

# Referendum on the Voting Method in the UK

## 5<sup>th</sup> May 2011

from **Corinne Deloy**

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### ANALYSIS

1 month before  
the referendum

*"At present, the UK uses the 'first past the post' system to elect MPs to the House of Commons. Should the 'alternative vote' system be used instead?"* This is the question 46 million British voters are being called to answer in a referendum that will take place on 5<sup>th</sup> May next. The date chosen for this popular consultation has been criticised by several parties and political leaders. Indeed regional elections will be taking place on the same day in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales; there will also be a local by-election (in some areas of the country). The voters being called to ballot for the local and/or regional elections may be over represented in comparison with the rest of the electorate (for example in comparison with those living in London who are not involved in any other election on 5<sup>th</sup> May). Scottish, Welsh and even Irish political leaders also regret that the referendum is being organised on the same day as the regional elections, which in their opinion, may confuse the electorate. 40 conservative MPs asked, in vain, that the popular consultation be organised on another date.

The House of Lords, the upper chamber of the British parliament wanted to establish an obligatory minimum threshold (at least 40% of those registered) for the referendum to be deemed valid. This proposal was not retained. Finally a petition by the People Pledge group asking for the organisation of a vote on the upkeep (or withdrawal) of the UK in the EU on 5<sup>th</sup> May was also circulated around the country. British Prime Minister David Cameron (Conservative Party) has not said however that he is totally against this project.

The referendum on the voting method will be the second organised in the UK. This first took place on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1975 and involved maintaining the country in the European Economic Community. More than 2/3 of voters (62.7%) approved maintaining their country in the EEC, 32.8% voted against.

The British must register on the electoral rolls before 14<sup>th</sup> April if they want to vote on 5<sup>th</sup> May with regard to the voting method.

### First past the post vs. alternative vote

The first past the post method is simple: the candidate who wins the greatest number of votes (whether this is

80% or 30% of the vote) in a constituency is elected.

The alternative voting system offers voters a chance to rank the candidates running by order of preference within a single member constituency. This selection is not obligatory however and the voter can choose to vote for one candidate only.

Counting then takes place as follows: the voting slips are sorted according to the first choices. The candidate rallying an absolute majority of first choices is declared elected. If no candidate succeeds in rallying 50% plus one first choice votes the one who has won the lowest number of first choices is eliminated from the race and the votes which went to that candidate are then divided between the other candidates according to the number of second choices won by each of them. The operation continues like this until one candidate wins an absolute majority of the vote and is declared elected as a result.

The alternative vote has been employed in Australia since 1919, and is used in the Fiji Islands and in Papua New Guinea. It aims to be representative of voter diversity and to enable people who vote for "small" parties to compete in the appointment of a candidate. The first past the post system benefits the "big" par-

ties more, i.e. in the UK this means the Labour and Conservative Parties. Hence in the last British general elections on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2010 more than 2/3 of MPs were elected without an absolute majority. During the general election of 1951, Labour, which won a majority of votes (48.8%) finally, had fewer MPs (295) than the Tories who won 302 seats with 44.3% of the vote.

Since there is no perfect voting method the alternative method may lead to distortions between the number of votes won and the seats taken. Hence in the last Australian general elections on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2007 the Greens won 7.79% of the vote without taking a single seat whilst the National Party which won 5.49% took 10 seats.

According to some political analysts the alternative voting system would have enabled the Liberal Democrats (Lib-Dems) to win 79 seats (instead of 57 at present) in the general elections on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2010. The Conservatives would have taken 281 seats (307 in reality) and Labour (262) (258). The Lib-Dems would then have had the choice between an alliance with either Labour or the Conservatives – either alliance would have led to an absolute majority. According to other calculations undertaken by researchers in Colchester, the Lib-Dems would have won 89 seats, the Conservatives 284 and Labour 248. However it should be noted that the alternative voting method used instead of the first past the post system can lead to a modification in how people vote (and/or abstained) which is impossible to judge after the fact.

John Curtice, Professor in Politics at Strathclyde University maintains that in the elections organised over the last three decades the Conservative Party would, with the alternative vote, has won less seats than with the first past the post system. In his opinion the Lib-Dems would not have won enough seats to prevent either of the two “big” British parties from winning an absolute majority. All the calculations show that finally the alternative voting system would make little change to the electoral results. So some people wonder about the need to give up a system which the British are used to (and in some cases attached to) and which has the merit of being understood easily.

Proponents of change promote the fact that the alternative vote is a fairer, more representative system. In their opinion this method of voting would force MPs

to work for all of the residents in their constituency. Indeed they accuse some political leaders of looking after their electorate alone and of believing that their seat is a post they can keep for life.

Opponents to any modification of the voting system say that the first past the post system is simple to understand and enables the production of solid majorities and keeps extremist parties under control. The relative electoral weakness of the latter in the UK and therefore their non-representation in the House of Commons, the lower Chamber in Parliament – is indeed often attributed to the voting method used which is said to protect the country from a phenomenon (the rise of populism) that is affecting all of Europe. Proponents of the upkeep of the first past the post system also say that the latter is used by over 50 countries in the world whilst the alternative vote is used in only three.

On 11<sup>th</sup> March last 25 historians (including Niall Ferguson, Amanda Foreman, Andrew Roberts, Anthony Bevor, David Starkey and Simon Sebag Montefiore) said they were against the alternative vote in a letter published in the daily *The Times*. They believe this system undermines the principle of voter equality which means that every vote has the same weight and the same value. Proponents of the “no” vote in the referendum on 5<sup>th</sup> May quote Winston Churchill (British Prime Minister from 1940-45 and then 1951-55) who during the last attempt to change to the alternative system (in 1931) said that this “*was the stupidest, least scientific and most unreal voting system*”. “*The result is determined by the vainest of votes granted to the vainest of candidates,*” he maintained.

### **The Position of the other Parties**

#### ***The “small” parties all defend the “yes” vote in the referendum, Labour is divided***

The desire to the voting method came from the Lib-Dems and was almost a condition for their alliance with the Conservative Party after the general elections on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2010. Nick Clegg’s party wants to see the UK adopt a proportional voting system. Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg has also qualified the alternative vote as “*a miserable compromise*”. The Lib-Dems however present this voting method as the first stage towards the adoption of a fairer voting system. Hence, Tim

Farron, leader of the Lib-Dem campaign recalls that *"the vote of ¾ of voters is not taken into account with the first past the post system."* This might of course seem exaggerated but it pinpoints a reality worth remembering.

According to Nick Clegg, the present British voting method is outmoded. By enabling the election of an MP with the support of a low number of voters, citizens' confidence in politics is being destroyed. *"Many MPs are elected without the support of most of the electorate they are supposed to represent. This means that millions of votes are not taken in account. This encourages MPs to be lazy and inefficient,"* he declared. The Deputy Prime Minister also insists on the simplicity of the alternative vote. *"It is as simple as 1, 2, 3. All you have to do is to write 1 next to the candidate you want to win, 2 next to your second choice and 3 next to the third etc. And if you only want to vote for one person you can also do that. The system is simple and fair,"* he repeats. *"Some say that this voting method goes against British tradition. This is absurd. The alternative vote is a development, but not a revolution. It is a small change that makes a big difference,"* stresses Nick Clegg.

The Greens support a proportional system but believe the alternative vote to be a step in the right direction. *"I think that with the alternative vote my electorate can vote more for what they believe in,"* declared their leader Caroline Lucas – who is also the first Green MP to be elected to the House of Commons (by incidentally winning 31.3% of the vote on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2010 in the constituency of Brighton Pavilion).

Plaid Cymru (PC), the Welsh Nationalist Party, Labour and the Social Democratic Party (SDLP), the Catholic Party of Northern Ireland and the English Democrats would like to replace first past the post by a single transferable vote but are still calling for people to vote "yes" on 5<sup>th</sup> May next. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the Alliance Party, a Northern Irish inter-confessional party, the Scottish National Party (SNP), Sinn Fein (SF) and the British National Party (BNP) also support a change in the voting system.

Finally the hero of the film *"The King's Speech"* (produced by Tom Hooper), Colin Firth and Helena Bonham Carter, decided to commit in support of the "yes".

Labour is divided over the issue of modifying the elec-

tion method. Its leader Ed Miliband indicated that personally he would vote "yes" on 5th May. However he advised Nick Clegg, who is losing ground in terms of popularity after his U-turn on university fees (the Lib-Dems supported the reform enabling universities to increase enrolment fees to £9,000 per year (10,730 €) in compensation for the progressive disengagement of the State from Higher Education), to *"rest a little"*. *"What do the "no" supporters want? They want Nick Clegg's photo on all the posters calling for the "yes" vote,"* declared the Labour leader.

Ed Miliband joined the "yes" camp on 29th March last alongside Caroline Lucas (1999-2006), and other former Lib-Dems leaders Charles Kennedy and Tim Farron. He said that the alternative vote would enable progressive leftwing and centre-left parties to *"build bridges"*. *"The tragedy of the British progressives is that the division between the left and centre-left has led to an increasingly united right, victory after victory. For over 80 years there has been one Conservative Party but several others trying to attract the progressive vote. It is not surprising that the Tories support the present system,"* indicated Ed Miliband.

Former Labour leader (1983-1992), Neil Kinnock, has also said he supports the "yes" vote. *"The UK must move towards a fairer system which prevents an MP who only wins one third of the vote in his constituency to be elected and which is a better reflection of voters' views. The alternative vote is this system,"* declared the former Vice-President of the European Commission (1999-2004).

However many Labour supporters are against any change to the voting method. Hence Margaret Beckett, former Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and the UK Commonwealth (2006-2007) signed a letter in the daily The Times, defending the first past the post system – it was co-signed by present Foreign Minister William Hague.

### ***The Conservative Party, the only party in support of maintaining the present system***

The Conservative Party, the Lib-Dems government partner, is against the adoption of the alternative vote system. Prime Minister David Cameron believes that it will produce *"unfair results since second choices will be decisive."* *"The alternative vote is a waste of time,*

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money and energy. I do not think that we should replace a system that everyone understands by a system that only some MPs understand," he declared, insisting on the fact that the alternative vote would have enabled Gordon Brown (Prime Minister from 2007-2010) to retain power after the general elections on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2010.

In a speech delivered in Swansea at the beginning of April the Prime Minister qualified the alternative voting as an "unfair, anti-democratic, obscure system." "It is so unfair that the candidates who come second or third may finally win the election. Imagine the Olympic Games. Usain Bolt wins the 100m. Just as the medals are being awarded the runner who came third takes gold. What we do not accept in the Olympic Games we cannot accept in politics either. We must vote "no" to this absurd system," declared David Cameron.

The head of government also said that this voting method may produce a greater number of hung parliaments and would lead to the creation of "second choice governments". Finally he regretted that the British seemed so uninterested in the question set by the referendum, which David Cameron qualifies as being "extremely important for our country".

During the referendum voters often opt to answer those who ask the question i.e. the government in office, than the question itself. However the singularity of the consultation on 5<sup>th</sup> May lies in the fact that the government is divided over the question being asked. According to the referendum theory set out by Peter Kellner

of pollster YouGov in most popular consultations the status quo prevails. If this theory is substantiated the first past the post system – stable and dominated by two political parties - should be maintained.

Just one month before the election the British do not yet seem concerned by the question being asked. The electorate is divided and the number of undecided high. According to the latest poll by YouGov the "yes" vote for the alternative vote is in the lead with 39%. An almost identical share of voters (37%) are however about to vote "no" to any change in the voting system. But 23% of those interviewed say they have not yet decided how they will vote.

Prime Minister David Cameron and his Deputy Nick Clegg have both said that the referendum result will not change anything in terms of government action. "This referendum is not a vote on the government. Whatever the result we shall continue to work for the national interest," declared the head of government. However a "yes" victory would comprise a defeat for the leader of the Conservative Party after his failure to win an absolute majority in parliament in the general elections in May 2010. In the event of a win by the "no" vote the electoral reform would disappear from the electoral agenda for a long time.

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