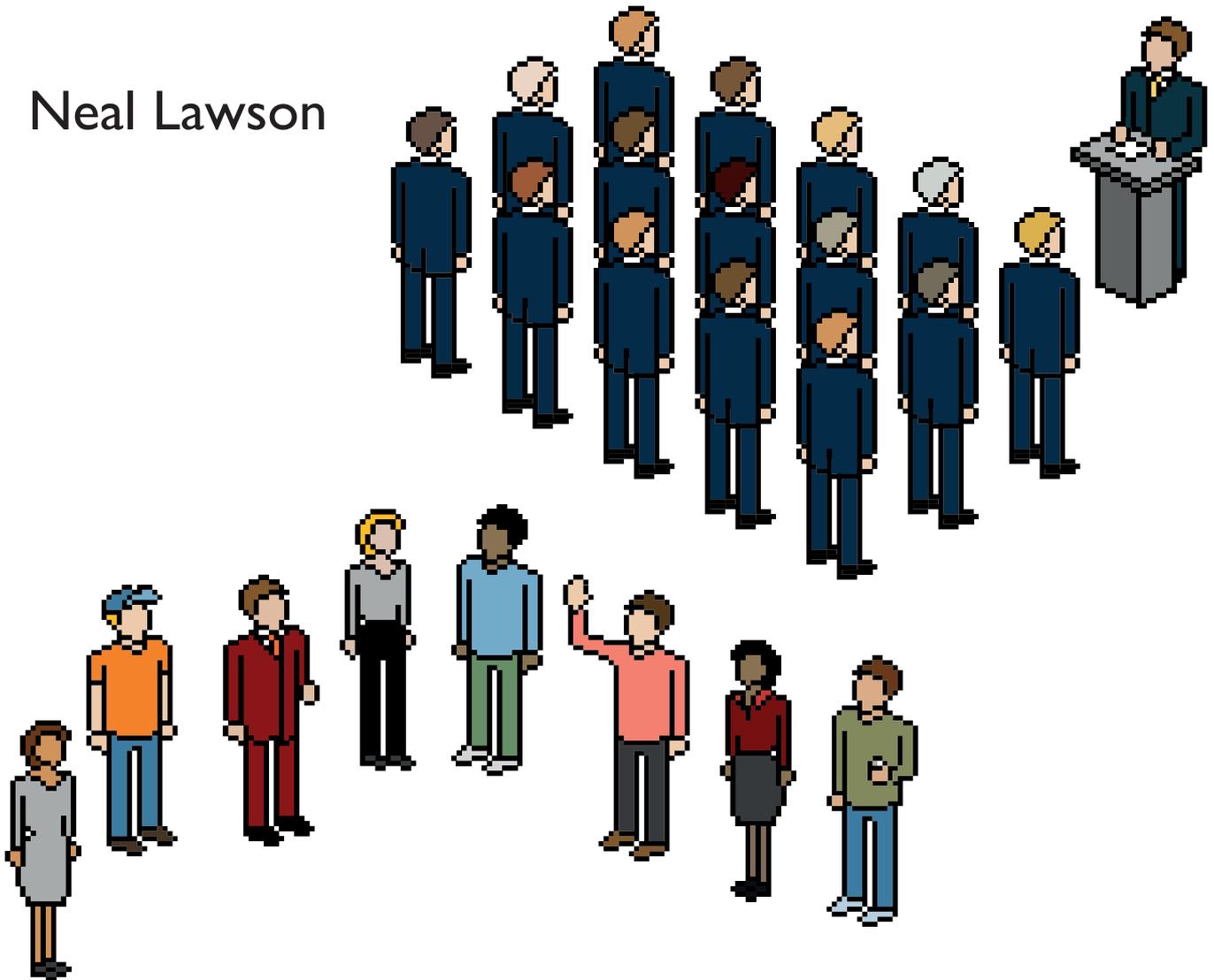


DEMOCRACY BY MACHINES OR MORALS?

WHY THE AV REFERENDUM MATTERS TO THE FUTURE OF THE CENTRE LEFT

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About the author

Neal Lawson is chair of Compass and sits on the 'Yes to Fairer Votes' board. He is the author of *All Consuming* (Penguin, 2009)

Published by Compass – Direction for the Democratic Left Ltd
Southbank House, Black Prince Road, London SE1 7SJ

t: +44 (0) 207 463 0632
e: info@compassonline.org.uk
www.compassonline.org.uk

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Why the AV referendum matters to the future of the centre-left

Introduction

On 5 May 2011 the nation goes to the polls to decide whether we put just one X on the ballot paper in future general elections or whether we can rank candidates in order of preference. On the face of it, who cares? Shouldn't we be worrying about the cuts instead?

I want to argue that despite the Alternative Vote (AV) being just a small step change in the way our voting system works it has profound implications for the future of our political system.¹

There is a division opening up across British politics – which redefines but doesn't replace the old left/right divide. It is between what we might now call machine politics versus moral politics and the AV campaign battle is sharpening the distinction. This distinction became clearer to me on the morning of Tuesday 29 March in a room in Westminster Central Hall when the all-party Yes to AV campaign was launched. Only it wasn't quite all party. It was three parties. Or rather to be absolutely honest it was two and a half parties. The Greens and the Liberal Democrats are solidly behind AV, though both would prefer something more proportional; despite this they are not letting the perfect be the enemy of the good. The Labour Party is split despite leader Ed Miliband being on the Yes platform and the vast majority of the Shadow Cabinet being pro-reform.

On the other side of town the No campaign were running their spoiler event. This campaign also has in effect two and a half parties though only one and a half are ever present. The Tories

are to a person against AV. The half is the other half of the Labour Party that wants a No vote and is represented by the like of John Reid and Margaret Beckett. The silent missing partner is the BNP, which knows like the Tories that First Past the Post (FPTP) is the best system for them.

Of course all these politicians can see different party advantage in one system or another. But the real differences between them are much more than tactical – they are cultural. The Yes and No camps represent a different way of conceiving politics and power. That is why what is at stake on 5 May isn't just a different way of counting votes but whether Britain is going to start the process of embracing a new politics or will stick with the old.

Under FPTP Labour has got itself into a real mess. Because we have to appease anti-Labour sentiment to win under this system we achieve too little in government and our vote splinters to smaller parties. We have to stop digging and give ourselves a chance to win with a real political purpose.

The politics of the machine

The Labour and Tory politicians who want a No Vote differ on many things; equality, the role of the market, trade unions, public spending and much more. But they share a common assumption about politics, democracy and the role of the state.

For worthy but ultimately misguided ends the Labour 'just say No' brigade have a view of politics and power that has remained unchanged for over a century and mirrors that of the Tories. This view is essentially elitist – the party and its leadership know what is best for the people and will administer change from the top down. Tory deference meets Labour statism and they co-habit quite happily in the No campaign. Socialism for the Labour No camp is exactly what it was for Herbert Morrison over 60 years ago: 'what Labour governments do'. The process and the end point is always the same – the election of a Labour government. Everything stems from that. And it is this conflation of means that justify ends that is destroying Labour's ability to change the country for the better.

I debated AV at a north London CLP recently and one senior Labour MP from the No side

talked about what she wanted to do for ‘our people’. I know what she meant and she meant it for good reasons. But they are not our people. The fact that Labour felt like they ever owned anyone was probably not a good thing at the time and it certainly isn’t now. People cannot be owned. Paternalism is an ethos that may have been well meaning, but it is cold, insular, remote and bureaucratic, and its time has gone. It says that people can’t play a role in helping themselves. Yet it still has a grip on much of Labour’s psyche as embodied by the No campaign.

At its core it represents the politics of elitism. The people can’t be trusted and need to be led by a pure party vanguard who know what is best for them. A chosen few are the only people capable of making change happen. In Britain it has become what is in effect Parliamentary Leninism and unless and until Labour decisively shakes this deadly culture off, the prospects for any transformative change to our nation are negligible. The AV referendum is the chance to do just that because the old politics isn’t working.

In 13 years, with the blessing of a booming economy (albeit one built on the quicksand of debt and a house price bubble), huge majorities and a pretty useless opposition Labour proved beyond doubt that the days of social democracy by an elected elite, by a small group in a single party, are over. Under this old model the Labour government did some good things and some bad things and we all have our little list, but the fact remains that the planet continued to burn and the vast inequalities of power and wealth in our society persisted. Labour sucked up to Murdoch and the bankers, it said that ownership didn’t matter and tried to sell off the Post Office. It paved the way for the privatisation of the NHS and the break up of our schools. But not just that – at every step of the way this old politics undermined the basis for more radical politics in the future. The Party, the trade unions and the wider Labour movement were all weaker as a result of the Party being in power under this mode of operation. While FPTP forces attention on so few voters whose opinions count, this, it was felt, was the only way we could win.

In truth the politics of the clunking machine were long over. They were over in 1979 as the post war settlement finally unravelled. This reality caught up with actually existing socialism

in 1989. But Labour kept doing the same thing, expecting a different outcome. Deliver the leaflet, make the speech, get elected, pull the levers and hey presto – socialism. We did it in 1945 and it worked and so why can’t we do it again now? It is the politics of one more heave and has been a remarkably resilient mobilising ideal given how useless it has been at transforming our country.

The 1945 moment captured the imagination of Labour, and the party has been living off the vapours ever since. All political moments need their myths to sustain and guide them. But when a myth holds no basis in reality it becomes not a catalyst for change but a barrier. There are two problems with Labour’s 1945 myth. The first is that it is an imagined 1945. It is a 1945 that remembers only Clement Attlee, Nye Bevan and Herbert Morrison as the people who delivered socialism. It forgets the trade unions, the friendly societies, the left book clubs and Clarion Cycling clubs, the socialist societies, the Methodists and of course the intellectual impact of Liberals like Keynes and Beveridge and even Tories like Butler. It was not a singular and elite entity that created the post war settlement; it was rich, deep and nuanced. But all the No camp of Labour people remembers is the Labour Party, or more precisely its leadership.

The second problem is even more profound and that is the horrible truth that 1945 was a unique and therefore unrepeatable moment. It came off the back of the Depression and a socially unifying war that meant even Churchill could not stop it happening. Critically it was the high water mark of Fordism and all the paraphernalia of mass production and mass parties that went with it. It was a moment to make a certain type of bureaucratic history because the conditions in which history could be made in this way were right – but unrepeatable. All of the conditions of 1945 evaporated long ago. War socialism, despite the best efforts of the Labour No campaigners, is not coming back.

FPTP is the required political architecture of this mass, centralised, command and control model of politics. It speaks to a nation where in 1951 97% of the population voted for one of the two main parties. Those two parties represented two class interests and power could swing between them. But that world has gone. By 2010 only 65% voted Labour or Conservative. With

a decline in the number of marginal seats just a handful of swing voters in a few swing seats determine the outcome of every general election. 1.6% of us decide who wins. All the political focus has to be on them – not Labour traditional voters or the poor. In this world Rupert Murdoch and the politics of the *Daily Mail* rule. It is their will that must be appeased. When Labour triangulates onto this narrow space it leaves the way open for apathy at best or the BNP at worst. And ironically, because of the rise of smaller parties (that FPTP encourages) the big parties will continually fail to deliver hung parliaments. Coalition will become a more common feature of our politics in years to come – unless we change.

And so Labour's vote decline still further and we get stuck in a vicious cycle. The less the electoral system allows us to deliver real change, the smaller the vote we get. And so on. We have to break out of this and AV shows the way. Meanwhile the Labour No camp clings to the belief that next time it will be better. Somehow it will be different. But there is no legitimacy in winning on 35% of the vote. There isn't even anything to command and control. The life has been sucked out of that mid-century model and the world has moved on.

The AV referendum is now the sharp point at which the inevitable decline of such a politics is tested. It might cling on – like a chicken that can still run round the yard after its head is cut off. But it won't work. Not in the medium to long term. Not in the sense that it will help the centre-left stop the poor getting poorer and the planet burning. Its fate was sealed decades ago by cultural and technological changes that are now far beyond its power.

The re-moralised politics

So what does a Yes to AV suggest about a different form of politics? The key point about AV is that it recognises that social and political change will happen in different ways in the future. Instead of being delivered machine like, change will have to be negotiated and be built on shifting alliances not homogenous class blocks. Politics must be pluralised instead of being polarised. It has none of the simplicity of the machine model – it isn't linear. It is complex and fluid. But that is because

it mirrors the world as it now is. A world that is decentralised in which we have multiple identities in which we blog, comment and express ourselves in myriad different ways. We have moved from a factory world to a Facebook world. In the former we had a job for life, a place for life and a class and party allegiance forever. It was secure but stultifying. That world has gone.

This insight is of course far from new. Much of this was put forward around 20 years ago by the former Communist Party intellectuals around *Marxism Today* and the New Times project. They felt the death of Leninism more keenly than most. Charter 88 was another vital response to the end point of this form of social democracy and its supporters were more successful in getting elements of their programme onto the political agenda, not least because the 'old' Labour leader John Smith understood the requirement for a new politics. Even with his death the moment was not gone. Blair at least affected to get it. He brought in Roy Jenkins and cosied up to Paddy Ashdown – but he let the moment to realign politics to the left go and today we pay the price with the realignment of the right.

So what does a post Leninist left look like? It's not that hard to imagine. It is a political formation that respects more than anything the principles and practice of democracy. It shifts from democracy being a means to an end (grabbing state power) to being an end in itself. It sees democracy, in the absence of class, as the only tool the left has to re-engage with in the struggle with capital. Through democracy we decide as a society when, where and how capitalism operates. Politics, through such a democratic prism, stops being about reaching an end point and starts being a never-ending journey. Socialism stops being what a Labour government does and starts being what people do.

So not only would Labour re-ignite the constitutional reform touch paper set off by Charter 88, it would apply the test of democracy to every meaningful social and economic institution in the land – in public services, workplaces and communities. Power would rightly be regarded as plural rather than singular. Such pluralism would shatter the brittle and rigid structures of our adversarial political system in the recognition that change happens not by force but through argument, engagement, debate and discourse.

It is the politics of the campsite; of clear identities but shared values. It is about winning allies, forging partnerships, coalitions and alliances. It is a war of manoeuvre not a war of position. It is Aesop's sun not Aesop's wind.

But are the conditions right for a shift to a post Leninist form of politics for Labour that AV would permit? Are the political and economic failures of New Labour and the birth of a centre-right coalition the conditions in which Labour can junk vanguardism for good, or will there be one more 'one more heave'? The unpopularity of the Coalition Government and Nick Clegg in particular makes the lazy assumptions of one more heave attractive. If being in office is all that matters, socialism can be administered once again from on high, then why take a chance? From this view Clegg the traitor is the enemy – not Cameron. The AV referendum is chance for the No camp to settle old adversarial scores not embrace a pluralist socialism. But another round of bitter disappointment and inevitable failure in office if this mode of operation is repeated would be too much to bear.

The century of the centre is over. Centrifugal forces have become centripetal. The all-seeing, all-knowing hierarchy has had its day. What was linear, straight and mechanical has given way to what is fluid, liquid, plural and complex. Under these new forces Britain itself is breaking up. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are more and more going their own way. New mayors are being elected across the land. Whatever we think of this process it is inconceivable that it will be reversed – the only issue is how far will it go and whether it will work for labour or capital. The politics of one leader, one party and one state cannot hope to survive in this context. It is not surviving. The rise of small parties and the very hung parliaments the No camp fears is happening now under their system – and will go on happening.

This allows Labour to pick up on old themes and inspirations: of Levellers, Chartists, Diggers, mutuals, guilds and associations. Critically, though, it gives permission and legitimacy to become part of the Facebook generation, where you join multiple groups and have multiple allegiances and identities. Where what matters is that you march against student fees and protest against corporate tax avoidance – not simply

what party card you hold or what leader you follow. The tone of the debate to come is between a politics that is plural and a politics that remains singular and elite-driven. Between a future that is negotiated, and one that is dictated.

This cultural shift is essential for the left. The planet burns and the poor get poorer. These two crises combine to create a third – that of democracy itself. For what is the point of politics if it doesn't put right the big things that are wrong with our world? The struggle for equality, sustainability and therefore democracy are no longer singular campaigns – but will only be solved together, as a joint narrative, programme and movement for change. Leninism failed even in the era of mass society but reform from the top is always time limited. There will always be a revolt against it. The vanguard is even more hopelessly positioned today to control because there is no one bloc to command. Lenin believed that you could force history. New Labour found that you can for a while but it inevitable unravels without a broad coalition of moral support behind and ahead of it. Meaningful and sustained change happens with the people – not against them. The challenge is to retain a clear ideological stance but practise it through pluralistic means.

Elections fought under AV will force Labour to find common ground with others, to build alliances, to listen and to debate constructively. It will punish those who seek to destroy others – that is why the Tories and the BNP are against it. The AV referendum crystallises all of these issues and the campaign itself puts in the shop window two very different ways of being.

Saying and doing anything to win

The mindset of the machine politician is that anything is justified to win. Everything can and must be subordinated to winning control of the state because that is the way you make change happen. Means are justified by ends. In a two party, bi-polar world the only game in town is to smash your opponent by all means at your disposal. So in election campaigns you create clear dividing lines even if the reality is that the dividing lines are so narrow that few can tell the difference between who is in power and who is not. Everyone cuts, everyone privatises, everyone worships the

rich and the USA – because that is the demand of the City, Murdoch, the *Mail* and the 1.6% on whom every election hinges. The Tories put up pictures of Tony Blair looking like the devil. A Labour MP is disqualified from office for slandering his opponent. The electoral system closes down the space for morality and rewards destructive ruthlessness. It doesn't matter to the machine politicians that more and more people are turned off politics, turnout slumps or even that if they win by such dubious means they change little of any significance, at least on the Labour side, because winning is enough. Democracy has no significance beyond its ability to yield power. If politics shrinks on every step to the winning line then so be it.

And so it is in the referendum campaign on AV. The Labour No campaigners consistently take the same path – they will say and do anything to win. They say that voting yes will cost the country £250 million and plaster the press with adverts of soldiers, the police and even babies in incubators saying the money could be better spent. At best it is misleading when a lot of the cost is for the referendum itself and therefore doesn't change if you vote yes or no, or don't vote at all. The rest is based on the assumption that AV will require Florida style voting machines to count the ballots – when no such machines are needed.

It's the same with the claim that AV will improve the chances of the BNP winning seats – when the reality is the complete opposite. The BNP will suffer under AV because they inevitably fare badly under such preferential systems. They do well and win seats under FPTP as they have proved in winning numerous council seats, but no extremist party does well under non-proportionate preferential voting systems. That is why the independent pollster from YouGov Peter Kellner describes AV as an 'anti BNP voting system'. And if you don't believe me or Peter Kellner then believe the BNP themselves who are campaigning for a No vote. That doesn't matter to Labour No people. To go on wildly misleading is justified in the pursuit of winning. But the tragedy is that FPTP encourages Labour to focus on middle England at the expense of much of its traditional working class vote – and therefore acts as a recruiting sergeant for the BNP.

There is one final and interesting aspect of the No Campaign – it is the focus on Nick Clegg. They want Labour members and supporters to

vote No as a direct attack on him. They want the referendum to be all about him. In part this is because they perceive him to be unpopular and so want his image in voters' minds. But there is a deeper reason. Why is Clegg their number one hate person and not David Cameron? Especially given the fact that a No vote will force the Coalition partners closer together and the Liberal Democrats will be hugely weakened by such a result and the Tories strengthened. As one Liberal Democrat put it to me, 'We won't jump out of a speeding car.'

A Yes vote would seriously disrupt the Coalition – the Liberal Democrats would feel more powerful and the Tory right would be up in arms. What do the Tory right get from a coalition that waters down everything they want to do on Europe, taxes and the NHS, and delivers a voting system that could deny them ever being in sole power again? They would be gunning for Cameron: 'Tory MPs stop you in corridors to share their worries – an AV win would be "a dagger at the heart of the party", we would never hold power outright again,' wrote Gary Gibbon of Channel 4 News on his blog. George Pascoe Watson, former *Sun* political editor, writes in his PR briefing, 'Mr Cameron is a worried man, I'm very reliably informed. The PM has ordered an emergency push to deliver a "no" in the AV referendum at all costs.'

The weakening or possible collapse of the Coalition would be one of the main outcomes of a Yes vote for all that means for the cuts and more. But still some Labour MPs want a No vote. We have to ask why? The answer must lie in the fact that what they want is a two party adversarial system, not the end of the Coalition. Destroying the Liberal Democrats and not the Conservatives is their main mission. Then and only then can we go back to a politics of two big parties taking turns pulling the levers of the state. Only coalitions are more likely not less under FPTP and the levers don't work – at least not well enough to help 'our people'. And even if we get our chance – it's the rich who disproportionately benefit.

If they win a No vote then this type of politics will become entrenched. It will go on failing the poor and the dispossessed. More people will give up on politics and democracy. The politics of the machine will have defeated the politics of morality.

Conclusions

Two political futures are now on display as the referendum draws near. On one side there are those who want to control the state and happy to do that on the basis of only a third of the vote with no consideration of the level of turnout. Those on the Labour side of the No campaign want to do good with the slippery, illusive power they seek. They see the trapping of power just like 1945 and believe they can recreate that moment through the departments of the state and the red boxes. But the power to act, let alone transform, has seeped out. It lies increasingly elsewhere – in the media, in the City, on social network sites and more than anywhere in global corporations. The Labour No campaigners find themselves on the wrong side of history.

The second future is through social democracy but achieved in a very different way. It doesn't offer empty certainty but hope through pluralism, dialogue and a democracy so deep it liberates the poorest and most oppressed. The struggle will always continue against markets that are too free and a state that is sometimes too remote but in a very different way. That future is glimpsed in the Labour Yes campaign. It is not easy, sure fire or certain. Nothing is. But it is the only way the left stands a chance of making politics work; socialism through pluralism, dialogue and, more than anything, democracy. At last we stand the chance of making a breakthrough; socialism and democracy are two sides of the same coin. You can't have one without the other. The small matter of putting an X versus ranking candidates 1, 2, 3 on a ballot carries with it either a dead past or a possible future for the left.

We have a once in a lifetime opportunity to give the centre-left a chance to outflank the right and start constructing a politics that can change the world. To say we should take it – is a huge understatement.

¹ For the record I am in favour of a more proportional voting systems because I'm a socialist and believe everyone's vote should count equally. And also for the record some of these arguments appeared in this article on Our Kingdom: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/neal-lawson/labour-must-trust-people>

