

## The AV debate

Monday 4th April 2011

The most cherished part of our electoral system is the direct relationship with our MP whose selection is by and for the local constituency. With AV that is not at stake but it aims to ensure the MP so elected can claim a majority of the vote. In 1992 the MP for Inverness was elected on 26%.

### How AV works

Ballots are sorted, as now, in the town hall into piles for each candidate. If the biggest pile has 50% of votes cast then there is a winner. If not, 2<sup>nd</sup> preferences come into play. Instead of 'X' voters mark '1' against their preferred candidate but they can add '2' and '3' and so on to express alternative preferences if they wish. Their 'alternative votes' are used if their candidate loses. The ballots from the smallest pile, the weakest candidate, are redistributed, each to its 2<sup>nd</sup> choice. If there is still no 50% winner a 3<sup>rd</sup> round ensues and the next pile is similarly reallocated. If a ballot's first preferences are eliminated then 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> preferences are used.

### What would have changed in 2010?

In 2010 on poll calcs the LibDems would have gained 32 seats, 22 from Con and 10 from Lab making a Lib-Lab coalition feasible. But polls are unreliable. The change would have been more like 10, Mark Pack reckons. In a changed system voting behaviours and campaigns would change. It could be prone to 'donkey voting', clueless voters ranking 1234 from top to bottom or at random. Less likely than in Australia where both voting and ranking all candidates are compulsory.

### One man one vote

In AV if a voter so wishes he can 'plump' for a first choice only, just as though the system had not changed, and as Mark Pack remarks, in the final count each ballot counts for only one vote. He added that the notion of a long tradition of one man one vote is exaggerated, multiple votes for students at Oxbridge and owners of houses in multiple constituencies survived until WWII. The No campaign has made much play of Churchill's conclusion on AV: "the most worthless votes given for the most worthless candidates". That was in his Commons speech on the Representation of the People Bill 1931, the Liberals' price on that occasion for coalition with Labour. There is merit in the point. If the bottom candidate for instance was BNP then the 2<sup>nd</sup> preferences of BNP voters could tip the balance from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 2<sup>nd</sup> running candidate. Mark Pack quotes Churchill in 1909 equally derisory on FPP saying it secures only "fluke representation, freak representation, capricious representation."

Richard Barnes outlined the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's 8 criteria for free and fair elections. Most pertinent to the present debate was the principle of 'universal and equal adult suffrage', contravened he felt by counting some 2<sup>nd</sup> preferences before others. Better is the Supplementary Vote variant, all but the top two candidates are immediately eliminated, all 2<sup>nd</sup> preferences reallocated. If there is a more ideal reform, perhaps SV or back to 2-member constituencies or second ballots, is it more likely to emerge if we hold back from AV now or would change make more change more likely?

### A definite loser

The great merit of First Past the Post is that there is a definite winner but even more crucially a loser. When we want to be rid of this lot we can. Hardly among the merits of AV that in 2010 it might have delivered Brown. Ian Alston praised it as simple and decisive. If candidates are chasing 2<sup>nd</sup> preference votes and coalitions it will encourage even more of the 'all things to all people' approach and may penalise distinctive, straight talk. Our adversarial system in parliament as in the courts, he says, serves us well as a strong opposition holds government to account. Another benefit of a decisive loser.

### Coalitions

Proponents of AV favour consensus and compromise and add that we have coalitions anyway. Whigs and Radicals allied to form the Liberal Party under Gladstone and Mark Pack reckons Blair-Brown was a coalition, only whose terms were esoteric while formal 2-party coalition would be more transparent. Ian Alston countered that if parties are 'coalitions' they must thrash out their manifesto before the public vote. 2-party coalition deals are made after the vote and pledges inevitably sacrificed in the back room. Student fees being the obvious example but the AV referendum itself is another. No one voted for it, it was a cost of coalition. The Yes view is that we may get the best of both manifestos.

### AV will cost £250m?

The No campaign puts this price tag at the top of its objections. Ian Alston called it an infantile argument when substantial principles were at stake. 0.04% of govt budget would be well spent on delivering positive constitutional reform (if it did). But of the figure £130m is for 'counting machines' that are neither proposed nor needed as the 'piles of ballot papers' description above demonstrates. Only in GLA elections are machines used, as votes must be counted across the entire capital in multiple stages.



The Gladstone Club  
1 Whitehall Place London SW1A 2HD

AV is used only in Australia, Fiji and New Guinea. But is used here for the London Mayor, and variants SV for the GLA and STV for the Northern Ireland assembly. Ian Alston feared AV may be a stalking horse for more radical electoral change. Single Transferrable Vote is the LibDems preference. But we should not exaggerate the hazard. The British people will never relinquish constituency representation.

### Safe seats

Over half of the 648 constituencies are 'safe seats', 29% have not changed hands since 1945 despite momentous political changes in that time. Arguably only the handful of marginals, and only a handful of swing voters in them, determine the outcome of a general election. And perhaps the most compelling score for the Yes vote was a member's complaint that his several letters to his safe-seat MP were ignored. That said, the general trend has been for MPs to be more available. In concluding against AV the Jenkins Commission calculated that most safe seats would remain so. It would do little to fix unfairness between the parties or distortions of proportionality. But 'safe seats' perhaps just express the tribal structures in society. It is democracy - if you are in a minority your vote is lost. Are we becoming in politics, as a recent MCC survey found in cricket, a nation of graceless losers? Is the notion of 'wasted votes' just another name for sour grapes?

### Tactical voting

Dubbed 'insincere' by reformers insofar as the voter puts down what is not his preferred candidate. But this is a point of view. Our strongest wish is often to 'get rid of the last lot'. Tactical voting is essential to that end and many would feel fair game. Indeed in FPP many LibDem votes may be the tactical deployment of second preference for exactly that reason. One thing is for sure, tactical voting gets complicated under AV. As the Jenkins Commission put it in 1998, its results are 'disturbingly unpredictable'. On the other hand it may be fun. It has got us thinking!

*'Yes' and 'No' cases were advocated by Mark Pack editor of LibDem Voice and Ian Alston chair of the Edmund Burke Society with commentaries from Richard Barnes, an election observer for OSCE.*