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## Kennedy calls on Blair to 'pick up the phone' for talks on fairer voting system

**By Marie Woolf, Chief Political Correspondent**

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The public outcry: 'Give us back our democracy'

Kennedy calls on Blair to 'pick up the phone' for talks on fairer voting system

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Charles Kennedy has called for an immediate start to talks on reforming the voting system after politicians from all parties demanded action to end the iniquity of first-past-the-post elections.

As senior figures within the Labour Party stepped up pressure for reform, the Liberal Democrat leader urged Tony Blair to "pick up the phone".

"The door is open as far as we are concerned on voting reform," said Mr Kennedy's spokesman. "The Prime Minister could pick up the phone tomorrow if he wishes. Clearly we would be interested in creating a fair voting system."

A demonstration yesterday outside Downing Street - where protesters wore gags as a symbol of their feelings - kicked off further protests about the "unfairness" of the system. John Hemming, the new Liberal Democrat MP for Birmingham Yardley, wrote to Tony Blair accusing him of governing "without a democratic mandate".

Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs will meet leading electoral reformers, including the musician Billy Bragg, in Parliament today to plan a campaign to put fair votes at the top of the political agenda.

Robin Cook, the former foreign secretary, said: "Nothing that has happened in this election has changed my view that we should have an electoral system that produces a House of Commons that reflects the way that people vote."

Lord Oakeshott, the Liberal Democrat peer who is a committee member of the pressure group Make Votes Count, said the election result was "a disgrace to democracy" and the most unrepresentative poll in political history. An analysis of the figures showed that, between them, the Liberal Democrats and small parties got a third of the votes in Britain but only a tiny proportion of seats.

"The strains on the first-past-the-post system are getting too much," Lord Oakeshott said. "Labour got 130 more seats than their votes entitled them to. The Liberal and other parties received half as many seats as they should have got. One and a half million votes were cast for parties who didn't win a seat, including the Greens and UKIP."

Senior Labour MPs called on Mr Blair to consider reforming the voting system to build a "progressive consensus" of left-of-centre politicians that could keep the Tories out of power.

They want to see a revival of the kind of talks held between Tony Blair and Paddy Ashdown about proportional representation before and after the 1997 election. They were abandoned after opposition from the trades unions and senior Labour figures including John Prescott who warned it would inevitably lead to a coalition with the Liberal Democrats.

John Denham, the former home office minister who chairs the Home Affairs Select Committee, said it was time to consider creating a proportional voting system that would foster co-operation between the left-of-centre political parties.

He predicted support from the political grass roots and voters for reform.

"It is right that people look at the election and see how to change the voting system," he said.

"The real question is going to be whether the broadly progressive political parties see it in the interest of progressive politics to work together.

"There is potential for a long-term progressive settlement in this country.

At least 60 per cent of the electorate are broadly voting for progressive parties already, such as Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens. My own guess is this is not the sort of thing that comes from the top of government but a

lower level."

The Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform wrote yesterday to dozens of MPs that it says support voting reform, calling for mobilisation on the issue.

The Department of Constitutional Affairs is currently reviewing the impact of proportional voting systems used in recent Scottish, Welsh and European parliamentary elections.

The review, a response to a Labour manifesto commitment, is expected to report this year. But senior Labour figures have made it clear that the analysis is a "low-level" project carried out by civil servants and that there was no political will at No 10 to change the voting system.

"There are no plans to change the present system," said Downing Street last night.

## 'The credibility of our democracy is now in question'

### **Billy Bragg, pop singer and political campaigner**

The problem we face is that a great number of the electorate feel that when they express their view, it makes little difference and they wonder whether it is worthwhile voting. Proportional representation would allow for a more mature politics. My personal preference would be to maintain first-past-the-post for the Commons and introduce a reformed House of Lords which would reflect the proportions of the Commons vote. I don't subscribe to the view that PR will give the BNP a way to further their aims - I think the only way they get votes now is as a protest.

### **Sir Bernard Crick, professor of politics**

The system is so arbitrary now that it should be reformed. By throwing existing seats together into bundles - multi-member constituencies - and then introducing the single transferable vote, you might get one MP from each party, or two Labour and one Conservative, proportionate to the votes in that area. Local parties could still choose candidates and local issues would still be represented in Parliament. It could save wasted votes and would increase popular interest in voting. I doubt there will be change until we have a hung parliament, however. The difficulty is in getting turkeys to vote for Christmas.

### **John Denham, Labour chairman of the Home Affairs Select Committee**

I have been a long-term supporter of PR. It is right that people now look at the election and see how to change the voting system. The real question is whether the broadly progressive parties see it in the interest of progressive politics to work together. There is potential for a long-term progressive settlement. At least 60 per cent of the electorate are broadly voting for progressive parties already, such as Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens. My guess is that this is not the sort of thing that comes from the top of government but at a lower level.

### **George Galloway, Respect MP for Bethnal Green**

This election has underlined the iniquity of the British parliamentary election system as few before have. The first-past-the-post system means that a vote

for the Liberal Democrats, for example, is worth only a fraction of a vote for either of the other two mainstream parties.

The devaluation of the popular democratic will is even worse for newer and smaller parties. The main parties are increasingly managed so that swaths of opinion are not represented through them. Then commentators are surprised that there is a disengagement with mainstream politics.

### **Lord McNally, Liberal Democrat leader in Lords**

The credibility of our democracy is now in question because the combination of low turnout and the distortion of the system produces such an absurd result. We have for years been very happy to accept that the British system didn't produce an absolutely accurate snapshot of the electorate, but that it pretty well got it right. But the system is now producing a kind of malign spiral of lack of involvement and distorted result. What kind of a mandate does a government have if it is elected with only one-fifth of the vote?

### **Mo Mowlam, Labour former cabinet minister**

The one thing clear from the election is that our first-past-the-post system is producing unfair results that do not reflect the will of the people. The ratio of the number of seats for every 1 per cent of the votes cast of 10.1 for Labour, 6.1 for the Conservatives and 2.8 for the Liberal Democrats is disgraceful - but short of a hung parliament, where the junior party is the Liberal Democrats, we have very little chance of seeing the present system changed.

### **Lord Campbell-Savours, Labour peer**

There is a need for greater fairness in the system. I support a supplementary vote system where second preferences are taken into account. It would mean that every candidate in Britain would have been elected with over 50 per cent of the vote. That would give more legitimacy. It would not be proportional. It is moving towards a proportional representation but by no means secures that. I'm opposed to proportional representation, on the basis of the work I did that showed it was inconceivable that it would result in anything other than a hung parliament.

### **Keith Taylor, principal speaker of the Green Party**

We have a parliament which is clearly failing to represent the diversity of the electorate. Many people care enough to vote Green or for other smaller parties yet their voices are unheard. No wonder people feel disenchanting with the political

system when it fails to deliver what they want, from inaction on Iraq and climate change to increasing our capital by the sell-off of public services. The majority are fed up with the business-as-usual politics at Westminster. In 1997 Tony Blair promised to have a referendum on PR and it's well overdue.

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