

# **Engage Briefing on Alternative Vote and Proportional Representation**

## **Background**

The First Past the Post System (FPTP) is unfair and erratic. The unfairness has become even worse in recent elections as the shares of the vote won by the two largest parties have shrunk and the share won by the Liberal Democrats has grown. Thus, under New Labour, substantial overall majorities were achieved in three general elections with about 40% of the vote - and in 2005 55% of the seats with only 35.2% of votes cast. In 2010 23% of the vote secured for the Liberal Democrats less than 9% of the seats in the House of Commons.

Liberal Democrats have long campaigned for a more proportional system for elections to the House of Commons and have generally supported the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system, which uses preference voting in multi-member constituencies (as in Ireland). This is not strictly a proportional representation system but it does tend to produce a much more proportional result than FPTP. In 1997 the Labour Party manifesto included commitments to hold a referendum on PR and to set up a commission on the introduction of a proportional system. In power, Labour set up the Jenkins commission under Roy Jenkins, which recommended a system known as AV Plus, whereby single member constituencies would be retained, with constituency members of Parliament elected by the Alternative Vote (AV) system of preference voting (eliminating the last candidate first and redistributing his/her votes to 2<sup>nd</sup> preferences and so on); there would then be a top-up of additional MPs in the House of Commons to bring the parties to proportionality. Labour did nothing to implement Jenkins' recommendations.

The Coalition Agreement includes a commitment to hold a referendum on the introduction of AV, the system in use in Australia, not AV Plus, for elections to the House of Commons. The referendum is to be held on 5 May 2011.

## **Arguments for AV**

AV may not be all that we want, but it is a real improvement on FPTP. All elected MPs will have had the support of the majority of the votes of their electorates. Each voter can express a second preference for his/her second choice candidate, who will benefit from the vote if his/her first choice candidate is eliminated. This does away with the need for tactical voting. There will be less safe seats. AV also has the advantage of retaining single member constituencies and the link between MPs and their constituents.

*For Liberal Democrats:* we will probably benefit from not suffering from "third party squeeze" and from being the second choice of many/most supporters of the other main parties. Liberal Democrats will probably win a number of seats where they are in second place and the present incumbent party does not have the support of 50% of his/her electorate. This should partially redress the unfairness of the present FPTP system. AV now starts the

process of electoral reform for Westminster and we can move on from there. If we lose the AV referendum it will kill off progress on electoral reform for years to come. There are no intellectually sound arguments against the change to AV.

### **Arguments against AV**

AV is unnecessarily complicated. FPTP has served Britain well and helped to ensure strong single party governments. In practice, British general elections give the electorate the opportunity to “boot the government out” and replace it with an alternative with a majority in the House of Commons. AV is more likely to lead to hung parliaments and weak governments.

*For Liberal Democrats:* AV is not what we have long campaigned for. It is not a proportionate system. If we get AV now, we will be stuck without a proportional representation system for a generation. It is not certain that the system will work to the advantage of the Liberal Democrats anyway. We will be seen as unprincipled and self-interested in campaigning for AV, when it is well known that we don't really believe in it. If we lose the referendum, that will be very damaging to the coalition and to the party. We should have stuck to our guns and campaigned for STV.

### **Questions to Consider**

1. Is AV a fairer voting system than FPTP?
2. Is the change to AV worthwhile?
3. How important is it to the health of our democracy to remove the need for voters to vote tactically to keep out the candidate they want least?
4. How important is the link between a constituency and a single MP?
5. Is it likely that we could secure STV in the foreseeable future, given the present political system? If so, how should we set about achieving it?
6. Will a change to AV be a stepping stone to further reform or a cul-de-sac?
7. Will the change to AV be to the Liberal Democrats' political advantage?
8. How do we answer the charge that we are only interested in AV for our own political advantage, given that we have always supported another system?
9. On the basis that we support the move to AV, how best can we secure a Yes vote in the referendum?