

# Labour, the Unions and Proportional Representation

CAMERON RHYS HERBERT

## Abstract

The Labour Party's support will likely be crucial to any major change of the voting system in the UK. While Labour has supported first past the post for most of its existence, a resolution was passed at the 2022 party conference calling for Labour to include in its manifesto a commitment to change the voting system to proportional representation after the next election. This resulted from an effective campaign by activists to change the party's policy on electoral reform. The position of the trade unions, often perceived to be conservative on constitutional issues, was particularly important. This article focusses on the campaign to change the opinion of the British trade union movement. It outlines the British trade union movement's historic reservations about electoral reform and then analyses the grassroots effort behind this movement, focussing on the organisation of Make Votes Matter, Labour for a New Democracy, and Politics for the Many. The article concludes by offering insights into the potential long-term consequences of this campaign and its potential impact on the ideological direction of the Labour Party.

**Keywords:** Labour Party, trade unions, electoral reform, proportional representation, British constitution

## Introduction

SUPPORTERS OF proportional representation (PR) in the United Kingdom have long identified the Labour Party as a vital component of any attempt to change the voting system. It is unlikely that any electoral reform bill would pass through the Commons without the support of one of the two major parties, and for most of its existence, Labour has been more open to the arguments in favour of reform than the Conservatives. While Labour's membership appears increasingly to support the principle of PR, the party leadership has been more sceptical of the benefits of changing the voting system.

In 2022, however, Labour took a significant step towards embracing PR as Constituency Labour Party (CLP) and trade union delegates backed a resolution calling for Labour to change the voting system. This vote resulted from an effective grassroots campaign within the Labour Party and the trade union movement. Based on interviews with trade unionists, activists and Labour MPs—both current and former—the article traces the origins and

evolution of this movement, focussing on the trade unions. First, the historic reservations of the trade union movement concerning proportional representation are analysed, followed by a focus on three grassroots organisations which have played a central role in the grassroots campaign to convince the unions of the need for reform: Make Votes Matter, Labour for a New Democracy and Politics for the Many. The strategic innovations that characterise the work of these organisations and differentiate them from other groups working in this area, such as the Electoral Reform Society, are examined. Finally, the article considers the implications of the changing position of Labour's affiliated unions for the future of electoral reform in the UK.

## The unions and the constitution

The trade unions are often identified as an important factor in understanding Labour's historic constitutional conservatism, including its sceptical view of changing the voting system. Dorey is among several authors who argue that when the unions founded the

Labour Party, they infused it with their own ‘conservatism and anti-intellectualism’, and this has critically reinforced the party’s constitutional conservatism.<sup>1</sup> Andrew Miles’s recent treatment of the subject is more sympathetic, but argues that the ‘labourism’ of the dominant trade union movement, a belief in solving immediate ‘bread and butter’ issues over more theoretical political questions, is key to the ethos of the Labour Party and thus to understanding the party’s scepticism vis-à-vis changing the voting system in Labour’s history.<sup>2</sup>

This argument was strongly influenced by the writings of the 1960s British New Left and Tom Nairn in particular. Nairn was critical of the unions which, despite centuries of struggle to reach the high point of their political influence and power, were moderate, not radical.<sup>3</sup> While to Nairn, the problems of the British state were glaring, British unions appeared to have no desire to see the foundations of the political system change. Indeed, Nairn believed they welcomed its dysfunctions to the extent that it was compatible with their immediate short-term goals. This tendency towards short-termism, anti-intellectualism and political moderation was argued—by Nairn and other authors who refer to the concept of ‘labourism’—as having deep origins in the history of labour in Britain. It was often used as a contagion metaphor to argue that the emerging working class was successfully infected with the backwardness of the British bourgeoisie, as described here by Perry Anderson:

It is a general historical rule that a rising social class acquires a significant part of the ideological equipment from the armoury of the ruling class itself. Thus the universal axioms of the French revolution were turned by the working-class in France against the bourgeoisie which first proclaimed them; they founded a revolutionary ideology directed against the initiators of the revolution. In England, a supine bourgeoisie produced a subordinate

proletariat. It handed on no impulse of liberation, no revolutionary values, no universal language. Instead, it transmitted the deadly germs of utilitarianism, from which the Labour Party has so manifestly sickened in the 20th century.<sup>4</sup>

But while this kind of analysis is central to many studies of the Labour Party’s ideology, the relevance of this view to understanding Labour’s opposition to electoral reform is highly questionable. This is primarily because the unions have not always opposed PR. In 1912, the members of the Trades Union Congress’ (TUC) parliamentary committee personally lobbied the prime minister to include PR in an upcoming reform bill.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, The TUC reiterated its support for PR, alongside other radical democratic reforms, on several occasions leading up to the Fourth Reform Act of 1918.

In an era in which the franchise was closed to all women and a large proportion of working class men were excluded from politics either by law or through forms of voter suppression, most trade unionists were concerned with ways to both democratise and modernise politics, and PR was viewed across Europe, largely uncontroversially at the time, as the most democratic and rational electoral system.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the position of the TUC does not appear to have differed substantially from some of the more radical unions and parties on the Continent debating similar reform questions in this period.

By contrast, Labour’s political leaders in Parliament, and party intellectuals in associated societies like the Fabians, appear to have been much more sceptical than the unions at the time about the benefits of reforming the voting system or other aspects of the British constitution. Those opposed to electoral reform within Labour won the debate and appear to have won over the unions to their

<sup>4</sup>P. Anderson, ‘Origins of the present crisis’, *New Left Review*, vol. 23, January–February 1964, pp. 26–53.

<sup>5</sup>TUC History Online, Trades Union Congress Library Collections, London Metropolitan University; <http://www.unionhistory.info/reports/Display.php?im=6003074&QueryPage=.%2FAdvSearch.php>

<sup>6</sup>A. Blais, A. Dobrzynska and I. Indridason, ‘To adopt or not to adopt proportional representation: the politics of institutional choice’, *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2005, pp. 182–190.

<sup>1</sup>P. Dorey, *The Labour Party and Constitutional Reform: A History of Constitutional Conservatism*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 354.

<sup>2</sup>J. Miles, *The Labour Party and Electoral Reform*, London, Bloomsbury, 2023, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup>T. Nairn, ‘The nature of the Labour Party’, *New Left Review*, vol. 27, September–October 1964, pp. 38–65.

position, such that arguments against changing the voting system within the unions have scarcely differed from those made by other groups within the party, most obviously that first past the post (FPTP) appears to benefit Labour—an argument which became hard to dispute as Labour firmly supplanted the Liberals in the two-party system.

To the extent that trade unions have held any reservations about PR over and above those of the parliamentary party, two strands of opposition may be identified. The first is a suspicion that structural changes affecting Labour, or the political system more generally, may (deliberately or unintentionally) undermine the political interests of organised labour. This was evident in reactions to Stafford Cripps's calls for a progressive alliance and to the formation of the Social Democratic Party; the belief was articulated again during the Blair years by Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union leader, Ken Jackson, who was at the time Blair's strongest supporter in the unions: 'For some in New Labour, proportional representation is the hammer to smash the union link. It is the hidden agenda.'<sup>7</sup>

Many socialists within the unions were also strongly influenced by arguments advanced by the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD) and its most influential supporter, Tony Benn, namely that single-member constituencies provided a vital foothold for the left. Party lists give power to party leaders. Controlled by someone like Neil Kinnock or Tony Blair, they would gladly exclude socialists and, increasingly, many felt, trade unionists. The critical point is that the unions were never impervious to persuasion; constitutional issues have been debated extensively within the unions from the local to the national level. However, like other parts of the Labour Party, most affiliated unions did not support reform until very recently.

## Changing views

The impetus for a reignited debate about PR on the left emerged in the late 1980s when the political dominance of Thatcherism began seriously to challenge the confidence of many in

the benefits of the British constitution.<sup>8</sup> In this period, campaign groups like the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform (LCER) and Charter 88 developed strategies of both public campaigning and insider-focused lobbying of parliamentarians, targeted at winning over the party to PR. Despite many trade unionists remaining unconvinced by the arguments for reform during this period, significant shifts occurred in their perspectives on various constitutional questions in response to the drastically changed political landscape. Illustrative of this shift was how the LCER came close to gaining the support of the 1993 Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) political conference for electoral reform—a motion supported by the union's leader at the time, Bill Morris.<sup>9</sup>

While interest in electoral reform declined after Labour's victory in 1997, many in the unions continued to see constitutional change as a potential political solution to reversing two decades of decline. On the more moderate end, the TUC, in particular, was firmly committed to 'Europeanising' British industrial relations, including a commitment to the European Union and to supposed European ideals of social partnership, which, it was hoped, would provide minimum guarantees for British workers and decrease conflict in British industrial relations. On the left, debate concerned how to move beyond New Labour and the potential alternative political forms this could take. While not central to either debate, both trends contained elements that found PR attractive. Indeed, in the 2000s, several trade unions with left-wing, anti-Blair leaders, including the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT), and the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), endorsed PR. Within this trend, many on the trade union left were increasingly influenced by Nairn's earlier critique of the unreformed British state, including Billy Hayes, who led the Communication Workers Union (CWU) from 2003 to 2016: 'Cromwell created the

<sup>7</sup>'Union leader attacks reform', *The Independent*, 14 June 1998; <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/union-leader-attacks-reform-1165133.html>

<sup>8</sup>G. Shock, *Renewing Left-Wing Ideas in Late Twentieth-Century Britain: Marxism Today*, c. 1977–1994, DPhil. thesis, University of Oxford, 2020, p. 101; <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:926090c1-1bb2-4f28-9381-50bfa01c1e70>

<sup>9</sup>Mary Southcott, interview, 22 March 2023.

foundation of the modern state ... and for people from the left, or the trade union movement, the thing about first-past-the-post is that it's an antiquity.<sup>10</sup>

## Rising support for reform

The same arguments that had motivated the debate before Labour's victory in 1997 would resurface quite rapidly again after 2015, as the Conservatives had won two elections in a row and their approach to government was becoming increasingly objectionable to many of their opponents. In the words of two supporters of electoral reform: 'Boris Johnson's premiership was defined by staggering dishonesty, a slide towards authoritarianism and corruption and the erosion of democracy and the rule of law.'<sup>11</sup>

Successive Conservative governments used the Commons majority to force through a number of controversial measures. In particular, 'Brexit loomed large' in the Conservative manifestos of both 2017 and 2019 as the projects of carrying out Brexit and reducing the powers of the courts and Parliament to alter or halt the course of Brexit effectively merged.<sup>12</sup> The fact that FPTP could afford a government this kind of power was nothing new, but its use by the government was increasingly perceived to be unfair and reflective of a significant systemic flaw by opponents. Indeed, a recent report of the British Social Attitudes Survey shows that support for changing the electoral system to PR, which had hovered around 35 per cent since 1983, increased to 45 per cent in 2015 and in 2021 rose to 51 per cent—the first time in forty years of polling that a majority of the public has supported a change to the voting system.<sup>13</sup> The report suggests that the Brexit vote played a role in increasing dissatisfaction with FPTP.

While in 2008, only 31 per cent of those identifying as 'Europhiles' supported PR, in 2022, 73 per cent of the same group said they backed reform. The opinion of Eurosceptics, who were similarly opposed in 2008, is little changed over the same period.

Party identification was also strongly linked to the rise in support for PR. Where Labour voters had previously always opposed reform—at broadly similar levels to Conservative voters—in 2021, 61 per cent desired a change to PR. There is an even stronger consensus in favour of PR among the Labour membership, with polls putting support for PR at over 80 per cent.<sup>14</sup> This support does not appear to diverge along left-right lines. Factions like Momentum on the left have backed PR as policy; others like Labour to Win, an influential moderate group, have formally supported the debate of PR motions at Labour conferences.

What stands out, in particular, is how intense and sustained the scrutiny of the British constitution has been for the past eight years. Since the 2015 election, the primary issue in British politics has been Brexit and its accompanying constitutional problems. Indeed, survey evidence suggests that, contrary to the usual pattern by which dissatisfaction with election results dissipates over time as the losers acquiesce to the outcome, discontent over the process of Brexit appears to have intensified among Remain supporters.<sup>15</sup> This context was vital in sustaining a wave of grassroots PR activism, which began seriously in 2015 with the start of the group Make Votes Matter.

## Origins of the grassroots campaign: Make Votes Matter

Owen Winter was a sixteen year-old school student at the time of the 2015 general election. In that election, the Conservatives won an

<sup>10</sup>Billy Hayes, CWU leader 2001–2015, interview, 17 February 2022.

<sup>11</sup>K. Baker and S. Kind, 'Support for proportional representation among local parties is overwhelming', *LabourList*, 21 September 2022; <https://labourlist.org/2022/09/support-for-proportional-representation-among-local-parties-is-overwhelming/>

<sup>12</sup>T. Bale, 'Britain's political parties and the constitution', *Institute for Government*, 2023, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup>J. Curtice and A. Scholes, 'Constitutional reform', in *British Social Attitudes* 39, 2023.

<sup>14</sup>E. Chappell and S. Rodgers, 'Exclusive: 83% of members say Labour should back proportional representation', *LabourList*, 19 July 2021; <https://labourlist.org/2021/07/exclusive-83-of-members-say-labour-should-back-proportional-representation/>

<sup>15</sup>C. van der Eijk and J. Rose, 'Winner-loser effects in contentious constitutional referenda: perceptions of procedural fairness and the Brexit referendum', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2021, pp. 104–20; [doi.org/10.1177/1369148120932852](https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148120932852)

overall majority on under 40 per cent of the popular vote. Dismayed, Winter created a petition on [change.org](https://www.change.org), calling for the voting system to be changed. He had never campaigned on the issue before. However, after 220,000 people signed his petition in one month, it became clear that there were many people for whom the inequities of the voting system was a serious enough issue that they felt a need to protest. Organised over Facebook, Winter's petition led to a protest organised in Parliament Square and, subsequently, to a permanent grassroots advocacy organisation connecting activists from various political backgrounds: Make Votes Matter (MVM). Klina Jordan and Joe Sousek headed the new organisation. It drew upon a membership base of the major progressive parties and a few Conservative and UKIP supporters. As one trade unionist, who was a member of MVM, recalled: 'It's bizarre being in an environment with them ... as a trade unionist, I've been there with Tory lords who want PR, and you think, "well, the last thing *you* want is a trade unionist sat beside you"'<sup>16</sup>

From its inception, the group had three strategic foci. First, to create a movement with local groups organising events to build support for voting reform across the UK and to demonstrate that PR was an issue of public interest. Second, to build a coalition of groups supporting PR that could expand MVM's reach and supplement its grassroots base. The 'Alliance for PR' grew to include over seventy organisations. Critically, this included the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, which would provide funding for the first professional organisers of MVM and later Labour for a New Democracy (L4ND). MVM's third strategic focus was to work with political parties. Because enacting PR would require one of the two major parties to back reform, and this was much more likely to be Labour than the Conservatives, a good deal of campaigning effort was focussed on changing Labour's policy.

This third goal presented the most significant challenge. Labour members often consider Labour the singular party of social progress and are often sceptical of cross-party

groupings like MVM. More practically, a change to Labour policy would necessitate the involvement of the affiliated trade unions, which hold nearly 50 per cent of the votes at the party conference. The complexity and diversity of trade union organisations and the fact that many new campaigners often had no trade union background themselves meant they had difficulty gaining access.

It was, however, during work with the trade unions that the grassroots strategy, which would later be used to significant effect by L4ND, was developed. Caroline Osborne, then Labour organiser for MVM, recalled that the access problem in Unite was overcome by the development of telephone banking operations, whereby registered supporters were contacted by the campaign to identify union members and encourage and inform them about ways they could take up the issue within their union branches. This process dramatically increased the number of motions tabled at policy conferences and was eventually exported into L4ND's CLP campaign with similar success.<sup>17</sup>

The campaign was already able to draw upon prior support from many experienced trade unionists who were also involved in MVM's campaigns outside their unions. However, active canvassing of MVM members within the trade unions motivated many members who were not previously active in their unions or may have been involved, for example, as a shop steward, but not within union politics. Engaging these supporters was critical in transforming latent interest into a sustained campaign capable of passing branch motions up and down the country.

## Labour for a New Democracy

Despite MVM's success in developing effective techniques for grassroots campaigns, the problem remained that its reach within Labour was limited because it operated from a base outside the party. This was the catalyst for the launch in 2020 of Labour for a New Democracy, a specifically Labour-facing coalition of organisations campaigning for the Labour Party to commit to introducing

<sup>16</sup>Howard Kaye, ASLEF Executive Committee member, interview, 4 November 2022.

<sup>17</sup>Caroline Osborne, L4ND, interview, 6 December 2022.

PR. The coalition included organisations concerned with democratic renewal, such as LCER, Compass, Chartist and Open Labour; it was also supported by anti-Brexit organisations like Another Europe is Possible and Labour for a European Future.

L4ND was led by Joe Sousek and was hosted initially by MVM. In 2022, L4ND moved to the Labour-based LCER by mutual consent as a Labour-facing emphasis was perceived to be more conducive to persuading Labour supporters. Like previous campaigns, L4ND worked on multiple fronts, canvassing elected representatives, trade unions and Labour's grassroots. Its core goal initially was to secure a conference vote in favour of PR, with the fundamental strategy being the same local campaigning developed in work with the trade unions at MVM. This tactic was remarkably effective in galvanising members' support and rapidly generating support for PR within CLPs, and the 2021 Labour Party conference saw 153 submissions on PR—a record number for any issue. Over 80 per cent of CLP delegates voted in favour of the PR motion at the 2021 conference, but the motion fell owing to a lack of support from the trade unions—the union vote was 95 per cent against. It was not until the following year, after a number of trade unions had adopted policies on PR, that the conference would commit to backing reform.

## Politics for the Many and the trade union campaign

The size of union opposition at the 2021 conference was somewhat misleading, as most unions had not held a policy conference where the issue could be debated because of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, from late 2021, the campaign was successful across a remarkably diverse set of industrial and political contexts. By the 2022 Labour conference, two of the 'big five' affiliated trade unions, Unite and UNISON, backed reform, while the CWU adopted a position condemning FPTP. GMB held a conference at which they confirmed their opposition to PR and the pandemic again dominated the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers's (USDAW) 2022 annual delegate meeting. USDAW finally debated PR at their 2023 meeting, where they

backed PR. Support was not limited to Labour-affiliated unions, as Prospect and the University and College Union also adopted a policy favouring PR.

The trade union campaign was led by Politics for the Many, which was established in 2017 following a LCER fringe event at the TUC organised by Billy Hayes, with the aim of building support for electoral reform among trade unionists. The organisation was chaired by two longstanding trade unionists: Lynn Henderson of the PCS and former President of the Scottish Trades Union Congress; and Nancy Platts, Labour councillor and Jeremy Corbyn's former trade union liaison officer. Other socialist figures associated with Corbyn (such as the MP and former Transport and Salaried Staffs' Association officer, Sam Tarry) also played notable roles.

Since its inception, the organisation lobbied trade union officials; however, it found only limited enthusiasm amongst officials and its primary organising model focussed on the grassroots. As such, the campaign's success depended upon access to participatory mechanisms—for example, the ability of lay members to pass resolutions in local groups or propose motions to national policy conferences directly. These mechanisms tended to be stronger and more accessible to access in the smaller, more homogeneous unions. The challenge was greatest in the large general unions (GMB, UNISON and Unite) in which many different kinds of workers are conglomerated into one organisation. The advantage of conglomeration is that it focusses resources among previously disparate unions, making their use more effective. This is particularly attractive as union density declines, but the trade-off is that it can negatively affect union democracy. A single region in UNISON, the GMB, or Unite might have over 100,000 members. That diversity brings democratic challenges—construction workers and office workers are organised in different sections and have different representatives. The task of aggregating these diverse interests is difficult and thus, participatory democracy tends to be weaker. Moreover, the regional structure of these unions can vary dramatically—even within unions—and have varying opportunities for participatory democracy of a kind that the campaign primarily relied upon.

The challenge was particularly acute within the GMB. Not only did the union's democratic structures make it challenging organisationally to convince regions of the case for PR, but the union has a longstanding opposition to PR and had for many years educated its officials and activists on the benefits of FPTP. As such, officials in the regions of GMB organisation often opposed initiatives to promote PR. While proposals to support PR did go to the GMB's conference, the influence of the Central Executive Committee in organising and controlling debate at the conference is also distinctly strong compared to other unions, and its recommendations tend to be followed—as it was when it recommended opposition to PR.

There is no obvious reason to believe that support for PR was discernibly weaker among rank and file members of the GMB than in other unions, but the difficulty of negotiating democracy within the GMB has contributed significantly to the continuing failure to sway the union. While there were also organisational challenges relating to the structure of regional organisation in Unite and UNISON, and while some officials in both unions opposed reform, these challenges were also less acute. Within UNISON, while regional executives control the allocation of the majority of motions debated at conference, space is reserved for motions proposed by delegates in the room, and this participatory mechanism was key to passing the motion. While PR was prioritised as an issue by only a few regions, it was the second most popular issue for debate amongst delegates. There was no recommendation against the tabling of this motion from the floor; nor was there any voice of opposition from the UNISON leadership to its contents. It was thus carried with a large majority. Similarly, while campaigners submitted a limited motion to Unite's 2021 policy conference calling for opposition to FPTP and a future review of the electoral system, the newly elected General Secretary, Sharon Graham, not only embraced the motion, but built on it, asserting that Unite would not only oppose FPTP but back PR, declaring that 'Our political class has failed working people, and our system is broken. It is time to change our democracy.'<sup>18</sup>

Union activists, many having no prior engagement in union politics, drove these

changes. Far from resenting this, many union officials and representatives may have been more willing to incorporate the PR issue because unions value grassroots engagement. While almost all the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen's (ASLEF) executive members were previously opposed to PR, they were impressed by the scale of activism and convinced by the arguments, and the whole executive became strongly in favour.<sup>19</sup> Similar trends emerged elsewhere:

We heard that at UNISON conference, they said we haven't seen grassroots organising like this in a long time ... in my opinion, unions really like this kind of activism because it gets their membership riled up about something and they're interested, and they're keen, and they want to get involved.<sup>20</sup>

After the member-led resolutions had been passed at the Unite and UNISON conferences, there remained some tension about how these votes should be interpreted. There was a suggestion within the Unite delegation at Labour's 2022 conference that they should vote against the PR motion, as their policy only committed to opposing FPTP.<sup>21</sup> It was largely interpreted, however, that these conference resolutions provided a mandate for delegations to the 2022 Labour Party conference to back PR. The motion on PR, submitted to Labour's 2022 conference, was the most popular issue among the CLPs for the second year running. It straightforwardly called for a Labour government to replace the FPTP system with a proportional alternative and was passed on a show of hands by both CLP and union delegates.

## Where next?

PR remains far from being enacted or even included in a Labour manifesto in the short

<sup>18</sup>H. Stewart, 'Electoral reform group seeks £1m to back MPs who can beat Tories', *The Guardian*, 6 August 2022; <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/aug/06/electoral-reform-group-seeks-1m-back-mps-beat-tories-win-as-one>

<sup>19</sup>Howard Kaye, ASLEF Executive Committee Member, interview, 4 November 2022.

<sup>20</sup>Caroline Osborne, L4ND, interview, 6 December 2022.

<sup>21</sup>Mary Southcott Interview, 22 March 2023.

term. Indeed, the day before the conference motion passed, Keir Starmer asserted that Labour would not prioritise electoral reform. In the face of such difficulties, many activists point to New Zealand as a model for citizen-led electoral reform. In that country, a grassroots campaign was crucial in swaying two referendums, changing the electoral system to PR. However, New Zealand is not a model example of how to get PR, or at least it highlights the difficulty of doing so. In New Zealand, both Labour and National promised a referendum on PR almost by accident: both parties were mostly opposed to reform and strongly wished to avoid a referendum on the issue. However, they both promised a referendum in the mistaken belief that the other party would do so. Elites rarely lose control of the reform process in this way and it is much more likely that they will have to be persuaded of the need for reform in the UK.<sup>22</sup> However difficult this may be, the campaign has had some significant success in influencing the opinion of many current and prospective Labour MPs, and indeed, the support of the trade unions has likely bolstered the prestige of this campaign amongst Labour's MPs.

Having achieved the principal objective of a vote for PR at the Labour Party conference, the major PR campaigns face challenges moving forward. There is no consensus among activists over the kind of PR system which should be introduced, or by what process it could be enacted. A popular view among reformers is that having made a manifesto commitment to introducing PR, Labour could enact this as ordinary legislation after winning a general election, avoiding the intense scrutiny of other parties and large sections of the public. However, this decidedly majoritarian approach would be highly contentious and, as discussed in this journal, is perhaps not the panacea many supporters wish it to be.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the present success has been remarkable and will likely have long-term effects on the Labour Party.

<sup>22</sup>A. Renwick, *The Politics of Electoral Reform: Changing the Rules of Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 207.

<sup>23</sup>S. White, 'How should a progressive Parliament advance proportional representation?', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 93, no. 2, 2022, pp. 297–306; doi: [doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13146](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13146)

## Conclusion

Comparing the scale and strength of feeling to previous issue campaigns within the labour movement, a potential comparison is the campaigns over nuclear disarmament.<sup>24</sup> The scale of support and sense of feeling makes it highly plausible that PR will remain an issue of significant interest within the Labour Party in the next generation, even as the present leadership remains sceptical. Like disarmament, while senior politicians have voiced critical support—Clive Lewis even made PR a pillar of his leadership bid—most of the current energy around PR has come from grassroots organising. And like nuclear disarmament, it may well be the union connection which ends up being its most vital link. Embedding disarmament into the culture and education of major unions like the TGWU, which eventually merged into Unite, ensured that the issue retained prominence within Labour, even as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament declined as a mass organisation.

For active campaigners, building a consensus across the labour movement in favour of the principle of PR was arguably the more important goal. Unlike previous waves of interest in electoral reform, there is now much larger, more organised and more sustained support, increasing the likelihood that future generations of Labour politicians will support PR when a chance for reform does emerge again. Support within the movement for major change appears to remain strong even as Labour moves further ahead in the polls—CLPs and unions have continued passing PR motions. As such, the long-term significance of this campaign for the character of the Labour Party and PR may be greater than its short-term prospects suggest.

## Appendix

### A.1 List of interviews by date

*Billy Hayes*, former leader of the CWU 2001–2015, 5 September 2022

<sup>24</sup>B. Pimlott, 'Trade unions and the second coming of the CND', in B. Pimlott and C. Cook, eds., *Trade Unions in British Politics: The First 250 Years*, London, Longman, 1991, pp. 200–222.

*Alan Johnson*, former leader of the CWU and its predecessor, the Union of Communication Workers 1992–1997, Labour MP for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle 1997–2017, 6 September 2022

*Howard Kaye*, ASLEF executive committee member for District 5, 4 November 2022

*Sandy Martin*, Current chair of LCER, Labour MP for Ipswich 2017–2019, 8 November 2022

*Caroline Osborne*, Labour for a New Democracy—Political and Education Officer, 6 December 2022; follow-up interview 27 January 2023

*Mary Southcott*, Political officer of the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform 1990–2016, 22 March 2023

*Sam Tarry*, Labour MP for Ilford South, 7 February 2023

*Owen Winter*, Make Votes Matter founder, 11 January 2023

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*Cameron Rhys Herbert* is a doctoral student at the University of Cambridge, working on the history of trade unions in British politics.