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**Newsletter Launch April 2007**

**Welcome to CAER's first newsletter under the leadership of David Cameron. More women, more BMEs, a chance to take control of more councils and a likelihood of a hung Parliament at the next General Election.**

**CAER believes we need to go further. It is time to re-think electoral reform, democracy and making every vote count.**

**Imagine** ..... an election that does not have 'safe' or 'marginal' seats, where former 'safe' seat MPs have to work to get elected, where money wasn't poured into target seats, where MPs are directly accountable to the electorate rather than the party hierarchy, an end to tactical voting and an outcome that broadly represents the balance of opinion in the country? .....

A resurgent Conservative Party in the north of England and increased representation in Scotland and Wales. A system that rewards MPs for hard work, relaxes some of the constraints on MPs from the whips and the national party line, so that they can develop their own profiles as local champions and their own lines of thought on policy issues. A system that gives the voter a direct link and feels engaged where some usually have a feeling of being neglected and voiceless, of being taken for granted by the system and not having a real choice, that breeds apathy and

votes for extremism. The BNP comes along and some voters feel that it is the first party that could be bothered to engage with them. In areas where mainstream political competition is healthy, there is no vacuum for the BNP or UKIP to fill.

**Fantasy?** No, it could become a reality and it is not just the Cameron factor and 'one more push' that will help us but electoral reform that will deliver the above. And it is already happening in Britain.

**Democracy for Britain.** We already have electoral reform in Northern Ireland, in the EU through the election of MEPs, the London Mayoralty and now Lords' Reform. We already have it so let's exploit it to our advantage. However, the English have been denied a say on their voting system.

**Reform is bad for Labour.** Reform is about giving voters a choice of candidates and fair representation for their views and fair to parties and candidates. The idea of 'safe seats' and 'marginal seats' is central to campaigning in the First Past the Post (FPTP) elections. Under reform this would change. The bias in the electoral system currently favours Labour but boundary determination is only a small factor in generating bias, and the more powerful reasons –

differential turnout and the distribution of the vote – that are mostly responsible.

### Scotland

The local elections in 2007 will see the first elections under STV (single transferable vote). Our party are quite pragmatic about this. They have seen how PR has worked for us, since the wipe-out in 1997. Whilst still not supporting PR and believing that FPTP is the best system, they recognise that there are opportunities and are maximising the system to best effect. The fear in Scotland is that a lack of understanding of the system will detract from individual parties' policies and may let the SNP through. Following the May elections I will provide a full briefing on what STV meant for our party.

### Wales

Rumour has it that the Welsh Conservative Party is planning to commit to the introduction of proportional representation. This is a sensible and pragmatic approach to getting more representation in a country where majoritarianism has always worked against us. This mattered less when there wasn't really a Welsh political culture or political institutions because they could see themselves as part of a UK culture. But with the development of the Assembly and a new political consciousness, Welsh Conservatives have had to re-think about their place in Welsh politics and the opportunities that may present themselves. Hence considering PR.

Labour claims Wales as their own in vast swathes of the country where not to be Labour, so the attitude goes, is to not be properly mainstream Welsh. This bullying attitude is exemplified by the arrogance of Peter Hain.

Therefore, the Welsh Conservatives are considering a "Rainbow" coalition with Plaid and the LibDems. For instance, if the Welsh Conservatives finish ahead of Plaid in the elections, a "Rainbow" coalition might require the First Ministership to be split between Nick Bourne and Ieuan Wyn Jones. Now there's a thought.

### Northern Ireland

After four years of faltering political talks, this election was declared by Peter Hain, to give

parties a renewed mandate to form a shared government. Part of this process was the introduction of STV resulting in multi-member constituencies and instead of marginal constituencies, there are marginal seats in each constituency. This means parties and individuals have to campaign across the country at grassroots level.

### The result?

1. STV delivered what people voted for, with each party winning close to their fair share of seats
2. Smaller parties and independent candidates made gains and breakthroughs
3. Turnout remained high, at 63.5%
4. The number of spoiled ballot papers fell dramatically, by 40% compared with the last Assembly election
5. One quarter of candidates were elected at the first stage of the count, the remainder relied on transfers to reach the quota – transfers mattered and voters used them
6. There were very few wasted votes – the vast majority of votes contributed to the election of at least one candidate
7. Despite parties selecting few female candidates, the number of women in the Assembly increased by one, plus the first BME representative was returned
8. Unfortunately, our party only managed 0.5% of the votes under first preference and therefore gained no votes.
9. Interestingly, the PUP, a small party with only 100 members managed to canvass 13,000 people and gained 0.6% of the vote, gaining one seat. There is a salutary lesson for us. The difference in numerical terms is 365 votes.

In this polarised and divided society, STV has worked somewhat to dissipate the hold of the DUP and Sinn Fein.

### Lords' Reform

A recent Hansard Society/YouGov survey revealed that 82 per cent of the public want at least some members of the Lords to be elected, 67 per cent supports the existence of a second chamber and a clear majority think that future members of the Lords should be more independent of party politics than the House of Commons.

So what did we get? A proposal for a wholly elected Lords because Labour fear being punished for the cash for peerages scandal.

CAER makes the case for the election to be conducted under the single transferable vote system because that will clearly distinguish the two chambers; would create a direct link with the electorate without undermining the legitimacy and link with MPs' constituencies. STV means less party control, is the fairest proportional system and does prevent extreme parties getting elected such as UKIP and the BNP as they need 25-30% of the vote to get a seat.

It is the Conservative Party that has been most democratic in the recent debates on Lords' Reform by proposing constituency boundaries that the electorate recognise ie district and county boundaries rather than the EU regions favoured by Labour and the LibDems. People need to have link with an area to feel they are represented – how many non-politicos can name their MEP? We have even suggested Open Primaries but the other two parties are having none of this democracy business.

## Women in Politics

### Women on Local Councils

With elections due in a number of English local authorities, CAER is examining the current gender balance. While women's representation on councils is slightly better than the House of Commons, fewer than one in three councillors are women.

The English average is 28.7%, although county councils tend to have fewer women than district councils. Only one English local authority has more women than men: Redcar and Cleveland Council in the North East. Islington Council has equal numbers of men and women. At the other end of the league table is North West Leicestershire with just 5 women out of 38 councillors (13.6%). Leicestershire County Council is second last with just 14.5% women.

Women fare even worse in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: the average in each nation is close to 22%.

Councils deliver vital services, so it is important that local decision-makers reflect the community they serve and are aware of its needs firsthand. As well as being important in its own right, serving on local councils can be an important entry route for some women into national politics.

Unfortunately, it is unlikely that the situation will change following next month's poll. The **First Past the Post voting system** used to elect councils is part of the problem. Alternative electoral systems can encourage parties to put forward more diverse teams of candidates or allow voters more effective say on who represents them.

Scotland's local councils will be elected by the Single Transferable Vote from May of this year, and it will be interesting to examine what impact this has on women's representation.

CAER was launched following the February 1974 disastrous general election when we were cheated of Government by the system. Then, when the Conservatives were elected for 18 years under the first past the post system (FPTP), electoral reform was not an urgent issue. During that time and subsequently the banner has been carried by Keith Best, former MP for Anglesey/Ynys Mon. Then came 1997 and 3 general election defeats in succession which has led to voter disenfranchisement and the system being biased against us.

The Conservative Party is also going through a period of change at the same time as the electorate claims it feels more disenfranchised. By changing the voting system in the UK we can claim to make every vote count, to regain city seats and to represent fairly those Conservatives who currently live in 'safe' Labour seats.

**If you would like to be on our mailing list for more information or join CAER or comment on the above please get in touch.**

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