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**'Grown-up Politics Needs A Grown-up Voting System –
Our Future Depends On It'**

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It's a great pleasure to be invited to speak at an event at the University of Leeds. I graduated from the University of Liverpool. Living where I do now, our local hospitals are run by the Manchester University Foundation Trust. I am very much aware that the universities of Liverpool, Manchester, and Leeds started out together as colleges of the federal Victoria University.

Professor Ramsay Muir, writing in 1905 or thereabouts, penned a student song celebrating the three now independent universities:

*We sing our friends and rivals,
We praise the gallant deeds
Of the men of murky Manchester
And the lusty lads of Leeds.*

Somewhat more respectful than the words in the student songbook I found in a cupboard in my office when I was President of the Guild of Undergraduates at Liverpool. That song referred to the fate awaiting us all – *to go up to Heaven or down to Leeds*. No really!

My task this evening is to answer the question why grown-up politics needs a grown-up voting system. And in advocating changing the way we elect our representatives – at Westminster and in local government – I am going to make the case for replacing 'voting with an X' in First Past the Post contests to elect a single representative, with voting that ranks candidates in order of preference 1,2,3: the Single Transferable Vote system of proportional representation in multi-member constituencies. Then I am going to subject my preferred system to a series of challenges to make sure that it is fit for purpose. That purpose is to ensure both that our Parliament is properly representative and to promote what I am calling 'grown-up' politics. That is a political system that addresses the big issues of our time in an appropriately strategic way, not just having our politicians play tactical games around the really big challenges that we face as a country, as a community of nations, and, indeed, as neighbours living on, and impacting on, a troubled planet.

I must confess that I have taken an interest in elections from an embarrassingly early age. As a child, I was happy colouring in the constituency maps in the Times Guide to the House of Commons – blue, red, or yellow. Didn't do much for my sense of geography having Orkney and Shetland – or Zetland, rather – as in inset somewhere in the Moray Firth.

At boarding school in the 1960s, I bunked off afternoon sport to deliver Liberal leaflets in North Oxford. And I joined the Electoral Reform Society (ERS) – when everyone one else my age was involved with altogether cooler causes. Today, I am a member of the ERS Board. While I am not representing the ERS officially in this talk, but speaking in a personal capacity, in preparing this lecture, I have benefited hugely both from ERS research and also the suggestions from some fellow Board members and staff. So this is not all my own work.

The schoolmaster who taught me history for A Level, who organised school debates, and a mock election, one Malcolm Oxley, is a proud son of Leeds. So when I received the invitation to address the Leeds Phil and Lit I knew I had to say yes.

It was on a Malcolm Oxley Sixth Form trip to Munich, Vienna, and Prague in August 1968 that we encountered the Warsaw Pact forces invading Czechoslovakia on 21st. Scary stuff. Sleeping in a NATO tent borrowed from the school Combined Cadet Force was not the best position to find oneself in on a Prague campsite when the Russians invaded. But the experience taught me to value freedom and democracy even more. And not to take such things for granted. That feeling was reinforced two decades later, on 9 June 1990, when, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Communist rule, I found myself back in Prague, this time as an assistant editor of BBC television news. I remember the line of enthusiastic voters approaching the polling station in Prague Castle. They were singing as they queued. It was like hearing the Prisoners' Chorus from *Fidelio*.

We in Great Britain tend to take our democracy for granted. And we really shouldn't. Nor should we kid ourselves that the way we conduct our elections is the best. Just because that's the way we've always done things.

So what is it that's not grown-up about First Past the Post voting? It's not just that First Past the Post does not result in an at-all representative parliament overall, with the leading party often securing an overall majority without winning a majority of votes – and minority parties under- or un-represented. That's bad enough. But that in turn results in chopping and changing of policy approaches which is inimical to strategic thinking and planning for the long term.

We hear a lot just now about '13 years of Tory misrule'. But that was the Labour slogan in 1964. And then Ted Heath (and, later, Margaret Thatcher) came in to undo all that the Harold Wilson governments had done.

This lurching from side to side makes it difficult to address the key issues that face us in a strategic rather than a tactical way. So issues just don't get dealt with. Social care is one current example. For many years, the classic neglected issue was pensions policy.

It was just three years ago that I attended a lecture given by the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, at the University of Liverpool. In a talk about devolution and the Northern Powerhouse, Mayor Burnham emerged as a stern critic of First Past the Post voting and a persuasive advocate for proportional representation. When I quizzed him about this, the Mayor said that it was the concept of marginal seats under First Past the Post voting that made rational decision making around the allocation of public funds almost impossible.

The effect of 'safe seats' has equally unfortunate consequences for voter engagement. If there's no prospect of a change, why bother voting? In marginal seats, the political discourse is all around tactical voting. Most certainly not around what Tony Benn used to call 'the ishoos'. And, worse still, in all seats, whether safe or marginal, the winning candidate presumes to speak of 'my constituency' and 'my constituents' - even tho, as is the case in the area of South Manchester where I live, the MP, elected on a minority of the votes cast, is a noisy Brexiteer, claiming to speak for a Leave-voting constituency.

The distorting effect of First Past the Post voting leaves the smaller political parties seriously under-represented. And it is indeed odd to have the Scottish National Party as the Third Party at Westminster (with all that means for profile and media coverage), with the SNP's 1.2 million votes securing 48 seats while the Liberal Democrats, with three times that total of votes, electing less than a quarter of the SNP's number of MPs. Just 11 – although that total has risen to 15 following by-election gains. But we won't get anywhere if the focus is simply on the anomalies between parties. That's just like primary school kids fighting in the play ground: 'That's not fair!' Well, it isn't fair; but, through all this, it is this mis-representation or non-representation of individual citizens that is the greatest fault of First Past The Post.

But there is a better way – a British way. The Single Transferable Vote system (STV). Introduced by the British to Ireland in the 1920s and today used in Ireland North and South – for both the Irish Dail and the Northern Ireland Assembly and for local councils. Used too for electing local government councillors in Scotland. And currently on offer to Welsh Councils by the Welsh Senedd.

Under the STV system of proportional representation, representatives are chosen in multi-member constituencies – say five or six in urban areas and three or four in less populated rural areas. The Leeds district's eight MPs might be elected in one multi-member seat. (Others with local knowledge will know better than I what might work best.)

The voter has one vote and marks candidates in order of preference (as far as he/they have any). A candidate who secures a quota of all the votes cast is declared elected and any surplus votes are reallocated to his/her next choice in proportion to the overall pattern of preferences. When there are no more preferences to be reallocated and there are still seats to be filled, the bottom placed candidate is eliminated and their second preferences are reallocated among the remaining candidates. The process continues until all the seats in that constituency are filled. In a five-seat contest, the quota would be the lowest common number that just five candidates could each secure and be elected. In other words, the total votes cast divided by the number of seats plus one – plus one. Only five candidates could secure that.

Transfers are made correct to two decimal places. So it's certainly more complicated than just totting up the Xs in a First Past the Post contest. But the advantages to be derived from better representation are considerable.

A lot of people will be familiar with STV voting from their membership of trades unions or professional bodies. You can learn more from the Electoral Reform Society's website www.electoral-reform.org.uk. And also from this pamphlet by another Leeds name, the late Colin Buchanan *An Ethical Case for Electoral Reform* (published by Grove Books in Cambridge www.grovebooks.co.uk. It contains a simple guide to STV).

Colin, who died just a few weeks ago, was an Honorary Bishop in the Diocese of Leeds (and, by the way, a former President of ERS).

He was always most helpful to me as a newbie member of the ERS Council (now the ERS Board). As an Anglican Bishop, Colin pointed out that the Church of England had been using STV for elections to Church bodies, synods etc. from the 1920s. Making the case for a political system that better values the Common Good, Colin believed that the Church of England should, as he put it, 'preach what it practices'. Although I am a Lay Reader in the Diocese of Chester, I'm not sure how a lecture like this would play from the pulpit! But Archbishop Justin Welby's appeal this week for politicians 'not to treat opponents as enemies, but fellow human beings' would most certainly be best served by adopting STV voting.

Of course, other systems of proportional representation are available. Elections to the Scottish Parliament and the London Assembly, for example, are by the Additional Member System with party representation evened up from Regional Lists. Elections to the European Parliament (when we still belonged) were by a Regional List system. I certainly do not advocate Party Lists, wanting to give the voters the chance to express their preferences between candidates, which is what STV does.

Advocating the adoption of STV isn't just about theory. We have the experience of the operation of the Single Transferable Vote in, for example, Scottish local elections to draw on.

Professor Sir John Curtice from Strathclyde University is today's elections guru. The successor to David Butler, Robert McKenzie and Michael Steed. Sir John has analysed the Scottish local elections – to identify the impact of ten years of STV north of the Border.

The results showed an electorate that had embraced this new form of voting: ranking their preferences instead of being forced by a winner takes all system to take a gamble on one option, which they often view as the least worst.

Curtice's report for ERS, [*The Power of Preferences: STV in Scottish Local Elections*](#), showed how Scottish voters are choosing to make the most of the power of preferences when they vote for their local councils. In 2017, 85.8% of ballots contained more than one preference while the number of ballots which contained three or more preferences stood at 60.7% – a steady growth since the first STV election in Scotland where just 54% did so.

One of the benefits of this use of preferences is that voters are able to express their support for more than one party. Under First Past the Post voters have as many or as few votes as there are vacancies, meaning that voters are left unable to express a 'second preference' choice once they've backed their preferred candidates.

In Scotland around seven in ten Conservative, Labour and SNP supporters chose to use their transferable vote to express preferences for other parties or independent candidates once they had voted for all the candidates of their party of choice. With Liberal Democrat voters it was even higher, with just one in five choosing to back the party and the party alone. And the increased use of preferences is important. In 2017 we saw just 38.5% of candidates elected on first preferences alone – down five points from 2012, showing the growing influence of those second, third or even fourth preferences on the outcome of Scottish local elections. Professor Curtice's analysis found that 101 seats (or 8% of all seats) in 2017 were eventually won by candidates who were not in a winning position after the first round.

These data show how, under STV, voters are able to shape the outcome of an election to make it far more reflective of their views and preferences than under FPTP. Indeed, the report emphasises how Scottish council elections held under STV have seen outcomes far more proportional than those seen in Scotland at the last three Westminster elections, held under First Past the Post.

It's too early to tell if the increasing polarisation of Scottish politics along Nationalist/Unionist lines will impact future results but what this analysis did show was that, after 15 years of fairer votes, the people of Scotland had embraced the power of the Single Transferable Vote.

Now local authorities in Wales are also able to make the change to STV, and the results in Scotland offer a powerful example of the benefits of adopting a fairer system. It's now up to councils in Wales to take up that opportunity and in doing so continue the progress towards ensuring that voters throughout the UK benefit from fairer voting systems at every election.

Last month, there was encouraging news for voters coming out of Powys and Gwynedd, as their County Councils voted YES to public consultations on scrapping First Past the Post for their elections and bringing in the fair and proportional Single Transferable Vote.

Councillors in Powys voted 34 for a consultation and 26 against, with 2 abstentions, while Councillor in Gwynedd voted 43 for, 8 against with 2 abstentions. Powys and Gwynedd County Council are the first councils in Wales to take this step since a law was passed in 2021 that gave councillors the power to move to the STV.

In the last set of local elections in Wales over a third of councils got 'unearned majorities' where a party holds over 50% of the seats on less than 50% of the vote.

Take for instance Cardiff, where Labour hold 70% of the seats with just 47% of the vote. Or Ynys Môn, where Plaid Cymru have 60% of the seats despite winning 41% of the vote. This goes the other way too: across Wales parties lose as much as they gain from the distorting effects of First Past the Post. Plaid, standing as Common Ground with the Greens in Cardiff, ended with just 2 of the council's 79 seats despite winning 17% of the vote across the city. It really is an electoral toss up for who gets represented – and who gets to set the agenda locally.

But even with so much opportunity it was still disappointing to hear a lot of misinformation spouted by people who like the status quo. One councillor even said that STV would end the proud tradition of independent councillors – something that would be a surprise to the 152 Independent councillors in Scotland, elected with STV!

The consultation is the first step, but to finally rid themselves of First Past the Post in time for the next elections, Powys and Gwynedd will need two-thirds of their members to agree to a resolution before 15th November 2024. So there's a lot still to do.

In his [2023 Reith Lecture series](#) on the BBC, Professor Ben Ansell observed: "There's a common lament about British democracy. It's that our electoral system, first past the post, systematically leaves people out. So the eighth of the electorate who voted for UKIP in 2015 received just one seat out of 650, and the Greens and the Lib Dems, with a similar combined vote share, got nine.

It's hard to talk about our democratic future when the 'our' consistently leaves out a quarter to a third of the population. And a more proportional electoral system would remedy this to some degree, matching parliamentary seats to the public's votes", said Professor Ansell. And he continued: "Proportional systems are no panacea, but they do ward off some of the enemies of democracy. They force parties to speak to the whole country, not just swing voters. And more parties and hence more opinions, even ones you don't like, get represented in the heart of Parliament and perhaps also in government. And, finally, proportional elections can produce more consensual politics because no party can rule on its own. And coalitions are frustrating and they're imperfect and they rarely satisfy every party, I get it, I get it, but that's the point, no one gets what they want. Coalitions, they are a *tableau vivant* of the core of effective democracy: agreeable disagreement. We don't always get along, but we do have to agree how to disagree."

Professor Ansell pointed out that we nearly saw the introduction of proportional representation in the 1918 Representation of the People Bill. Ironically, in a Parliament where the Liberals were the largest party, the proposal for PR voting was voted down – by London Liberal members who feared for their seats under PR. The story is told in Martin Pugh's *Electoral Reform in War and Peace, 1906 to 1918*.

So how can we finally make the change more than a century later?

Michael Meadowcroft has written persuasively on *The Politics of Electoral Reform*. And the politics is everything. Making out a good theoretical case for reform is necessary, certainly. But it's not enough. We have to be able to counter the challenges – and build a majority for change.

My experience at the hustings was that arguments for reform of the voting system and the adoption of Proportional Representation were always met by a call for 'Strong Government' underpinned by X voting. Forty years ago in North Wiltshire, I was up against one Richard Needham who would meet my calls for reform with ridicule "What Chris Graham offers is Italian politics without the sunshine!" The Conservatives stood for strong government. And, for that, decisive majorities were needed – and certainly not the greater likelihood of coalition governments. (I hope that in later years, Sir Richard's experience as a Northern Ireland minister showed him both the need for and the benefits flowing from the Single Transferable Vote.)

So to the questions. Is PR an enemy of strong government? Well, two points. I've never advocated the sort of voting system that Italy enjoys: a party list system where seats are allocated by the totals of votes received by the parties; and the members returned are decided by the political parties from ordered lists of party loyalists. But truly strong government does not stem merely from big majorities in Parliament (where the dominant party is often wildly over-represented anyway.) Such 'strong governments' have a poor record when it comes to tackling the big challenges that face us. And when there is a change

of government, the incoming lot set about unpicking whatever the outgoing regime had put in place. An example, pensions policy in the 1960s and 70s.

Or take green issues under David Cameron. Cameron rebranded the Conservative Party, with a green tree emblem replacing the union jack as the party's logo. The Leader was pictured visiting the Arctic region, hugging a husky dog, and fretting about climate change. But in less than a decade he and his Chancellor George Osborne were reneging on their green policies and removing 'the green crap' levies on fuel bills. And the tree logo had shed its green canopy and re-grown the union jack.

I would argue that the truly 'strong government' we need can only stem from clear strategic thinking and consistent application. How we respond to the challenge of Artificial Intelligence is up there with the challenge of Climate Change, I would suggest. But where's the clear thinking and bold and consistent policy making? From an administration with a strong Commons majority? The result of First Past the Post? Actually, the opposite is true. Under First Past the Post voting, time and attention are devoted to tactics and gimmicks which will appeal to swing voters in marginal seats. And the Common Good loses out to the latest 'Enemy of the People' scare.

The next objection to the introduction of a reformed electoral system arises from the introduction of the multi-member constituencies required for STV PR. It might be three or five members representing a bigger patch, or more in big cities like Leeds. So we'd lose the idea of the single MP who is Lord of the Manor. Who sees himself as the voice of the constituency in Parliament. 'My constituency'. 'My constituents'. Even though he may never have enjoyed the support of a majority even of those of 'his' constituents who went to the polls.

And under FPTP many people in safe seats don't vote because they can't see the point. It won't make a difference. And of those who do vote, many will be obliged to vote tactically ...

That doesn't stop MPs referring with great pride and confidence to 'my constituency' as if they owned the place. And asserting that 'my constituents' want this or think that. This gets worse with Cabinet Ministers asserting that they know what 'the British People' want ...

In actual fact, STV promotes far stronger links between elected members and their constituencies. Let me return for a moment to that second trip to Prague in 1990 for those first free elections after the end of the Cold War: at Prague Castle, there were lots of visiting dignitaries observing the process. The pop stars Simon and Garfunkel had been playing a concert on the Eve of Poll. In the castle courtyard, I encountered Art Garfunkel in conversation with the former Irish Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald.

Nerd that I am, I started talking to Garret Fitzgerald about electoral systems. I found he was not at all a fan of the Single Transferable Vote. "If you're trying to run a coalition administration with a tiny minority it doesn't help to have your ministers rushing off to their constituencies at all times to tend the parish pump." So it doesn't sound as if STV weakens the constituency link at all. Actually, it strengthens it. And over the years the Irish have resisted all the attempts of some Dublin politicians to scrap PR STV in favour of First Past the Post.

But what about the suggestion that PR might encourage extremism? Nigel Farage hasn't managed to win a seat under First Past the Past. Richard Tice of Reform UK calls for proportional representation.

Elsewhere in Europe where party list systems operate, all sorts of extremists are doing well. And certainly the politics of Israel are not helped by the system of party list PR which is in operation there.

But you cannot defeat the argument for electoral reform in the UK by citing the pitfalls of particular systems of proportional representation which no one is calling for here. I would

suggest that the rise of extremism is the product of the all-round failure of the current Westminster system – laid bare for all to see over the past few years.

Reforming our system of elections is the best answer to extremism – not a cause of it.

But under the current administration, election law has been heading precisely in the wrong direction. Even the limited advantage of the Supplementary Vote system used for the election of Mayors and Police and Crime Commissioners has been removed. OK, one had to guess who might be in second place for the supplementary vote to count. But in May we'll be back to tactical voting as the Supplementary Vote system has been removed.

Liverpool has certainly had a difficult local government history in recent years. But an opportunity for reform was lost when the Government insisted on moving away from three-member wards, with three-year terms, and annual elections for one third of the council. Instead, there are now more single member wards – with all-out elections every four years. What a missed opportunity to build on the Scottish and Welsh experience and introduce STV by amalgamating the multi-member wards that already existed.

So how are we to achieve the introduction of STV? Turkeys don't vote for Christmas, we know.

An inconclusive General Election result can lead to rushed and unconsidered proposals as part of a coalition deal. The Alternative Vote referendum in 2011 was a disaster. But then the Alternative Vote system proposed would not have been much of a reform. There was to be preferential voting, but still in single-member constituencies. (I suppose that might eventually have transitioned to STV PR in multi-member constituencies – but it was not to be.)

A Speaker's Conference is no solution either. Because that's leaving it to the turkeys again.

Or we could appoint someone to investigate and report. In New Zealand, Dame Marie Shroff, who had been Privacy Commissioner (New Zealand's equivalent of the UK's Information Commissioner) was appointed to travel the world and compare different voting systems. Her recommendation of the Mixed-Member Proportional system was adopted following a referendum vote.

A better approach for the UK would be to build on the experience of STV in Scotland, Ireland, and, now, Wales. And introduce the system to local government right across the UK.

And how might a Labour Government be persuaded to tackle Electoral Reform? Well, the Labour party conference has voted in support of electoral reform and proportional representation. There is strong support in both the trade unions and many constituency Labour parties. We wait to see what's in the party's manifesto later this year.

But Keir Starmer – a proud graduate of this university – doesn't seem to want to address the issue. Presumably, he feels that he has to show confidence that Labour can secure an overall majority under First Past the Post. He cannot be seen to admit even the possibility of defeat.

A much better approach would be to embrace STV voting as the key to delivering the politics of the Common Good – something that progressives in all parties and none could rally behind, leaving behind the extremists of Right and Left. So, go for it, Keir !

Failure by the Labour leadership, so far, to back electoral reform is a problem, because if Liberal Democrat or Green Party supporters are to be expected to vote tactically for better placed Labour candidates in Conservative-held marginal seats they need to have some incentive to do so. And showing some respect for those whose support you need to borrow would be a good start.

What we certainly don't want later this year is a repeat of what I witnessed in 2010. While David Cameron and Nick Clegg were in talks following the inconclusive General Election result, I remember sitting next to a former Labour cabinet minister at a Westminster data protection function. The said former minister had some choice things to say about Nick

Clegg. I suggested that was no way to reference a fellow Sheffield MP. “Why aren’t you lot talking to the Liberal Democrats?” I asked. “Oh, we’re tired”, was the response. “We need some time in opposition.”

And let us not forget Professor Ansell’s observations about coalitions: *they are a tableau vivant of the core of effective democracy, agreeable disagreement. We don’t always get along, but we do have to agree how to disagree.*

Well, I hope something of what I have had to say so far has been informative – and not overly nerdy. And I should be happy to attempt to answer any questions you may have shortly.

The New Year 2024 will see elections in no fewer than 70 countries, involving potentially more than half the world’s adult population. The USA, Russia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Taiwan, South Africa, South Sudan. Oh, and the UK of course. I was betting 2nd May; but it might be June or October.

This year also marks my 60th since I first joined the campaign for voting reform. I hope this will also be the year that sees a coming together of progressive forces to inaugurate the grown-up electoral system we need – to initiate the grown-up politics that our communities, the world, and our planet so desperately need. Our future depends on it.

Christopher Graham

4th January 2024

Over matter:

Let me conclude with a story about the time when my nerdiness around elections saved the day.

50 years ago I was a News Trainee at the BBC. On the 28th February 1974 there was a General Election.

With all of four months experience behind me, I and my fellow-trainees were sent to help out on the television results programme. There had been a re-drawing of constituency boundaries and our job was to choose the correct graphics captions to be projected over the live outside broadcast declarations. Lab gain. Con hold. And so on.

The live declaration from Aberystwyth was in Welsh. Panic in the Television Centre studio in London. Don't worry, said somebody. The figures will be in English. But they weren't.

But I could see that the smiling candidate holding his clasped hands above his head like a champion boxer was wearing a large blue rosette. I knew from my history studies about 'True Blue Whigs'. I also knew from Liverpool that local Tories had traditionally fought in red and Liberals in Blue. In some wards, the Tories still fought in red. The dark blue boat race rosette of my childhood was, I had learned, my father's Liberal rosette from the 1929 General Election in South Warwickshire. So I called the live declaration a 'Lib Dem gain'. How do you know, asked the more senior figure in charge of the desk. Do you speak Welsh? No, I said. But the winning candidate has a blue rosette.

'Listen, sunshine,' was the withering response. 'When you've been in this business just a tiny bit longer you'll understand that Tories fight in blue. 'Not in Wales,' I responded. And it turned out I was right. And it didn't do my career any harm. In fact, the story was still being told at my leaving do 25 years later when I left my job as Secretary of the BBC to run the Advertising Standards Authority.