

Electoral reform could prove a PR disaster

Burnham has called for proportional representation but there's a far better way to improve politics and voters' trust

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Rewiring the British state is one of Andy Burnham's favourite themes. So far, the former mayor of Greater Manchester has breathed life into this line with plans to give some of Whitehall's powers to city regions and town halls, and in setting up an outpost of No 10 in the north. But a groundswell is building among political allies for him to go further. This week 98 Labour MPs, including some ministers, signed an amendment calling for the government to announce a national commission to come up with proposals for electoral reform.

They may well be pushing at an open door. Burnham has been sympathetic to the cause ever since he first ran for mayor of Greater Manchester in 2017, an election held using the supplementary vote system in which voters choose a first and second-choice candidate. He says that campaigning for second as well as first preferences was "an incentive to knock on any door", and last year explicitly called for a system of proportional representation (PR) for Westminster. During the Makerfield by-election campaign he confirmed his support but added that such a change would have to be included in a manifesto and endorsed at a general election.

The paradox of PR is that politicians who favour it when struggling under first-past-the-post drop it like a hot potato when the current system delivers them a handsome majority. Tony Blair could not have gone off the idea more quickly after winning a 177-seat majority in 1997. The Liberal Democrats scuppered its most likely moment when they agreed to go into coalition with the Conservatives for the measly prize of a referendum on alternative vote, in which voters rank their local candidates in order of preference and the votes of the bottom one get reallocated until a winner gets over 50%. A referendum they went on to lose decisively on a miserable turnout.

Now with a PR-friendly prime minister in No 10, and the potential for a progressive coalition government after the next election, you can see why its proponents think its time may have finally arrived. If Labour puts PR in its manifesto alongside the Lib Dems and the Greens, and those parties between them attract more than half the vote – and perhaps even find themselves in government together – then, hey presto, there is a democratically respectable path to the electoral reform that has eluded campaigners for so long.

But I would sound a note of caution to the new prime minister. The most fervent supporters of proportional representation – variations of which are used in local government, Holyrood, Senedd and Stormont elections – believe it is innately fairer than first-past-the-post because the number of seats a party gets bears closer relation to their vote share. What matters, though, is not the number of seats but the amount of governing power they endow. An opposition party with only a handful fewer seats than a governing party can end up with almost zero real political power. A tiny party in a governing coalition can have an outsized influence if they play their hand well (unlike the Lib Dems). Just look at the veto power the DUP had over Theresa May's minority government through its confidence and supply agreement, or the influence of the radical Greens on SNP-led government in Holyrood, for example. In this sense "proportional" electoral systems are no more meaningfully proportional than first-past-the-post.

What matters more than any notion of proportionality is the public legitimacy of an electoral system. Does it command the trust of voters? Can people reliably hold unpopular governments to account by removing them from office? Is it resilient to fraud and manipulation? Here agitators for reform are on stronger ground: first-past-the-post works well in generating alternative governments in societies where the vast majority of the public vote for one of two main parties. It has less predictable results in a fragmented electorate split between multiple parties in which people cast their votes based on issues that go beyond the old left-right economic spectrum.

In this new world, we will see more MPs and governments elected off the back of minority vote shares. A majority of the public also now seem to be in favour of some kind of electoral reform, although it certainly does not feature in voters' top issues, and will at least in part be a symptom of their declining faith in politics to deliver.

There are risks to Burnham of changing things. Some on the left have been arguing for PR with the assertion that there is a permanent progressive majority in Britain that votes for parties to the left of the Conservatives, and that a proportional system would effectively help to keep the right locked out of government. Nigel Farage has long been a supporter of PR, reiterating his frustration with the current system when 14% of the vote generated only five parliamentary seats for Reform UK in the 2024 election. Yet since Reform's poll ratings have soared he has gone awfully quiet on this front. Now, he would be likely to milk any whiff of a change for all it is worth, as part of his brand of anti-establishment politics.

Switching to a proportional system could also end up making our politics even more polarised and fragmented, as smaller parties do well out of appealing to relatively niche parts of the electorate, then end up wielding disproportionate power in coalition governments. How comfortable would most voters be with Restore or some incarnation of the Gaza independents or Your Party holding sway over the government of the day, I wonder.

It is wishful thinking to believe that changing the electoral system will transform our political culture for the better, when the truth is social media has much more influence. A government could spend a great deal of time and political capital reforming it for, at best, few plaudits from voters and at worst, even deeper public cynicism about politics.

The Lib Dems may have actually been on to something with AV: it is not a proportional system but an incremental tweak that means people can honestly rank their choice of constituency candidate rather than voting tactically, and which encourages candidates to pitch to a wider rather than narrower segment of the electorate. But the most important thing Burnham could do to restore voters' faith in politics is to show the government can deliver on big-ticket items like economic growth and social care rather than remaking the rules of the political game.