

Is Britain Heading for Fraudulent Elections?

Britain prides itself on being a model democracy. Its Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, is always berating countries as far apart as Belarus and Zimbabwe on their failure to hold free and fair elections. But, are things in this country as rosy as people believe?

London now has its first elected mayor the maverick, left-wing politician, Ken Livingstone, was predictably chosen by a wide margin in a poll held on 4th May. At the same time, Londoners elected a new assembly which will govern the capital alongside hundreds of local councillors representing the London boroughs as well as the MPs who represent their interests in the House of Commons.

This profusion of government at all levels is part of the New Labour government's policy of devolving power and bringing decision making closer to 'the people'. To do this, it has introduced all manner of changes to the way Britain is governed and passed a new election law, the Representation of the People Act 2000, which gives people greater opportunities to vote. Its aim is to increase the turnout at elections for all these tiers of government.

In fact, since the Second World War turnout in British parliamentary elections has been consistently high - between 70% and 80%. The lowest point, ironically, being Labour's landslide victory in the 1997 general election when turnout dropped to 71%. However, people have been less enthusiastic in demonstrating their support for those who deal with unromantic things in their local communities like the drains and the roads. Turnout at local elections always hovers around the 30% mark.

Bertrand Russell noted that boredom was a feature of stable and prosperous democracies. The fact that only c.50% of people vote in American presidential elections is a sign of the country's maturity rather than its decline, he said. It is to places further east that we must turn to see the results of high turnouts: participation in Soviet elections regularly exceeded 97%. We know that these numbers were pulled out of a hat, so to speak. But not entirely. People really did go to the polling stations in great numbers. It was sometimes more than their lives were worth not to do so.

Boosting the turnout, Soviet-style

But the latest fad of getting more people to vote risks imitating the Soviet Union in ways that seem to have been given little consideration by our legislators. Experience of elections in the former Soviet Union reveals that several practices introduced or extended by the new legislation are all too familiar in that part of the world.

For example, it is going to be much easier in the future to assist people to vote. Whereas previous legislation allowed for the blind to be given help in the polling station the new qualification applies to "blindness or other physical incapacity." There seems to be no need to prove evidence of 'incapacity' - the "presiding officer" only has to be satisfied with the situation before him. It is not unimaginable, therefore, that some people might seek to 'help' their elderly (incapacitated) relatives to vote. The sight of old ladies and gentlemen being "assisted" in the polling booths sometimes by their children but often by able-bodied people whose relationship is unclear is all too familiar in the former Communist world. It is called "family voting" and looked upon benignly as a "tradition" which will go away when people fully grasp the nettle of democracy at best. It is hardly the stuff of progress.

The new law also boosts the use of proxy and postal voting, which again reduces the number of people who need to show their faces in the local polling station. Anyone who wants to can now vote by post. There is no real procedure for checking on who actually casts the vote.

The rules regarding voter registration have been relaxed. A fixed period for registration has been replaced by a "rolling" electoral register, which can be added to throughout the year. The voter may not even (yet) be resident in a particular place - he or she may vote if they can show that they will reside in the area in the near future. There is also a provision for those with no fixed address - like the homeless - to vote by giving a "declaration of locality." It is easy to see how the numbers on a register could be swelled by such means as there seems to be no provision for checking up on whether or not the said 'declaration' is true or bogus.

While registration can take place at any time, so can removal from the register. If the returning officer is satisfied that someone is no longer entitled to be registered his/her name can be erased. It is easy to imagine a case whereby someone goes to vote and finds his name has been removed - maybe mistakenly - from the roll. However, it is then too late to rectify the situation.

In either case, unscrupulous officials can inflate or reduce the size of the electorate in ways that can easily affect the outcome of the poll. Many constituencies in Britain are held by narrow margins, particularly after the last election. A few extra votes here or there can easily alter the outcome of the poll.

It is worth remembering how few officials run British elections. They are all members of the Labour-affiliated trades union, UNISON. One returning officer from a constituency near Oxford told me while we observed an election in Armenia that he had never met a Tory returning officer! He was also a fund of anecdotes about how some of the more committed of his colleagues had already found ways to add voters to the register after its official closure. The worst case he cited was in a Liberal Democrat-controlled seat where candidate and returning officer holidayed together!

Seeing how many returning officers from Britain have acted as election observers in post-Soviet countries where the crudest manipulations of the ballot have been endorsed on the basis that the "reformers" won, the political bias of them as a class could have been taught a lesson or two on how to produce the "right" result by the old Soviet hands whom US State Department and British Foreign Office have endorsed as our boys.

It couldn't happen here

Of course the losers often cannot believe that cheating takes place in jolly old England and in any case even if they get a rerun voters simply punish them as poor losers.

But things are set to get easier for anyone trying to flesh out the voters' list in Britain. There will be two registers. The complete one which will only be displayed in specific places prior to an election and a 'doctored' version available all year round. MPs were exercised by the prospect of violent husbands pursuing their battered wives or stalkers terrorising celebrities via the register and gave those who wished the opportunity to remove their names and addresses from the second, more widely available, version.

On top of all the relaxations listed above the government has made it much easier to vote where or when you want. Should a local authority seek permission it can set up polling stations in places like shopping malls and supermarkets to entice shoppers to vote. Polling stations (and the supermarkets) can now remain open for "more than one day" before the poll and afterwards as well. The use of the mobile box will also be increased, especially in remote areas - although nowhere is that remote in modern Britain.

It is something of an irony that Belarus hailed as a dictatorship in the mould of Stalin and Pol Pot, should be proposing an end to early voting as we in Britain embrace the idea. Wherever I have come across the practice it has always seemed less than transparent. For one thing, finding people to man polling stations for several days in a row is no easy matter. Any odd soul is eventually co-opted to sit, bored and distracted in the village hall for hours on end. Control of the ballot boxes during the long days (and nights) also presents problems - something blithely ignored by British legislators.

However, there was much excitement as several places in Britain tried out the pilot schemes in local supermarkets during the May local elections. Alas, despite the hyperbole the (low) level of participation in the poll remained overall unaffected.

Nor did electronic counting machines (also used for the first time) appear to be all they were cracked up to be. Dust got into the ones used to count the ballots in the London mayoral election and they had to be dismantled and reassembled. But, said the Guardian newspaper, with no hint of irony, these machines had proved successful in places like Bosnia where all elections, as far as I can tell, have been a farce! The first one held in Bosnia after Dayton in September, 1997, certainly boosted the turnout - 107% of the people who would have been 18 or older according to the 1991 census cast their votes in that internationally-supervised shambles!

Of course, people will be shocked by my assumption that there could be anything so crude as election fraud in a place like Britain. All these changes are, after all, predicated on the fact that we are an honest lot. But is that really true?

In the eighteenth century Britain's elections were a byword for grotesquery and fraud. Artists like Hogarth lampooned the bribery, drunkenness and chaos surrounding the (many) elections that took place in the country's seedy rotten and pocket boroughs. But, by the end of the nineteenth century electoral reform had removed most of the worst abuses. In recent years the very idea of election fraud would not cross people's minds - the minimal checks used on polling day in Great Britain bear testimony to the general level of trust people have in the whole process.

But the laxity in the system has produced abuse over the years. For example, many students have regularly registered themselves to vote twice, both at their university and at their home address. And, at least two constituencies were investigated for foul play after the 1997 election.

However, nothing can compete with the long-term electoral abuse that has taken place in Northern Ireland. In March 1998 a parliamentary committee reported on the regular use of personation (voting for someone else), bogus registration and multiple voting over the years in Ulster elections. At the same time, William MacCrae, the defeated candidate in the 1997 election in Mid-Ulster claimed that the election to Parliament of Martin McGuinness, hero of the Northern Irish 'peace process', had been marred by fraud. In the hours before the deadline, over 10,000 applications were received for absentee voting in the poll, a large proportion from one party (it remained unsaid that this was Sinn Fein).

A friendly Northern Irish Catholic waiter from an Oxford restaurant told me in 1997 that on the eve of polling the "Boys" had been round as usual to ask his aged mother, "Declan - still away is he?" and then take the polling card from the mantle-piece.

Referendums galore

Another strange episode occurred in 1997. New Labour was determined to bring devolved government to Scotland and Wales via referendums scheduled to take place soon after the election. The Scots have always embraced the idea of self-government but the Welsh showed little interest in hosting their own parliament. Many people in Wales were resentful, anyway, of what they called the 'Tafia' - a tightly-knit group of businessmen, politicians and local officials who controlled all lucrative jobs and contracts in the municipality. In their jaundiced eyes, a Welsh parliament would only bring more of the same.

Opinion polls consistently showed that Labour would be lucky to get the idea through and on the nail-biting night of the referendum, 18th. September, 1997 they nearly didn't. Only a last minute surge in support brought victory to the 'yes' campaign with a slender majority of 6,700 or 0.6%.

In January 1998, The Scotsman newspaper published allegations (made by the local Labour Party in Wales) that the result was marred by fraud, particularly in the count. Polling agents for the "No" camp had not been allowed to scrutinize the count, ballot boxes had not been properly identified and the whole process of counting itself had been "haphazard." It took many more hours to count the simple "Yes" or "No" papers than it had after the general election only months earlier when there had been a much higher turnout. The worst offenders seemed to have been in the Caerphilly constituency of Mr. Ron Davies, the man chosen by Tony Blair to run the newly devolved assembly. It was the 6,000 votes from here that turned defeat into victory. To make matters worse Davies had boasted at the annual Labour Party conference that it was his constituency that delivered the result. But, people asked, how could he have known where the 6000 votes came from?

The magazine *Private Eye* recently reminded its readers of the allegations surrounding the Welsh referendum calling them a smoking gun that could explode any time in the face of the government. There are obviously people out there who know the truth. However, legally, nothing can be done as there is no right of appeal in Great Britain against the conduct or results of referenda. The scandal blew over, and a few months later, the Queen opened the new Welsh assembly in a dingy panelled room in Cardiff to the accompaniment of two lady harpists dressed in trouser suits.

Events in Scotland were not without their peculiarities. The referendum there endorsed, as expected, a similar assembly but Scots faced two questions and the second was more controversial. It asked whether voters backed giving the new Scottish parliament tax-raising powers. BBC radio news reported at 9 a.m. on polling day that many voters in Glasgow, Scotland's biggest city and parts of Edinburgh, the capital, had not been given the paper with the second question. Yet when the results were announced there was no statistically appreciable difference between turnout in both parts of the referendum.

Mainland Britain, a country which had only held two referendums since the Second World War, is fast catching up on a European trend. There have been three already since Labour came to power with the most important - that on entry into the single European currency - looming after the next election. As many people are aware, the government is determined to win this one. The events in Wales combined with the relaxation over all aspects of voting procedures in Britain should give many people pause for thought, especially as there will be no redress whatsoever for any accusations of mistakes or foul play.

Unfortunately, I see no sign of any opposition party even considering the possibility of voter fraud. The debates that preceded the passage of the new election act were shallow and full of irrelevancies. Journalists seem to find the new ideas - extending polling hours and voting at Walmart - an exciting development without having asked what goes on in places where such practices are common. Academics with an interest in psephological matters usually support electoral reform i.e. proportional representation. As Britain is introducing PR gradually in some local and European elections they are happy too.

Much of the New Labour agenda depends for its success upon such complacency. But there are signs that the British people themselves are tired of the endless meddling with their institutions for no perceived benefit. They are beginning to vote against the government. So, it will be interesting to see whether the Labour Party goes down gracefully when the time comes or whether it - or some of its more fanatical supporters - exploit some of the holes now left wide open in the country's election laws to remain in power. What worked for Wales could just as well work in Britain as a whole.