Outline a case for and against electoral reform in the UK

The debate over electoral reform is nothing new, it has been around for decades and in real terms is a debate as to whether or not we should scrap the current first past the post system for a new one. To most the issue is of minor concern and most of the electorate will be unaware of it significance even though it is them that will decide the outcome of the debate. The political parties, however, consider it to be a priority in particular parties such as the Lib Dems and the Greens who feel that they are being hard done by the current system.

What is important to realise is the legitimacy of the calls for electoral reform. First past the post undoubtedly has unfair elements to it. The fact that a Conservative government can have 18 years of uninterrupted rule without at any stage getting more than 43% of the vote. Or in 1951 and 1974, when one party can come into government when the other actually got more votes demonstrates this. Changing our system has difficulties too; it is a bit of a catch 22 situation though. Why would a government propose a bill which would change the very system that has put them into power? This is currently Tony Blair's concern, in his 2001 manifesto he promised to review the current system and even a referendum to decide an alternative, however once he wins by a landslide the review is no longer a priority. There are of course arguments both for and against reform.

Firstly a proportional system would create a House of Commons that is more proportional to the votes cast which is obviously better for democracy. It is unfair, for example, that in 1992 the Liberal Democrats polled 17.8% of the votes nationally and got just 3.1% of parliamentary seats. However change could result in a non majority government. The first past the post system prides itself on its ability to produce a strong government with a majority which leads to powerful leadership. A coalition government would arguably end this. The argument against first past the post is that it results in the dictatorship of a minority but it is possible that a coalition government may result in the dictatorship of an even smaller minority.

William Hague	Conservative	25,951	58.9%
Fay Tinnion	Labour	9,632	21.9%
Edward Forth	Lib Dem	7,890	17.9%
Boney Maronie Steniforth	Raving Loony	561	1.3%

Secondly, most see the current way that votes can be 'wasted' within a constituency. In the given example of Richmond you can see that the Conservatives won thoroughly, however all the votes for Labour and Lib Dems have been 'wasted' because no matter how they vote they still won't affect the outcome. If a more proportionally representative system was used, these votes may not be so useless and you may get a higher turnout since the electorate may feel that their vote finally counts.

The affect of the wasted votes is probably made *less* obvious by the phenomenon of tactical voting. This refers to the way that people who would have previously voted Lib Dem will vote Labour because they realise that there is no chance of their first choice getting into power but if they vote for a more plausible option (Labour) they may get a more preferable outcome. This itself is another argument in favour of reform since it isn't democratic that people have to vote to keep someone else out rather than put the person they really want in. In a system where the electorate can have more than one vote, or order their preferences there would be no tactical voting.

Another argument used to defend first past the post is that it creates an MP-constituency link that other systems lack. This link is said to help constituents feel the

effects that their MP is having on them. This said, it has been found that most people only carry out two political actions per year (voting) so I doubt the validity of this argument.

Currently in order to claim a government the two major parties will be chosen between within a minority of 'marginal' constituencies where the result is unpredictable. In a system that is proportional or with additional members the importance loaded on these areas will be weakened. The fact that the votes in constituencies are close but result in just one representative asks the question of why we don't have additional members or 'MP top ups.' It has become more common for MPs to be elected with the support of less than 50% of the voters- at present 312MPs of a total of 659 are in this position. Fans of first past the post would say to this that very few systems are exactly proportional (and those that are have coalitions) and that any disadvantages of the current system that are covered up will give way to new disadvantages of a new system.

Fortunately our Tony Blair is aware of this so he hasn't leapt on the bandwagon of electoral reform yet. Soon after he came to power Tony got Lord (ex-Labour and now Lib Dem) Jenkins to investigate and produce a report on the possible alternatives to first past the post. However in a bid to keep everyone happy Tony told Roy that anything that he came up with must preserve the two main strengths of the current system. The deliver of a single strong government and the MP-electorate link. Lord Jenkins finally came back with an alternative of a system in which voters list candidates by preference. If no candidate gets 50% of the first preferences, the least popular candidate is eliminated and his second preference votes are reallocated. This process continues until one candidate gets 50% of the votes. Also with AV plus there are 'top up MPs'. This means that some MPs are given seats on a regional basis when one party get substantial support in a region but receives no seats. For example in the last Scottish elections the Tories got 17.5% of the vote but no seats, but because a 'top up' system was being used this mistake was corrected.

Jenkins' suggested reform would therefore correct two faults in the current system, which is the under-representation of minor parties and the way a candidate can win a seat with less than 50% of the votes. However I think that it has flaws too. It accepts that being put into power with less than 50% of the total vote is wrong (hence it is corrected on a constituency level) but it is still possible in AV plus system to have a national government which has less than 50% of the vote nationally. Also AV plus is more likely to create a coalition government. AV plus is arguably no more proportional than first past the post but is more complicated so I can see the advantages it provides but consider them limited and see little benefit of changing to this from a system that is no worse.

There are a whole host of alternatives to choose from. But they have to try and be simple for electorate and counting. They have to try and be proportional but at the same time deliver strong government, it has to keep a MP-community link and make sure that someone or people don't come to power with less than 50 % of the vote. It is obvious mathematically that all these criteria can't all, always be fulfilled. Systems that have come into consideration though are the supplementary voting system, the additional member system the single transferable vote system or the list system. All of which have pros and cons.

An important note to make in this debate is where each of the major parties stand and perhaps more importantly why. Liberal Democrats are fully in support; in fact they have been the fuel behind the debate for years now. This is understandable when you see how under-represented they are in the Commons compared to their proportion

of national votes. Conservatives on the other hand are strongly opposed to the idea. A change to the current system could spell the political end for them. This is because of the inherent centre-left majority in our country. Labour and Lib Dem both represent this and it is only because the opposition to the conservatives are split that they are successful and have had 35 of 57 years in power since the war. This is shown by the way that the total number of Labour and Lib Dem votes always outnumber s the number of conservative votes nationally. Finally, and currently most importantly, Labour are split on the topic of reform. Some are in favour and some are against. Perhaps this is because they don't want to change the system that has elected them (although Labour are traditionally under-represented by this system except in 97 an 01). Labour have promised us all a referendum on the topic of electoral reform however the validity of referendums themselves have to be called into question, since there is far more that can affect the result of one of those than just the merit of each argument. We can probably expect this referendum to come just as the current Labour government id dying and looks as though it might lose and will then pull an ace out of the pack, a referendum on electoral reform which could stop the Tories from ever winning a government again.

Currently Labour will be not keen to change the system. They have tried different systems on smaller scale elections in the UK, for example the Scottish and Welsh assembly elections and the London mayor elections. Labour have ironically lost in each of these elections (except in Wales where they later formed a coalition with the Lib Dems) and these bad experiences of other electoral systems can only make the idea of scrapping first past the post less appealing, as many Labour MPs will tell you.

My personal view is that any electoral system will have disadvantages and will be disliked by some. Some parties will always feel unfairly represented. Therefore these aren't good grounds to call for reform and taking this into account, first past the post is a good alternative. Arend Lijphart, a leading academic expert on the subject, concluded in his study of 27 countries between 1945 and 1990 that "electoral systems tend to be very stable and resist change" and if this is true I think we should follow the clear advice of Sir Paul McCartney and "Let it Be."