

Dear Secretary,

I note, from a recent interview with Sir Alistair Graham on the Today programme, that the Standards Committee will be looking at the functions of the Electoral Commission. In the course of the interview Sir Alistair concentrated on turnout at elections and the falling number of people who actually register to vote.

I was disappointed that the remedies mentioned were all concerned exclusively with the mechanics of voting - there was not a single mention of the electoral system.

It is of course highly important that there should not be fraud, and that everybody should register and should cast a vote. However, the purpose of elections is to represent fairly in Parliament the wishes of the electorate. If they do not achieve this purpose, as most certainly they do not under the present electoral system, it is not surprising that many people will regard voting as just a futile gesture which might well do nothing more than demonstrate the strength of support for a particular party or candidate without making the slightest difference to the election result. Any amount of fiddling with the mechanics of casting a vote (polling booth, postal, Internet) is not going to alter appreciably this fact

To illustrate what so typically happens under our single-member constituency, first-past-the-post(FPTP,) system here is an example picked at random from the 1997 election results:-

Rother Valley: Lab 31,184; Con 7,699; LD 5342; Other 1,932. So 7699 plus 1 = 7700 voters were represented by the Labour winner. Every one of the remaining votes was represented by no-one: i.e. one Labour MP went to Westminster representing 7,700 voters or 17% of those who voted (or 11% of the total electorate). (Electorate 68584; voters 47157 = 67.3%)

It is estimated that overall 70% of all votes under FPTP are wasted. In this case, if we exclude the Tory "yardstick" vote of 7699, the proportion of wasted votes is 67%. Moreover, **if 23,484 of the Labour voters had stayed at home, or if all the people who abstained from voting had turned out and voted for the Tories the result would have been the same: one Labour MP would have been elected.**

So it would be progress indeed if one outcome of the Committee's review were to be the lifting of what appears to be a ban on the Commission's power to "interfere" in "politics" The most serious effect of this seems to be a strict taboo on any recommendations to Parliament by the Commission which might bear on the obvious need to get rid of a system that, amongst many other evils, recently excelled itself in giving us a government for which 78% of the electorate had not voted. (Such a taboo is not surprising of course against a background where the government - under pressure from its tribalist MP's - so cynically reneged on its unequivocal 1997 commitments regarding electoral reform). So, in order to try to meet the government's anxieties about turnout, all the Commission seems able to do is to deal with fringe "problems" that would largely disappear anyway if we had a rational electoral system.

If we are to have true democracy we need a robust untrammelled Electoral Commission. Indeed a highly desirable outcome would be that the Electoral Commission became the centre of a constitutional system where decisions as

to how our representatives are elected was taken completely out of the hands of MP'S who will always have a vested interest in retaining the system - however undemocratic - under which they were elected

Best wishes

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