

Electoral reform for the UK? Don't bet on it

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Excitement among advocates of electoral reform has been building, buoyed up by the possibility that Andy Burnham may take over as UK prime minister. This is understandable — he's an enthusiast too, and the fracturing of our party politics makes it look inevitable — but they shouldn't get ahead of themselves. For good or ill, anyone hoping to see a shift from first past the post to proportional representation before the next general election, and without a referendum, is fooling themselves.

Burnham's support for electoral reform is seemingly genuine. At last year's Labour Party conference he told a rally: "There is nothing more unstoppable than an idea whose time has come — and PR's time has come." Last week, he confirmed that he was "committed to proportional representation", being unable to see how "first past the post and the point-scoring inherent within it lifts Britain out of the doom loop it is in".

So far, so promising, not least because he (like me) supports creating a national commission to promote an evidence-based UK-wide conversation on the issue. But the idea that this process would prompt the introduction of PR in time to elect the next crop of MPs — presuming a putative Burnham government holds off calling an election until 2029 — is outlandish.

It's not just a question of logistics — though they would be formidable even if the government were to pursue a purely parliamentary path to legislating for the form of PR eventually agreed upon (various systems are already used in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and will soon be reintroduced for mayoralities). The Commons, predictable Conservative opposition notwithstanding, might just wear it. But the House of Lords, packed with Tory peers instinctively opposed and crossbenchers committed to detailed scrutiny? No chance.

It's also the vibes. A rushed job would inevitably court accusations that change was motivated less by a concern to create an electoral system better suited to what looks increasingly like a permanent shift to five- or six-party politics than a desperate attempt to stop Nigel Farage from entering Number 10.

One could argue that Farage would not object: he has been arguing for PR longer than Burnham has. Now he seems to have cooled on the idea — with his Reform UK party currently winning locally under FPTP, it's no longer his enemy but his friend.

It's a pound to a penny, then, that if Labour and other parties in the UK's left-liberal bloc (the Liberal Democrats, Greens, Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru) were to ram

reform through parliament, Farage could argue yet again that “the establishment” was denying “the will of the people”.

These parties should instead make a manifesto commitment to whatever system a national commission might recommend. Then, should they manage to form a government from whatever crazy set of results FPTP produces next time, they could at least claim a collective mandate for change.

It probably wouldn't be enough. Britons might balk at the idea of another referendum, given how bitterly divisive the 2016 Brexit and 2014 Scottish independence votes turned out to be. But those exercises in direct democracy (along with the 2011 vote that rejected a far less comprehensive change to the electoral system) have set a precedent when deciding major constitutional issues — one that is difficult to override.

So, while reformers may welcome the possibility of Burnham becoming prime minister, celebration would be premature. Better, by far, to get real: step up efforts to set up a truly independent commission, agree to back the system it recommends, insert a commitment into as many party manifestos as possible and begin working out how best to win support in what is bound to be a hard-fought public vote.