



First Past the Post for Democratic Socialism

By Rachel Hopkins MP (Luton South)

The 2011 UK referendum on the Parliamentary voting system came down decisively in favour of retaining the existing First Past The Post (FPTP) method of electing MPs – 68% to 32%. It seems unlikely that a change to any form of proportional representation is going to be made in the immediate future.

That being said, there are those who continue to press for the abandonment of FPTP and the left must continue to oppose this. FPTP is vital to securing the election of a majority Labour government on a socialist programme.

FPTP does not just sustain the prospect of a socialist Labour government, it is also more genuinely democratic in giving real power to voters by making it possible for voters to choose governments, not just MPs.

Proportional representation systems tend to produce multi-party Parliaments as ever small fractions of the political spectrum find the prospect of having at least some representation an irresistible attraction. This weighs heavily against Parliamentary majorities for individual parties committed to manifestos from which voters can choose.

PR systems lead almost inevitably to multi-party Parliaments with no one Party having a majority so that post-election deals between parties to form governments are necessary.

FPTP also maintains single member Parliamentary constituencies sustaining a direct personal relationship between MPs and their voters. Single Transferable Vote (STV) systems can retain single member constituencies but STV would still minimise the possibility of Labour ever achieving a Parliamentary majority. Second preference votes would rarely accrue to Labour candidates. It would therefore be extremely unlikely that Labour would ever achieve the required 50% of votes in each of the more than 50% of constituencies necessary for a majority government. The chances of STV paving the way for a genuinely socialist government would be remote.

The socialist components of a Labour manifesto would be jettisoned for the Party to have a vote in government, sowing the seeds of disillusion among Labour's working

class and socialist voters and especially the socialist backbone of Labour Party activists.

There is history here to make the point. In the late 1970s the Callaghan Labour government lost its slim majority in Parliament following by-election defeats and was forced to negotiate a deal with the Liberals (as they were at the time) to continue in office. The Liberals demanded that Labour abandon its plan to give local authority direct labour organisations powers to undertake private building work as a price of Liberal support – a bit of socialism sacrificed. This would always be the case if Labour had to do deals with other parties in PR-elected Parliaments.

To join the Cameron Tory government, the Lib Dems u-turned on student tuition fees having campaigned to abolish them in opposition. Instead, they went along with the Tories and tripled them as part of the coalition deal. The Lib-Dems then went from 57 seats in 2010 to 8 seats in 2015, an electoral wipeout.

And finally, if First Past The Post were abandoned there would be inevitable pressure from the successful collaborationist parties to cement themselves in power with more radical PR systems. The long-term result would be an endless series of governments comprising the Chuka Umunna, David Cameron and the Nick Clegg lookalikes in the pockets of the global neo-liberal corporate world.

The left must not be seduced by the siren voices of PR. Across Europe, the left has been marginalised and electoral systems have been a major factor in that process. Left parties have tended to split into radical socialist and centrist – essentially liberal parties. There are often minority left parties in such Parliaments but with no power.

It is commonplace for these Parliaments to include as many as ten parties. In Denmark, there are three 'Liberal' parties. In the Netherlands there is a party for animals and in a number of the multi-party Parliaments, the sad remnants of supposedly socialist or social democratic parties have become little different from more conservative parties to their right.

Only our Labour Party has sustained a real possibility of being elected to power with a genuinely socialist programme. First Past the Post is vital in keeping that prospect alive.