

DISPROPORTIONAL MISREPRESENTATION

At the risk of sounding bossy, the last issue of this magazine urged readers to consider voting for the Green party in the General Election. It looks as though many may have done so. Over a million people voted Green, four times as many as in 2010. Caroline Lucas retained her seat with an increased majority, and it seems fair to say that a good base has been built for the next election in 2020.

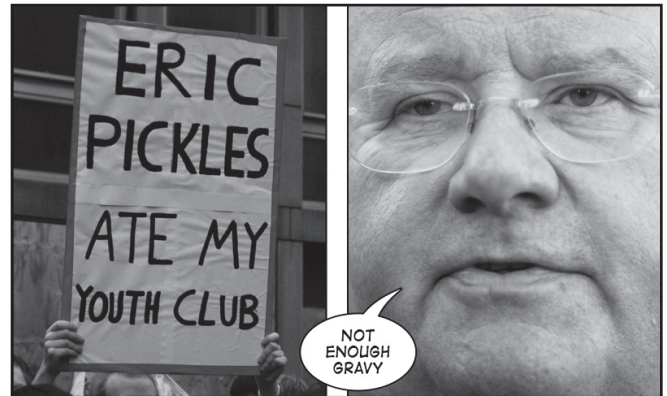
National institution as she is though, the MP for Brighton Pavilion can't change Westminster on her own. Many new Green voters (and indeed members) will have been bitterly disappointed to find that all the energy and optimism of the 'Green Surge' didn't translate into any new seats. Older Greens are used to this kind of disappointment, but that doesn't make it any less bitter.

Just in case anyone missed how the system worked, the Tories' eleven million votes gave them 331 seats. Labour's nine million produced 232 seats. The Lib Dems, Greens and UKIP between them ended up with seven and a half million votes – and just ten seats. The case for a more proportional voting system is stronger than ever. But the ruthless Catch 22 remains, that no Government benefiting so egregiously from the 'first past the post' system will ever legislate to change it. As things stand today, proportional representation (PR) for Westminster elections is probably as far away as ever.

One way this might change would be if what remains of the Labour party decided it was in its interest to campaign for PR, on the basis that this could enable some kind of progressive coalition to emerge. Some think this might now be more than a far-fetched fantasy, since Labour otherwise faces being locked out of power for a long time. The days of Scottish Labour seem to be over, and south of the border the planned boundary changes look set to further consolidate Tory dominance in 2020. Sadly though, it seems more likely that Labour will instead be dragged further to the right, on the laughable basis that the ill-fated Ed Miliband was rejected by the electorate for being 'too left wing'.

The Liberal Democrats, now 'ConDemned' by Clegg to a forlorn rump of eight – and soon seven, if their one representative in Scotland fails to survive an expected byelection – can be relied upon to support PR as they have consistently done for decades. But having played their hand so poorly in 2011's Alternative Vote referendum, and then become a laughing stock in the election, they will no longer have any credibility to lead any campaign. 'Making votes count' will itself require a broad coalition, including those otherwise not inclined to vote.

The injustice of the 2015 result is as ever compounded by the fact that so many people didn't vote at all, meaning that the 'majority' Conservative government was in fact chosen by less than a quarter of those eligible to do so. This is the real extent of the mandate for the accelerated privatisation, tax-cutting and dismantling of the welfare state that is already unfolding under the fraudulent guise of 'austerity'. Even the police are worried, arguing recently that further cuts to their budgets will lead to "paramilitary policing". Get ready, Scotland – there may be a lot of English refugees heading your way before long.



Is this the last hurrah for the Pickles meme?

One of the few causes for celebration is that the Eric Pickles is no longer in charge at the Department for Communities and Local Government, meaning he is no longer the final arbiter on planning matters. As often happens, he's been knighted on his way out of office. This largesse has caused outrage across the North, where he has presided over a ruthless programme of cuts to council funding, disproportionately impacting Labour councils in areas that really need the money. It's perhaps a shame that new knights of the realm do not have to demonstrate their prowess on horseback, as this might have provided a spectacular finale to the visual black comedy he has so expertly provided.

His departure is unlikely to mark any change in policy though. Greg Clark, Pickles' replacement, was the chief architect of the 2012 National Planning Policy Framework and is known as an enthusiast for 'localism'. It is localism, apparently, that justifies the ill-judged proposal to 'offer communities a veto' on new wind farms in their area, by giving local authorities the final say on applications. It is unclear how this might be achieved, though if as has been suggested it involves removing appeal rights, this could set a disturbing precedent.

Meanwhile in a formidable pincer movement, new Energy Secretary Amber Rudd will also remove the subsidies that the onshore wind industry relies on. Strangely the same localist logic is not being applied to fracking, despite the fact that recent polls show only 24 per cent support it, while 65 per cent support windpower. Rudd does apparently believe climate change is a reality, which is reassuring, but she has already announced her intention to "kick-start a shale gas revolution".

Most worrying of all, perhaps, is the prospect of what a Tory Government with a small majority might do to appease its eurosceptic right wing. The prospect of Britain actually leaving the EU is a shocking one. Hopefully this will be averted, though there will be a lot of unpleasantness along the way. More immediately, reactionary eurosceptic Michael Gove has been charged with finding a way to repeal the 1998 Human Rights Act, removing the European Convention on Human Rights from English law. This bodes ill, not least for travelling people whose rights have been much better protected by Europe than by Britain, or indeed by most other EU nation states. Localism is not always a good thing. **MH**