

The Snap Election Plan



Martin Bristow

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Acknowledgements

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Contents

Preface	5
Introduction	16
First Past the Post Must Be Replaced	19
The First-Past-the-Post Conundrum	57
The Snap Election Plan	72
A Call to Action	94
Appendix: My Facebook Posts Since the EU Referendum	95

Preface

At 07:00 on 23rd June 2016, I walked into my local polling station and voted in the referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union. As I walked home, a sense of gratitude consumed me. I thought of my freedoms and rights, and of my British grandfather who had risked his life in World War II for his country. Just under 20 hours after walking home from the polling station, at 03:00 on 24th June 2016, my phone alarm sounded.

I crept downstairs, excitedly turned on the television, and was surprised to see the latest vote count of 52:48 in favour of leaving the EU. I wasn't initially concerned: the results so far weren't a good representation of the whole, I thought. As the morning progressed, the results remained more or less consistent. I couldn't believe what was happening. Initially, my dominant emotion was that of excitement: democracy was writing history in the country that I called home. Then, as the magnitude of the event dawned on me, devastation took hold: how could we turn our backs on a project of freedom, peace, prosperity, unity, collaboration, and diversity? How could we turn our backs on a project that had emerged from the ashes of World War II, and one that had aimed to bring stability to Europe? The EU had its faults, but how could we possibly justify this decision, to ourselves and to future generations, I asked myself.

As the morning wore on, and the outcome became increasingly certain (the figures settled on 52:48 to Leave, 72 % turnout), my mind was racing. How would this affect the lives of future generations, European peace, world peace, opportunities, Britons' identity, the UK's immediate and long-term economy? How would this affect the stability of the union between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland? Amongst these questions, I tried to take what positives I could from the result. I thought whether Britons might pull together more as a result of their new identity.

The consensus, just before the vote took place, was that the result would be for the UK to remain a member of the EU, a membership that it had held since 1973 (then of the European Economic Community). And now, over 40 years later, I found myself grappling with the concept that my wish to remain in the EU had been a minority one.

After I had got over the shock, my hope was that the UK would unite in its belief in democracy, in unity, in mutual respect, and in tolerance. I hoped that we would pull together and make the best of leaving the EU according to the expectation, just prior to the referendum, of what a Leave result would mean. I turned to news and social media in an attempt to ground myself, to make some sense of what was happening.

My feeling of hope soon turned to frustration: news and social media were filled with comments and opinions that seemingly showed no respect for the UK's democracy. I could understand the level of shock, disbelief, and even horror, that people were feeling—I had similar feelings myself. But what shook me was how all those emotions were being channelled. What I was reading was all manner of attempts to justify annulling or diluting the result. A petition to re-run the referendum, on the basis that the turnout and majority were insufficient, was racking up votes by the second. There were also reports of Leave voters disowning their decision, and wishing to be given another chance to vote. Other Leave voters claimed that they had actually wanted to remain in the EU, and had only voted Leave to narrow what they thought would be a comfortable win for Remain. It seemed that, whatever reason people could find to disrespect, dilute, or annul the result, they would find it.

I started to think for myself what the reasons were, why the UK had voted to leave. When I looked beyond the complaints of lying politicians, of David Cameron's supposed mistake, and of a poor Remain campaign, what I started to believe was this: the UK electorate voted to leave the EU because, for decades, they had been starved of being able to shape their own country. They had become increasingly disillusioned, disengaged, and disenfranchised with the very institutions that were supposed to serve them.

Although people voted to leave the EU for a whole host of reasons, the following two reasons, in my opinion, decided the EU referendum result:

- Many voted to leave because they were frustrated with politics generally, and saw the EU referendum as a means to bring about meaningful change, the last chance that they might have to do this for decades to come.
- Many voted to leave because they thought that leaving the EU would solve problems that had, in actual fact, very little, if nothing, to do with the EU.

Unfortunately, the media played a big role in Brexit. Much of the media was owned by wealthy corporations and individuals who benefited from the existing constitutional arrangements in the UK. Whenever the UK faced issues, much of the media was all too keen to use the EU as a scapegoat. But to ask wealthy corporations and individuals to want to be, well, less wealthy, would be to start breaking up the foundations of capitalism, with all the good that it brings.

The cause of this disillusionment, disengagement, and disenfranchisement in politics wasn't the fault of individual politicians either: they, too, had been suffering. After all, who wanted to be disliked, disrespected, and unappreciated? Who wanted to be put under prolonged intense pressure, to be sent hate mail and publicly disrespected? Who wanted to go into a profession to stand up for what one believed in, but have to compromise on it, every day, to continue to earn a living? Who wanted to have to fight internal party battles? Who wanted to have to join a party that didn't really stand for one's views, simply because it was the only way to make any real progress? Who wanted to govern but with little mandate? Unfortunately, the vast majority of those politicians who filled influential roles were the ones who, very early in their political careers, learned to accept the status quo. To do good in a malfunctioning environment was better than to do no good at all.

Of course, there were *some* politicians who, even behind closed doors, wouldn't have agreed with the failings of the system that I've described in this book. But, in my view, this is only because, ever since they were old enough to know what politics was, they had internalised the system that they were presented with.

If the electorate were starved of being able to shape their own country, and if wealthy corporations, wealthy individuals, and individual politicians weren't responsible, what *was* the cause? As I see it now, it all boiled down to one thing: how the nation's views were translated into positions of power in the most powerful legislature in the UK. I refer to the voting system that is used to elect members to the House of Commons, and the system goes by the name of 'first past the post' (FPTP).

FPTP favours the UK's biggest two political parties: Conservative and Unionist, and Labour. FPTP's winner-takes-all approach means that, within each constituency, all the losing candidates' efforts count for nothing. When aggregated across the

country, this amounts to a huge waste. Millions of votes are therefore cast, not to maximise a positive result, but to minimise a negative one, in trying to avoid ending up on this waste heap. The result of this tactical voting is that the two dominant parties have an unfair advantage, in that, between them, they win far more seats than they have support for. For the last ten general elections, and not even taking account of tactical voting, the mean percentage increase from vote share to seat share is 37 %.

Under FPTP, all votes cast for candidates that didn't win, and all votes cast in excess of what the winner needed to win, are wasted. That is, if those voters hadn't voted that day, it would have made no difference to the allocation of seats in the House of Commons. At the 2017 general election, 68.4 % of all valid votes cast were wasted in this way. At the 2015 general election, the figure was 74.3 %.

I firmly believe that, over the decades, if the UK's views had been represented more proportionally in parliament, the UK wouldn't have voted in 2016 to leave the EU. Instead, over the decades, there would have been a gradual and visible increase in support for leaving the EU. Britons would have been much more engaged in politics, current affairs, democracy, economics etc., because they would have been empowered to shape their own futures. The whole culture and ethos around politics would have been more positive, collaborative, direct, open, honest, and progressive. The media and individual politicians would have wielded less power simply because the electorate would have wielded more. All this would have resulted in much more debate, debate that wouldn't have been grounded in rhetoric, falsehoods, and melodrama, but in pragmatism, facts, and realities.

In addition to this increased engagement, empowerment, and enfranchisement of the electorate, there would have been less internal pressure within political parties. If there had been a divergence in a party, the party would have had far more to gain by splitting into two parties, or by encouraging dissenting individuals to join a party that did represent their views. The Conservative party would likely have been a pro-EU party, unified, and with a clear vision. UKIP would have been the party of choice for Eurosceptics, and would have grown to a size much more in keeping with public opinion. The Conservative party would have been under no pressure to use a referendum to solve internal party problems, as it attempted to do in 2015/2016.

There would also have been more trust in the UK's political and democratic institutions, and those people who represented them. Over the decades, people wouldn't have lost trust in politicians, economists etc., to lead them, in a similar way that they wouldn't have lost trust in a doctor to heal them or a teacher to teach them.

Of course, these are all generalisations. But the result of the referendum on 23rd June 2016 *was* a generalisation; it was the balanced view of the UK at the time. So, although the result of the EU referendum could be attributed to all manner of reasons, I do believe that the UK's system for electing representatives to the House of Commons was the underlying reason the UK voted to leave the EU.

Despite this flaw in the UK's democracy, one institution that was still serving the UK's democracy well on 23rd June 2016 was the most fundamental and direct tools of democracy: the binary referendum. One simple question and two simple answers, to make a decision on a national level. So, on that fateful day, when the UK government asked its people, its clients, its customers, what they wanted it to do, I had hoped that the institution of the referendum would be honoured and respected by all. To the contrary, and to my dismay, it was undermined. Just as it is unfair to blame a postal worker for delivering a hefty bill, it is unfair to blame the institution of the referendum for Brexit. Personally, I hope that the referendum and what has followed will be the lens that will bring into focus what the UK desperately needs: reform of its general-election voting system.

My frustration at what I was reading in the news and social media on 24th and 25th June urged me to action, and I took to Facebook to share my views. My first post was on Saturday 25th June 2016, which read as follows:

Thank you to all those who exercised their democratic right on Thursday and voted. I voted _____ [removed for legal reasons] and respect the result to Leave. The binary vote was democracy at its purest, simple and to the point. Sadly it seems there are very few chances for the people of the U.K. to have a direct influence in this way. Our far-from-perfect first-past-the-post voting system comes nowhere close; 16 % [sic] of votes resulting in 1 UKIP MP*

anyone? And who knows what 16 % [sic] would have been were it not for the reality of a “wasted vote”. Had those voices been heard sooner, I suspect Thursday's result may have been different. Democracy got off the sofa on Thursday, went outside into the sunshine, and stretched its legs. Let's now pull together to achieve what the majority of us want.

*The UKIP vote share was actually 12.6 %; I think I was quoting the combined vote share of UKIP and the Green party, which was 16 % rounded to the nearest integer. If we inflate the 12.6 % by, say, 20 %, because of those who would have voted for UKIP had they not been put off by the prospect of wasting their vote, then UKIP's vote share would have been 15 %. 15 % of the seats in the House of Commons is 97 seats, nothing close to the one seat that they were awarded.

Since this first post, I have posted several more times, and I have included all my Facebook posts since the referendum in the appendix at the back of this book.

It was February 2017. I had been following the news since the referendum, and I was still just as passionate about the state of UK politics and democracy. I had also spent time since the referendum writing Facebook posts on the subject. This led me to the decision of using this interest and material as a starting point for writing a book on Brexit, politics, and democracy. I played around with different titles and ideas, and whether the book should be fiction or non-fiction. Non-fiction suited me better and, on 19th March 2017, I settled—or so I thought—on the simple title of ‘My Thoughts on Brexit’. After setting to work, I quickly realised that the title was bland, so I changed it to ‘Brexit Means Leave’, a play on ‘Brexit means Brexit’. This evolved again a few days later. I thought that the working title could be confusing, so I changed it to ‘Democracy First’. All my notes up to that point indicated that the book was, ultimately, all about democracy, and about putting that above all else. So it seemed like the natural title.

I had always seen the book as being a basis of discussion and debate, but not directly leading to anything more. But why not take it one step further, I thought. If democracy was central to the book, and if the UK's general election voting system was central to the UK's democracy, why not write the book to do more than just stimulate debate? Why not set out how the UK might go about

reforming the UK general election voting system? At that point, in the morning of 22nd March 2017, I decided to do just that. What I needed was a plan.

I had long been aware of the FPTP cycle that went like this: those in government (and those in the official opposition) benefited from the voting system that gave them that power, and so were unlikely to want to change the system; but the system could only be changed by those who were *in* power. This was an obvious barrier to bringing about voting reform. Could enough members of parliament (MPs) be persuaded to support it, so that the necessary legislation could be pushed through parliament, I asked myself. This was a possibility. Another option was to persuade all the smaller parties to demand voting reform as a pre-requisite for any government deal following a hung parliament, then try to take as many seats away from the big two parties as possible to bring about a hung parliament. But both these options didn't appeal to me. I knew that I would need public support to make any plan work. Unfortunately, with the level of trust that the public had in established politicians and parties, I saw this as an uphill struggle. What I wanted was a plan that would put matters entirely in the hands of the UK electorate.

What I quickly realised was that the power of the vote, not that of the pound, would be central to the plan, and therefore so would be the next general election. I considered founding a political party that stood for voting reform that the public would be able to vote for. But there were already several voting-reform-supporting parties out there, so why would voters vote for the new one, I asked myself. The new party would have the advantage of being fresh on the scene, from which it could build trust with the electorate, but how would that be sufficient to convince enough voters to vote for the party? To stand out from the crowd further, I could have the party stand *only* for voting reform. This would eliminate the possibility of voters being put off by other policies that they might not agree with. But if I took this approach, why would voters vote for a party that would, for up to five years until the next general election, only put in place voting-system legislation? Also, I would face the same challenges that all the other smaller parties faced, in that many voters would be put off voting for it because of the risk that their vote would go to waste. The system was against me—I thought on.

What seemed central to breaking into the FPTP cycle was this: how could I minimise the risk to voters of their vote for a voting-reform-supporting party going to waste? I identified three questions:

- How could I maximise the chance that, in any given constituency, a vote for this new party would result in the party's candidate becoming an MP?
- How could I maximise the chance that, if a voter *did* vote for the candidate of this new party, and the candidate *did* win the seat, the resulting MP would be able to assist in bringing about voting reform?
- How could I maximise the chance that, even if the MP *did* assist in bringing about voting reform, once the MP had done that, they would continue to provide value to the voter for the rest of the parliamentary term?

The ideas for all these questions came to me in quick succession and, in the afternoon of 22nd March 2017, *The Snap Election Plan* was born.

The following day, I started to flesh out the details of the plan, but I quickly realised that the book would take longer to write than I had first thought. I had no intention to rush the book, but at the same time I was eager to get a book published. To meet these needs, I put the 'The Snap Election Plan' (in inverted commas to indicate that the book was in progress) on hold and came up with an idea for a much shorter book that I could write and publish first. *My Year in Germany* (now *A Year in Germany*) was that idea. I had lived and studied for one academic year in Dresden in 2005/2006 as part of my four-year *Civil Engineering with German* university course, and *My Year in Germany* was my account of that year. On 27th March 2017, I got back to work on 'The Snap Election Plan'.

I was expecting the next general election to be in 2020, and I continued to build up the book with that in mind. Then, on 18th April 2017, things changed. I was in the local park with my children when my wife texted me the news: the UK prime minister, Theresa May, had announced her intention to hold a snap general election on 8th June! When I got a chance to think, I questioned whether I should try to publish my plan for voting reform so that I could try to

implement it for the forthcoming election. I worked out what it would have needed: register a political party; find candidates while the party application was being processed; raise funds for candidate deposits; raise funds for administration; and convince enough people to vote for the candidates. When I looked at the timescale, I realised that it was too farfetched. Instead of investing my time on what I saw as a fruitless exercise, I decided to let the 2017 general election go, and focus, instead, on planning for the next one.

I continued to work on this book but, as the election campaign progressed, I became increasingly conscious that my efforts might not be necessary. I read articles that suggested that Labour might include voting reform in its manifesto. I also questioned whether a voting-reform referendum might result from a hung parliament, as happened in 2010. So, while I waited for election day, I focused my efforts elsewhere. I recalled that, from February to December 2008, I had written email updates to my family and friends during my travels around parts of Oceania and Asia. Since I already had the material, in lots of 1s and 0s in storage somewhere in the world, I decided to write and publish a book of my account of my travels during that time. *Travels in Distant Lands* was the result. I held off publishing it until this book was ready, to minimise distractions from what I was most passionate about.

When the Labour manifesto was published, the sceptical part of me wasn't surprised that it lacked no commitment on a voting-reform referendum. There was still the chance of a hung parliament, though. To the surprise of many, including myself, the election *did* result in a hung parliament. However, it wasn't in the right proportions to bring in the Liberal Democrats, probably the most likely partner to initiate a voting-reform referendum. I pressed on with 'The Snap Election Plan'.

On 6th April 2017, a UK government online petition entitled 'To make votes matter, adopt Proportional Representation for UK General Elections' closed with 103,495 signatures. Unfortunately, I had only learned of the petition not long after it had closed, so I hadn't signed it. Given that the petition had more than 100,000 signatures, parliament had to consider debating it. As the months went by, I eagerly checked the webpage to see if they would. In mid-September, I learned that parliament had decided to do just that, and

that the date for the debate would be 30th October 2017. I wrote to my MP to urge him to do what he could during the debate, and I posted a link on Facebook urging people to write to their MPs too. Although I was hoping that the debate would bring about voting reform, the lack of appeal on the subject by the Conservative and Labour parties suggested to me that the debate would result in no direct action.

On 30th October 2017, I watched the debate online. I was impressed by some of the excellent speeches and questioning, and how the Scottish National Party advocated for voting reform despite being direct beneficiaries of FPTP themselves.

It was 2nd December 2017. I was using the Internet to research voting-reform pressure groups that were based in the UK. As I browsed the ‘The Alliance’ page of the Make Votes Matter website, I came across ‘ProPR’. I browsed their website, Facebook page, and blog. The following is an extract from the webpage propblog.wordpress.com, posted in a blog dated 30th September 2015:

...there is a strategy and the Green Party knows what it is, because it was passed at the Party’s Spring Conference. The motion was introduced by Will White and reads:

“GPEx and the leaders of the Green Party will work with other interested parties to replace the First Past the Post voting system with Proportional Representation as soon as possible, and to call a new PR election as soon as possible to more fairly reflect the opinion of the electorate.”

And the following is an extract from the same webpage, posted in a blog dated 2nd October 2015:

We at ProPR believe that the Proportional Representation Principle IS the software we need to hack the FPTP electoral system. The Principle states that any pro PR party should only have the single policy of “Bring in PR and then call a new election” in its FPTP election manifesto. If all the pro PR parties adopt this principle,

there would be no political barriers preventing them from forging a very strong pact, which Labour would be tempted to join. With Labour on board, a General Election victory would be guaranteed and PR would be introduced.

When I read all this, I was shocked that I hadn't discovered it sooner. I was also delighted to have discovered like-minded people.

The snap election plan (I write the plan itself in lower case) uses one of the ideas that are introduced above, in that a snap general election should be called as soon as voting-reform legislation has been passed (if the electorate so wishes). But this is where the similarities appear to end. The snap election plan does *not* seek to form pacts between parties. In fact, the plan doesn't call upon existing parties and politicians in any way. If voters wish to remain loyal to their voting-reform-supporting party, I anyway suggest that the best way to achieve that would be to *not* vote for that party at the next UK general election, as explained in this book.

Well, enough of how the book came to be. What comes next—and it's this that I'm passionate about—is how I can convince you that FPTP should be replaced with a proportional-representation voting system, and that the plan in this book is the best strategy to make it happen.

Introduction

When I was in my early teens, my father explained to me, at our kitchen table and with the aid of a sketch, the concept of the United Kingdom's first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system. I started to play around with the system in my head and remember seeing flaws with it. For example, I set up a two-party scenario and ran a hypothetical election. In 50.1 % of the constituencies, Party A got 50.1 % of the votes; in the other constituencies, Party B got 100 % of the vote. The result, despite Party B getting 75 % of the votes, was a majority government for Party A. Another scenario I considered was one in which the winner of each constituency won each seat with only 10 % of the votes, thus getting complete control of the House of Commons with only a 10 % vote share. The likelihood of these scenarios occurring was negligible, I thought. But why have a system that *could*, in theory, produce such results?

As I got older, it didn't bother me. I had more important matters to deal with, like studying for my GCSE exams, and then my A-levels. My interest was mainly in mathematics, science, and sport, not politics. During my late teens and twenties, I had a reasonable interest in politics and current affairs, but my focus was elsewhere: engineering. I studied *Civil Engineering with German* at university, then travelled, then got a full-time job in engineering to develop my career.

Over the years, I still maintained some interest in politics and democracy; I voted in the general elections and some of the other elections. In 2011, I somehow managed not to know about the referendum on voting reform. Had I known about it, I would certainly have voted to change the voting system from FPTP to the 'alternative vote' (AV) system. AV was not a proportional-representation (PR) voting system, but it would have meant that the Conservative and Unionist party and the Labour party would have needed to appeal to a broader audience within each constituency. Other benefits would have been that AV would have reduced the tendency for tactical voting, and encouraged more people to become engaged in politics.

The result of the 2011 AV referendum was that the majority of those who cast valid votes preferred FPTP over AV (68:32, 42 % turnout). So, does that mean that 68 % of those who cast valid votes

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