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100 Labour MPs back vote reform

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100 Labour MPs back vote reform

Steve Richards: They may not realise it now, but a fairer voting system could be in Labour's interest **P**

Letters: Undemocratic voting systems, Proportional representation and others

Pressure on Tony Blair to modernise the voting system increased last night as it emerged that almost 100 Labour MPs, including several cabinet ministers, support electoral reform.

As the campaign for reform gained momentum at Westminster, the Prime Minister was warned that he would hasten the Labour Party's "political mortality" unless he changed the voting system before the next election. Labour MPs told him that the Tories could "sneak" back into power unless the way people vote was changed.

Several cabinet ministers, including Ruth Kelly, Peter Hain and Patricia Hewitt, have indicated they are in favour of a fresh look at the voting system.

They are backed by ministers including Bill Rammell, the Higher Education minister, Gareth Thomas, the International Development minister, and by senior backbenchers including Robin Cook, the former foreign secretary, and John Denham, chairman of the Commons Home Affairs Select Committee.

Allies of the Chancellor, including the former work and pensions secretary Andrew Smith, have also indicated their interest in voting reform. The Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform lists almost 100 MPs who have voiced their support for reform. It said yesterday that last week's election had "rung the death knell for first-past-the-post" and that electoral reform would ensure the longevity of a Labour government.

Demands for reform were reinforced by an analysis of the election which found that millions of votes were wasted. The report, by the Electoral Reform Society, found that only one in three MPs had majority support - the lowest in history. Some MPs, including George Galloway, were elected with less than 25 per cent support from their constituency.

The voting system produced "inequalities" across Britain, including in East Sussex where Labour won four out of the eight seats despite coming third with just over a quarter of the votes. A spokesman for the Electoral Reform Society said: "The result was demonstrably unfair. It awarded the immense powers of a government with a majority in the House of Commons to a party which enjoyed the support of scarcely one in three of those voting and a little over one in five of the total electorate. These figures are the worst ever."

Glenda Jackson, MP for Hampstead and Highgate, said: "First-past-the-post is now well past its sell-by date. There has long been a strong moral case for electoral reform. But there is now a strong political imperative that unless you reform our voting system there is a real danger the Tories will sneak back into office through the back door."

Last night, in a packed meeting at Westminster, Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs met voting reformers, including the musician Billy Bragg, to plan a protest campaign called "Create a Storm for Reform".

Mr Bragg paid tribute to The Independent for highlighting the issue of electoral reform and called for "a national debate".

"The Independent is doing a great public service by highlighting this. I think The Independent has got the zeitgeist here. By dedicating its front pages, as it does, it is forcing this on to the agenda," Mr Bragg said. "It's really, really positive to actually show people the numbers. Because that is what we need to do: take forward this debate with straightforward, tangible arguments that people can relate to."

Ed Davey, a Liberal Democrat frontbencher and director of the Make Votes Count group, said: "Create a Storm for Reform is a big initiative and we are confident of increasing support on all sides of the house. Many people are alarmed at how the electoral system worked in this election and voting reform has rocked up the political agenda."

The Independent received hundreds of letters supporting its Campaign for Democracy. "For every one person who voted Labour, two voted for other parties and two abstained at this election," said Nina Temple of Make Votes Count, which represents electoral reform groups.