Global Rights Index, with Canada (along with the UK) categorised as *"regular violators of workers' rights"*, and Australia and the US classed as a *"systematic violator of workers' rights"*.³⁵

In contrast, the group of countries which combine full federal systems with PR perform markedly better across the board in terms of income equality, the poverty gap and workers' rights. In fact, all four of the countries with federalism and PR outperforms all three of the countries with federalism and majoritarian systems in terms of income equality and poverty rate.³⁶ All of the former countries have better workers' rights than all of the latter group, with the exception of Canada and Belgium which are tied in the middle of this range.

In countries comparable to the UK which retain FPTP, federal structures and devolved power have neither prevented falling satisfaction with democracy nor persistent economic inequality. They are consistently outperformed by countries with both PR and federal structures. This strongly suggests that further devolution in the UK stands a far better chance of achieving its intended outcomes if it is implemented alongside the introduction of a proportional voting system for general elections.

IV. 'Economic devolution' in practice has not mitigated regional inequality

As part of his recent focus on the cost of living crisis, Keir Starmer has advocated “new forms of *economic devolution*”, as distinct from political devolution, to help drive growth. He explains this as follows:

“I have asked Gordon Brown to look at new forms of economic devolution. To make sure the decisions about things that drive regional growth – like skills; infrastructure; attracting investment – are all made by people with skin in the game. Labour will not attempt to run our levelling-up strategy from the centre.. But we must also recognise that every place needs the power to grow its own economy. So our reforms will allow devolved and local government to make long-term financial decisions.”³⁷

It's clear that the devolution of economic powers and responsibilities is being presented as a means of empowering local or regional authorities to drive their own growth and thereby address regional inequality. What is less clear is the scope and nature of the proposed new powers.

However, while this undoubtedly has an important part to play, it is striking that very substantial economic devolution in practice has not led to a reduction in regional inequality. Parts of South Wales and Northern Ireland remain among the poorest performing in terms of earnings, wealth, health, educational attainment and social mobility.³⁸ Both have had devolved govern-

ments with sizable budgets and extensive powers since the turn of the century. While this has increased satisfaction with democracy in those regions, it has demonstrably not improved regional inequality.

In these areas, more than two decades of the devolved spending decisions by *“people with skin in the game”* has produced no better result than the most left-behind of English regions, most of which lack any enhanced economic devolution.³⁹ There is therefore no more reason to expect the extension of devolution, in and of itself, to reduce economic inequality any more than it will improve satisfaction with the UK’s national democracy.

“An unelected House of Lords has no democratic legitimacy and therefore requires radical reform. But electoral reform of the Commons has to come first if we are to strengthen democratic accountability, improve what has been woefully poor governance in recent years and build public trust in parliament through the introduction of a fairer, less tribal, system in which everyone’s vote counts.”

Baroness Ruth Lister

Lords reform and PR

An unelected upper house has no place in a 21st century democracy and there is very low public support for the House of Lords to continue in its current form.⁴⁰ One alternative which has previously been endorsed by Gordon Brown is an elected senate of regions and nations.⁴¹ Such a change would improve the democratic legitimacy of the revising chamber but on its own would be unlikely to decisively improve voters perceptions of British democracy, help create a well-functioning and sustainable political system or help address economic inequality.

As detailed in section 1, trust in MPs is low. Replacing the Lords with an upper chamber elected on a proportional basis might well improve the standing of that house - but lack of public confidence is as much a problem for the Commons in its current form as it is for the Lords. Almost as many people have little or no confidence in elected MPs (55%) as they do in unelected peers (63%).⁴²

Indeed, if politicians were to propose an extensive package of democratic reforms which left out the Commons, it may actually contribute to deepening negative public perceptions of MPs by appearing to suggest that change is needed to all parts of the political system other than their own. As Dawn Butler put it, for politicians *“to exclude electoral reform from a national conversation*

about our democracy would look strange and, frankly, a bit suspect".⁴³

Replacing the Lords with a proportionally elected Senate, whilst retaining FPTP for the Commons, could result in a situation where the upper house carries greater confidence than the lower house – just as Scotland and Wales' proportionally elected parliaments are the object of greater satisfaction than the Westminster Parliament. This could even result in a crisis of legitimacy arising from the conflicting mandates of the primary and revising chambers; with the second chamber unquestionably being a more accurate reflection of the British electorate than the first.

Australia provides an example of a democracy with a majoritarian lower house combined with a proportional upper house. As detailed earlier, it has seen falling satisfaction with democracy and is not achieving the kind of redistributive goals that Labour wants for the UK.

There is little reason to expect the combination of a majoritarian House of Commons with an elected Senate would result in significantly different outcomes in the UK.

"I have every sort of democratic quarrel with [the First Past the Post] system, but for today I feel certain that its continuation will only feed further the fissures which threaten to prise the United Kingdom apart."

Mark Drakeford⁴⁴

The state of the union

7

Different parties won the 2019 general election in each of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. These national divides are further exacerbated by a Westminster government which has greater power but less legitimacy, having won a majority of seats despite receiving a minority of the popular vote both in the UK and England, a third of the vote in Wales, and a quarter of the vote in Scotland.

PR for general elections must be part of any sustainable constitutional settlement for the UK given the threat to the United Kingdom itself posed by the inequitable representation FPTP affords to voters in different parts of the UK – and above all by the hostility of unrepresentative Conservative governments at Westminster to the constituent nations of the UK, their representatives and their executives.

In his Aneurin Bevan Memorial Lecture, the Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford explained the Conservatives' mindset. His analysis is that they see devolution as having undermined the UK, placed too much power in the hands of political opponents and that *"it is time to demonstrate who is boss"*.

The First Minister noted that the resulting *"dominant strain... in the first majority Conservative Government since devolution has been,*

for nearly two years, determined and aggressive unilateralism.” The danger to the union is that such action, “carried out by Conservative Governments entirely care-less about the consequences,” is that it risks fuelling separatist sentiments – whether in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland – “which threaten to prise the UK apart”.

To date, devolution has not brought about a durable constitutional settlement in the UK. On the contrary, Labour’s 2020 National Policy Forum consultation on *Devolution and the Constitution after coronavirus* pointed out that:

“...the Conservative Government has repeatedly undermined this settlement, adopting an antagonistic approach towards the Scottish and Welsh Administrations, playing fast and loose in its role as an honest broker in Northern Ireland, and treating the Devolved Administrations as an afterthought throughout the first phase of Brexit negotiations.”

*“It is clear”, the NPF document concludes, “that the constitutional status quo in the UK is unsustainable”.*⁴⁵

The fundamental fragility of the present devolution settlement is not a result solely of insufficiently extensive devolution. The relationship with Scotland, where devolution is at an advanced stage, is arguably the most strained. The extension of devolution in Scotland in 2012 and 2016 has not prevented the breakdown of the relationship between Westminster and Holyrood under majority Conservative UK government. The growing tensions within

the union are in large part fed by hostile relationships between representative devolved assemblies which fairly and proportionally reflect their voters and the unrepresentative government at Westminster.

The First Minister's argument is particularly concerning because it implies that the independent exercise of political power by Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish politicians - in other words, successful devolution in action - itself provokes conflict with Conservative governments at Westminster. For as long as FPTP is retained for general elections, the UK should expect to have Conservative majority governments most of the time in the future, as in the past, in line with the experience of other developed countries with majoritarian electoral systems. Therefore, even once the next Labour government has extended devolution, it is only a matter of time before there is a still greater conflict. Rising tensions appear inevitable between strengthened devolved parliaments and executives, and a Conservative majority government which regards them as, in Drakeford's words, "*the ungrateful and ever-demanding subsidy junkies of the Celtic fringe*". A similar story has emerged with regards to mayoralities in the north of England, with the Conservative government pitting itself against the leaders of English cities.

Drakeford concludes that, "*The next Labour Government must entrench devolution, putting the settlement beyond the unilateral ability of a hostile Conservative Party to reverse the arrangements endorsed in two Welsh referendums.*"

It is far from clear how such security could ever be guaranteed if FPTP remains in place. Acts such as the unlawful proroguing of Parliament have both demonstrated how easily convention and ‘fair play’ can be disregarded, and revealed how few real checks and balances there are on the government’s exercise of power. The recently passed Elections Act shows how Conservative governments are willing to unilaterally rewrite the rules and conventions of British democracy – from imposing political oversight of the Electoral Commission and disenfranchising sections of the electorate through voter ID, to upending the devolution settlement in London by imposing FPTP for mayoral elections.

There is no way of preventing a return to the unsustainable status quo, of an unrepresentative Westminster government in conflict with more representative devolved parliaments, assemblies or executives, without replacing FPTP for general elections with a form of PR.

A 2019 Constitution Society report⁴⁶ summed up this argument: “FPTP does not exercise a centripetal force in British politics, drawing the country together into a stable two-party system, but a centrifugal one, exaggerating regional differences and straining the bonds between the constituent nations of the United Kingdom.” Introducing a proportional system is the obvious solution. Doing so would reduce the exaggerated impression of political differences between the constituent nations, would force Westminster governments to secure the support of a majority of the British electorate, and would therefore require governments to have a level of support across the different nations of the UK.

“It’s all very well for us MPs to call for a radical shake-up of British politics, but this may ring hollow if what we actually mean is a shake up of everything except the way we’re elected and held to account. The House of Commons sits right at the centre of the UK’s power structures. To exclude electoral reform from a national conversation about our democracy would look strange and, frankly, a bit suspect.”

Dawn Butler⁴⁷

Conclusion

Keir Starmer has set out ambitious aims for constitutional reform: to renew British democracy, address economic and regional inequality, and strengthen the union. Radical devolution, federalism, or a new Senate of regions and nations are often proposed as the means to deliver these. While these changes would bring benefits in their own right, any objective assessment of the evidence shows that electoral reform is a significantly more important change in terms of achieving all three goals.

Proportional voting systems are key to satisfaction with democracy around the world, whereas majoritarian systems are proving deeply destructive to faith in democratic systems and governance. On the other hand, there is no evidence that further devolution or an elected UK senate in the absence of electoral reform would improve satisfaction with democracy at Westminster.

The close link between proportional democracies, progressive politics and economic equality is well established. To leave FPTP unreformed would be to retain a key driver of inequality and to significantly reduce the frequency of future governments committed to addressing inequality compared to a PR system. International evidence shows that devolution has done nothing to shore up equitable outcomes where it is constrained

by majoritarian democratic institutions at the national level.

The bonds of the union are under tremendous strain and reforms that retain FPTP for general elections but strengthen other parts of the system will only escalate, rather than resolve, conflicts between genuinely representative bodies and a fundamentally unrepresentative House of Commons.

The evidence of what has, and has not, worked in the UK and elsewhere is clear: PR must be central to Labour's constitutional reform programme. If Labour is to bring about a more democratic, more equal, more united UK, then reform cannot be limited to 'everything but the Commons'.

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