

THE RT HON LORD OWEN, SPEAKING AT THE FINAL RALLY OF THE NO TO AV CAMPAIGN, CENTRAL HALL, LONDON, 3 MAY 2011 WILL SAY:

NO TO AV, YES TO PR

We can, I believe, on this platform all agreed that constitutional change, particularly the voting system, must not be an experiment. It's not just a present for Christmas. It must be conceived as permanent. Where we disagree is that I have supported for 29 years proportional voting.

The great mistake - original sin - if you will, of this referendum on electoral reform was the exclusion of the option of proportional representation (PR). The facts are clear. Its exclusion was no accident but part of a party political fix far removed from either principles or fairness. It was forced on David Cameron by Nick Clegg, who also chose to hasten the referendum vote and not wait until the coalition had proved itself, which would have been the sensible way of proceeding.

When Gordon Brown struggled to convince Nick Clegg to come into a coalition with Labour he offered not only to stand down as Prime Minister after a few months while Labour chose a new leader but that during this time he would carry through Parliament legislation for a referendum offering three options, PR as well as AV and First Past The Post (FPTP).

There has been a conspiracy of silence from Liberal Democrats and some Labour politicians about Brown's offer on PR that was never formally put to the Cabinet or the Parliamentary Party. The Liberal Democrat negotiators were reluctant for it to be known in their party that the offer had never been taken up. The Labour negotiators for the most part did not like PR or believed a referendum in this form could never have been carried into legislation.

Whatever view one takes on Brown's three-way offer, it was the correct and the constitutionally proper way of dealing with electoral reform in 2010. It was inevitable that this present restricted two-way option referendum, forced too early, would fail to

ignite public opinion when the jury is still out on this Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition.

When even the proponents of AV call it a "miserable compromise" it is hard to invoke principled arguments for changing the present system. It is even harder to extol the merits of AV when the system has been rejected by three Commissions. In 1982 the SDP/Liberal Alliance chose PR. In 1993 the Labour Party chose SV, the Supplementary Vote. In 1995 the Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair's Commission, under Roy Jenkins, chose a top up with AV to make it proportional. They all rejected AV.

Fortunately in this campaign some of us who support proportional representation have stayed firm on a principled position "No to AV-Yes to PR" and as consequence can, as looks likely, pick up the baton of proportional representation if AV is defeated. We can champion proportional representation for the future without being tarred with any association with support for AV or FPTP. This is not a purist position. It is based on a hard political calculation. There are two credible stances on voting systems: First Past The Post with broad based coalitions in few political parties - a view I held until 1982: or Proportional Representation with broad based coalitions across more political parties as has been seen to operate successfully now in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and for a long time in Europe.

AV as a formulation for trying to bridge these two voting systems fails to convince, particularly since it is conceived as a stepping stone by most of its active supporters. Any system like AV that can on occasions produce a more disproportionate result than First Past The Post is NOT a progressive reform.