

Background Note

The Independent Commission on the Voting System, which was chaired by Lord Jenkins of Hillhead was established in December 1997 and was asked to report within a year. The Commission published its report in October 1998.

Other members of the Commission were: Lord Alexander of Weedon (Conservative peer), Baroness Gould of Potternewton (Labour peer), Sir John Chilcot (former Permanent Secretary at the Northern Ireland Office) and David (now Lord) Lipsey (political editor of the Economist).

The Commission had been tasked with identifying the most appropriate voting system for elections for the House of Commons, as an alternative to our current first-past-the-post system, to be put before the electorate in a referendum.

As part of its deliberations the Committee visited Australia, and met Senator Faulkner.

The Commission's recommended system is a two-vote, mixed electoral system (AV+). It proposes that between 80% and 85% of MPs be elected by individual constituencies using the Alternative Vote (AV) system, with the remaining number of MPs being elected by areas on a top-up basis.

The Commission recommended no change to the current total number of MPs at Westminster and left it to the Government to determine the exact numbers of constituency and top-up MPs.

The Government has said that it wishes to see a full debate in the country on the merits of the system proposed by the Commission. The Labour Party has just completed its consultation process on the issue. According to press reports this has come down heavily in favour of the status quo.

The further work required by the Government together with the extensive boundary re-drawing needed by such a system means that there is no possibility of the system being in place in time for the next general election. The Commission acknowledged this.

Australia elects its (lower) House of Representatives using the Alternative Vote system (which is referred to in Australia as "preferential" or "majority-preferential" voting). The same system is used to elect most state lower houses.

The Australian Senate, of which Mr Faulkner is a member, is elected by the Single Transferable Vote system.

Q & A

- **Who were the members of the Commission?**

The Commission was chaired by the Liberal Democrat peer, former Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer and current Chancellor of the University of Oxford, Roy Jenkins (Lord Jenkins of Hillhead).

The other members were:

Robert Alexander – Conservative peer (Lord Alexander of Weedon), QC and chairman of the National Westminster Bank.

Joyce Gould – Labour peer (Baroness Gould of Potternewton), former Director of Organisation for the Labour Party and former member of the Plant Committee.

Sir John Chilcot – former Permanent Secretary at the Northern Ireland Office.

David (now Lord) Lipsey – economic and political journalist, currently political editor of The Economist.

- **What were the Commission's working methods?**

The Commission invited anyone interested to submit written evidence. The Commission also held a number of public hearings around the United Kingdom and travelled abroad to study the electoral systems in operation in several other countries.

- **What evidence did the Commission receive?**

The Commission received well over 1,000 submissions.

- **Which countries did the Commission visit?**

The Commission visited the Republic of Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and Germany.

- **Is the Government going to honour its manifesto commitment to hold a referendum on this issue?**

Our manifesto committed us to holding a referendum on the voting system for the election of Members to the House of Commons. No change will be made to the current first-past-the-post system without the explicit endorsement of the people of the United Kingdom in that referendum.

- **When will the referendum be held?**

No decision has yet been taken. Prior to the publication of the Commission's report it had been envisaged that the referendum would be held before the next election. However, since the Commission's recommended system could not possibly be in place in time for the next election, holding the referendum afterwards is now also a possibility.

- **What is the Government's view of the system recommended by Lord Jenkins?**

The Government has yet to come to a view about the system recommended by Lord Jenkins. We are still considering the Commission's report and have already made it clear that we wish to see a wide-ranging debate across the country.

- **When will you announce the timetable for the referendum?**

No decisions have yet been taken. The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill, which was published on 20 December 1999 will establish an Electoral Commission and put in place new rules governing national referendums. It would be a pity to hold the electoral system referendum before the new apparatus is in place.

- **What choice will the electorate be given in the referendum?**

The electorate will be asked to decide between retaining the existing first-past-the-post system or changing to Lord Jenkins' recommended system. No other choice of system will be offered.

- **Which other countries use a system of the kind recommended by the Jenkins Commission?**

Bolivia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Mexico, New Zealand and Venezuela use a similar system to the one recommended by the Jenkins Commission.

- **Which countries use first-past-the-post?**

68 countries (45% of the world's electors) use first-past-the-post to elect their legislatures. These include (apart from the UK) the United States, Canada, India and Pakistan.

Lines to take

- The Jenkins report on voting systems was published in October 1998. Recommended AV+; a two-vote mixed voting system.
- System recommended by Jenkins is such that it could not be in place in time for the next general election and the Commission's report acknowledges this.
- Government committed to a referendum on the issue. No decision has yet been taken on a date for any referendum, or the question to be asked, but referendum not likely before the next general election.
- No change to the voting system will be made without the explicit endorsement of the British people in a referendum.