

## [Comment] Connect political power to votes cast

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - The United Kingdom is caught up in not one but two constitutional debates at the moment, and there is an interesting link between the two of them.

The first, on the European constitution, is followed closely by readers of EUobserver.com; the second, which might be less familiar, focuses on a possible reform of the House of Lords, the second chamber in the UK parliament.

The House of Lords is notorious around Europe thanks to its membership, a peculiar combination of political appointees and descendants of the aristocracy. No other European democracy, certainly not one with pretensions to lead the modernisation of Europe, gives seats in parliament to people because of favours their ancestors did for a previous monarch.

### Reforming the House of Lords

Plan after plan has been published over the years looking at different ways to reform the House of Lords. Various combinations of election and appointment have been suggested, trying to find ways of increasing the democratic element without challenging the supremacy of the directly-elected House of Commons. None of them has yet been able to command enough support actually to be put into practice.

The latest contribution to the debate has come from Billy Bragg, a well-known singer and political campaigner. His celebrity status adds to the interest in his proposal.

His method for introducing democracy to the upper house without undermining the pre-eminence of the lower house is to count the votes twice. Votes cast in the general election for the House of Commons are counted in the normal way - normal for Britain, that is, with its single member constituency system - and then recounted on a party list basis to choose members of the House of Lords. Each vote would be counted twice.

Billy Bragg hopes that this new system would bring democracy to the system and give smaller parties a chance of parliamentary representation that they do not have at present. The lower house would remain the more important chamber because that is the one that voters would be asked to vote for directly.

### Bringing chaos

But this interpretation of what would happen is mistaken. Rather than bringing balance, this system would bring chaos.

It is mistaken to assume that the voters' wishes for the two different houses can be expressed in a single vote. Different political institutions have different roles and voters may well want to be represented in different ways in each.

How can anyone know what is in the voters' minds? It is hard enough interpreting their votes; it would be impossible to interpret their motives, too.

The answer is to accept that each part of the political system should have its own legitimacy, and that its members should be chosen on their own merits. Trying to use the same votes for two different purposes won't work.

The same principle comes up when thinking about the European Union. Direct elections for the European Parliament were introduced because national MPs seconded from their national

parliaments were unable to express properly the will of the voters on European issues. It works much better as a result.

### **Electing the European Commission directly**

The European Commission, on the other hand, has yet to make the same transition. The choice of its members at present lies principally with the national governments. The influence of the voters is very indirect, coming via national elections decided for national reasons.

It would be much better to have a clear and more direct relationship between votes and political power in the Commission. Fortunately, such a system is available.

The European elections are coming up in June, and the MEPs who are elected then will have to endorse or reject the nominations made for Commission president by the European Council. Each political party contesting those elections should nominate its candidate for the president so that the citizens can see how their votes will be turned into political power.

In an age of increasing cynicism about politics, political power should be connected back to the votes cast.

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