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The Door Is That Way

7–8 minutes

The striking new plan to let voters reclaim democracy in a profoundly undemocratic system.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 26th July 2023

Trust no one, trust everyone: this paradox is the foundational principle of democracy. We should not trust any politician's promises until they've been delivered. We should not trust anyone to represent us without constant pressure and feedback. But we should trust society as a whole – trust everyone – to make choices for the good of all. Otherwise we would need a different system.

The problem is that the will of those we should trust – each other – is constantly thwarted by the will of those we shouldn't. Political and electoral systems, governed from the centre, are designed to grant us a semblance of ownership and control, while depriving us of real power. The political parties that claim to represent us too often respond instead to the demands of the powerful: media barons, corporations, party funders. In extreme cases, such as the UK's current government, they are reduced to corporate lobbyists, delivering the country to the most [antisocial interests](#).

This problem is compounded where elections are unfair by design, like the UK's first-past-the-post system. At the 2019 general

election, the Conservatives took 56% of the seats on 43.6% [of the vote](#). They [gained one seat](#) for every 38,264 votes cast. Labour needed 50,837 votes to win a seat, the Liberal Democrats 336,038 and the Greens 866,435. In [229 out of 650 constituencies](#), votes against the successful candidates outweighed the votes in favour.

As recent opinion polls suggest, there is massive public appetite for [changing the system](#), but this appetite is not shared by the two parties most likely to form a government. The Labour leadership won't commit to proportional representation, no matter how many party members [demand it](#), because it sees itself as the winner in a winner-takes-all election.

To make matters worse, every recent Labour leader has flatly refused to strike electoral deals with other parties. For 13 years, Labour has shut itself out of power by rejecting strategic alliances. The first-past-the-post system also enables Keir Starmer to wage his brutal war [against dissent](#) within the party, against diversity of thought [and strategy](#), [against hope](#). Because he is confident that voters in many constituencies have nowhere else to go, he can respond to the media barons and corporate lobbyists, rather than the people.

So what do we do, desperate for change, but denied it by those who claim to act on our behalf? How do we take back control? The answer, I believe, has been developed where I live. Totnes and south Devon is a prize example of what the democracy campaign Compass calls a "[progressive tragedy](#)". The latest election predictions (aggregated from [three different websites](#)) show the Conservative MP winning on 34% of the vote, while the Lib Dems, Labour and Greens between them are expected to take 59%. The Tories have held this seat for almost 99 years, and the split

progressive vote threatens to sustain their hegemony. The problem we face here, as in many other constituencies, is that everyone opposed to the Conservatives has to guess other people's intentions in seeking a tactical overthrow.

So here's the plan local people have devised to break minority rule. It's simple and seems hard to fault. It's called the [South Devon Primary](#). Voters are invited to a series of eight town hall meetings, all held within a fortnight, in different parts of the constituency. At these meetings, the leading progressive candidates (likely, in this constituency, to be Labour, Lib Dem and Green) make their pitch. Members of the audience are not asked to decide whom they like the most, but whom they believe is best-placed to beat the incumbent MP. At the end of each meeting, there's a secret ballot. There are basic precautions to ensure no one from outside the constituency can vote and no one votes twice.

The primary is run by volunteers, and depends for its success on their ability to excite people about the possibility of change and encourage them to attend the meetings. In other words, political re-engagement is baked into the model. The campaign has so far recruited 40 local ambassadors to talk to people in the constituency's towns and villages.

Progressive candidates, regardless of their party line on electoral pacts, have a powerful incentive to attend the meetings, as a no-show would greatly reduce their chances of success, both in the primary and in the general election. When all eight meetings have taken place, the total vote is released. The campaign will then urge progressives to unite behind the leading candidate: not only voting for them, but leafletting and canvassing for them. Local people, in

other words, will then be able to trust other people's tactical votes.

There's no obligation on the losing candidates to stand down at the election. But their parties will be disinclined to put much effort into their campaigns, knowing that the constituency is swinging behind another.

It seems to me that this approach could, in the future, perhaps, also provide openings for independents peeling away from Labour. If the prospect of independents winning their primaries were seen as a real threat, Starmer would be forced to abandon his purge of diverse and independent thinking from the Labour party. The Conservative MP for Totnes, Anthony Mangnall, complains the primary will "[restrict democracy](#)". It's not clear why. In fact, it's pretty obvious that it enhances and empowers democracy. He appears to be rattled.

Campaigners in another constituency – Godalming and Ash, in Surrey, where the chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, will stand at the next election – are now [adopting the model](#). Several other constituency groups are interested. The south Devon pioneers are offering their design to any constituency in which the Tories are likely to win by default in a largely progressive constituency. But it will not be made available to those in which polling suggests a progressive candidate already has a high chance of unseating the Tory incumbent. Of the 62 "progressive tragedies" in the UK, the campaigners estimate that roughly 50 could make good use of the strategy. Enough to swing an election.

This strategy offers more than just an end to minority rule. It also has the potential to undermine the power of dictatorial party leaders, of whatever persuasion, and return power to constituents.

This simple, local idea, which enhances our trust in each other, could transform our political system. It will help deliver something closer to the democracy we have so long been promised and so long denied.

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