

10 to 1 in Favour of Electoral Reform at Public Debate



“First past the post is the best method of electing our MPs” was the motion for the latest of Farnham Humanists’ free public debates held annually to discuss ethical, moral and current issues of common interest. This year’s debate was chaired by Norma Corkish, Chair of Waverley Citizens Advice Bureau, at South Farnham School.

Speaking for the motion, Mr Craig Rimmer, deputy chairman of the conservative Bow Group, gave two reasons for keeping the current system (i) the intimacy of one MP representing a local community; and (ii) the clarity and accountability of a government to its election manifesto. The current coalition was an unusual aberration resulting in an agreement negotiated behind closed doors which nobody had voted on. With other electoral systems this would be happening all the time with deals perhaps taking months and done to suit minority interests. Recent research by the Bow Group has shown that as we now have a credible third party, people have more power than ever before. The number of marginal seats has increased from 26% to 34% and only 15% of seats are truly safe. Mr Rimmer kindly spoke twice to cover for Lord Norton, who deeply regretted having to miss the debate due to an unexpected urgent requirement to be in parliament for a vote.

Against the motion, Dr Simon Usherwood, Senior Politics lecturer at Surrey University, said that if we favour justice we should want a government which represents the views of the electorate. The last time a Government was voted in by the majority of the voters was 1935. More and more people are engaging in tactical voting; voting against who they don’t want rather than in favour of who they do want. Dr Ken Ritchie from the Electoral Reform Society, described how in 2005 Labour won with only 35% of the popular vote. Margaret Thatcher’s win with just over 40% of the vote gave her the strength to go on with the poll tax even though most of her own party thought it was “bonkers”. With the current coalition, 60% of people voted for MPs who at least have a share in government. Dr Ritchie said seats are so safe that his society congratulated 70% of the candidates before the last election campaign had begun.

From the floor, Don Simpson said how even in South Africa everyone who votes gets an MP they have voted for. Another speaker described how Labour or Conservative governments are effectively coalitions controlled by minorities, citing the trouble in John Major’s government caused by a small number of right-wing Euro-sceptic MPs. A further speaker asked how intimate the current system is when her MP’s views are

totally different from her own. She would rather have a larger constituency with at least one person who really represented her. Jac Slim added that no voter ever voted for everything in a manifesto, we tend to vote for the least bad option.

In contrast a politics student pointed out the thousands of students who voted Liberal Democrat because of the pledge to oppose a rise in tuition fees but are now having to face fees of £9k a year. Several worried that electoral reform could risk a party like the BNP having some real clout. David Savage, Chair of Farnham Humanists, highlighted how in a number of countries coalition governments have resulted in small extremist parties holding the balance of power e.g. the ultra-orthodox in Israel.

Summing up in favour of the motion, Mr Rimmer emphasized the problems Austria, Denmark and Holland have also had with extreme parties in coalitions. He underlined how the current system delivers change when it is needed, e.g. in 1979 when Britain was not working and needed to be fixed. In his view holding government to account via an election manifesto is the true measure of a democracy.

Dr Richie pointed out that the Conservatives use the Alternative Voting System for electing new candidates and their leader. Electoral reform is also widespread elsewhere in the UK and Europe. He ended by saying that the Alternative Vote change next May is a step in the right direction and if it is not taken it may be the next generation before there is another opportunity.

The motion was defeated by 77 votes to 8 with 3 abstentions. A charity collection after the debate raised £283.24 which will be split between UNICEF and Waverley Citizens Advice Bureau.