

Written evidence from Andy Burnham (TEB58)

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee The Elections Bill inquiry

Thank you for approaching me for comment on the Government's proposals to move to a first-past-the-post (FPTP) system for English Mayoral and Police and Crime Commissioner elections. I welcome the committee looking into these reforms, which will have a big impact across both regional and local government. In this letter I will set out my personal position on the reforms, which I believe are being pushed through under the radar and which I think are a backward step for local democracy.

The Government have argued that there is evidence that voters are confused by the current supplementary vote system, but this doesn't seem to be reflected in Greater Manchester. Less than 2% of ballots in our Mayoral election last year were rejected because of unclear preferences, despite the fact that our Metro Mayor election was held alongside the Salford City Mayoral election and local elections. Moreover, while the number of spoiled or rejected ballots in London has increased, without further research it isn't possible to put this down to voter confusion (rather than, for example, voters intentionally spoiling their ballot to register protest or dissent).

The Government has also argued that it wants to bring these elections in line with other English or UK-wide elections. However, the comparison between Mayoral elections and those of MPs or local councillors is a false one. As Mayor, I am elected as an individual executive decision-maker, not to be part of a wider legislature. That difference is important and drives the need for a different electoral system. I stand on an individual platform, and while I am proud to be a Labour and Cooperative Mayor, I also firmly believe that Mayoral elections should be less about the main political parties and more about the individuals standing. A move to FPTP would narrow the debate and would disproportionately benefit the existing major parties in England.

As Mayor, collaboration, partnership and consensus-building are critical to my job. One of the big differences that I've experienced since leaving Westminster is that as Mayor I can put place, not party, first. I have to work in partnership with others in order to deliver change – whether that is with the Leaders of our constituent councils (regardless of their political affiliation), or the business and voluntary sectors. This is a major benefit of the Mayoral system. However, it does mean that I need a strong mandate and an ability to reach out beyond traditional political divides. The current supplementary vote supports this. David

Klemperer, Research Fellow at the Constitution Society, finds as much in a 2019 report: by actively supporting a two-party system, FPTP polarises both legislatures and voters. After a divisive few years in politics, I firmly believe we need to begin bringing the country back together again. That is why, despite our differences, I have recently made an offer to work with the Government to support them to define and deliver their Levelling Up agenda. A move back to FPTP for Mayoral elections would undermine this, driving polarisation and encouraging candidates to pursue narrow victories built on a core voter base.

Finally, I believe my own election results demonstrate that the current supplementary vote system can still deliver a strong mandate, a clear result and the accountability which the Government seeks. Despite nine candidates standing in Greater Manchester, I was able to secure 67% of the vote in the first round and win every ward in the city-region.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the devolved assemblies are responsible for their own electoral arrangements. The people of those nations decide how they want to exercise their democratic rights, rather than Westminster taking that decision for them. In England, we face a Westminster Government imposing a change in the electoral system with minimal scrutiny or debate.

Please accept my thanks again for the invitation to write to you on this topic, and I look forward to reading your report. If you need any further information from me then please don't hesitate to get in touch.

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