



[Alternative Voting won't help democracy](#) (Apr 2011)

by [Simon Belt](#)

The official ' [About my vote](#) ' website helpfully explains the elections taking place 05 May on the voting system with a video cartoon featuring [Victor the Vote Counter](#) . Having worked with civil servants like Victor, responsible for election counting nights, and having also been on the candidate's side of the counting table at a couple of counts, I appreciate the importance of **The Count**

Perhaps it's a little tongue in cheek, but the Electoral Commission's cartoon of [Victor the Vote Counter](#) starts with Victor watering his office plant and taking a sip from his cuppa, but don't let that detract from the message. So what is the message? Well, given that it's the Electoral Commission's website, unsurprisingly it's about the technical process of counting votes cast for candidates and the two methods we get to register our preference for on 05 May 2011. We will be asked 'At present, the UK uses the 'first past the post' system to elect MP's to the House of Commons. Should the 'alternative vote' system be used instead?' And whichever system we vote for, Victor gets to count our votes.

Now it may seem a little trite to rework the old anarchist slogan 'whoever you vote for, the Government always gets in', which attempts to ignite a broader activist side to political change by emphasising the narrow scope of change offered by electoral politics. And it is, but the campaign for Alternative Voting seems to be elevating the more conservative and narrowing aspects of electoral politics and celebrating them, rather than looking to promote the radicalising potential of electoral politics. And that's the problem I have with the campaign for Alternative Voting.

Narrowing the differences

So, starting with the campaign for Alternative Voting first. On the [Yes to Fairer Votes](#) website, the first image we're offered to induce us is Eddy Izzard with the invitation to join Eddie in the final push to 05 May and watch the video from Saturday's launch event. The message is clear - this is not a party political issue, but an inclusive and fun activity with a neutral 'progressive' political message, so politically correct it reminds me of passing the cushion around at therapy circle away day team events.

And in case you didn't get the warm and cuddly message with the first image, the shock treatment comes with an image of BNP front man, Nick Griffin, with the simple message 'He's

voting 'NO'. How about you?'. Now I know I am a little simple, but pitching the argument at that level drives home the message with shocking clarity - the electorate are as dumb as can be and need simple messages with simple logic.

This simpleton message of 'Nick says this, so you should do the opposite' is followed by a statement that AV will make your MP work harder for you. The logic here is that having to attract votes from people who don't necessarily support a candidates ideas or policies will mean that their ideas and policies will be adapted to better represent a 'majority' interest rather than a tribal party political minority.

Campaigning for ideas and political programmes in elections is hard work, and winning people to support particular politics or policies requires ideas that are clear, discrete and convincing. What is being promoted through the AV campaign is actually that politicians should move to encompass the agenda of their opponents in order to attract their second and third preference votes, and this can only mean political agendas becoming more diffuse and less similar rather than clearer and starker choices. In fact, rather than the AV campaign leading to politics as managerialism, it's more the increasingly narrow political terrain that's lead to the apolitical Alternative Voting proposals.

The likes of Victor the Vote Counter are the only beneficiaries of this process, having more of a role in managing politics and the political process, from MPs expenses scandal leading to civil servants managing MPs, or quangos and courts deciding what are politically correct policies for organisations to stand for or organise around leading to constitutions being changed, and ending up with more backroom deals under the guise of 'consensus' politics.

Just say NO

It seems like neither side in the Alternative Voting campaign have a positive political message about the democratic process with the following message central to the NOtoAV campaign:

*'Our current tried and tested voting system gives everyone one vote and delivers clear outcomes. The Alternative Vote is a **complicated, expensive and unfair** system that gives some people more votes than others. It might sound like a small change but the **danger is in the detail – it's a politicians' fix***

From my experience of campaigning in elections, and door knocking outside of elections, politics is demanding work. The election period and campaigning for a vote for a candidate, or more accurately their politics, requires the winning of hard arguments and trying to convince people of making a definite stand for one approach or another with clearly worked out reasons why. Votes achieved through convincing arguments mean something important and act as an organising mechanism to see through those politics or oppose certain policies long after any elections.

The process of campaigning for 2nd and 3rd preference votes weakens what we have now in terms of forcing through the argument and convincing people of a clear and definite stance on issues, in favour of an *'I'm quite like my opponents really'*, which will reduce polarising and clarifying argument in favour of the path of least resistance and consensus as a starting point rather than outcome.

If there is to be a change to the voting system, it should probably be for proportional representation where all ideas do get a full hearing and impact of all politics properly tested and represented. Alternative Voting system will result in politics becoming narrower and **The Count** becoming less about expressions of the passionate beliefs of active citizens fighting for their ideas, and more about Victor managing boring consensus politics.

Some background readings

[About my vote](#) , Electoral Commission website

[Yes to fairer votes](#) , Campaign for a Yes vote for Alternative Voting system website

[NO to AV](#) , Against the Alternative Vote website

[The real reason you should say No to AV](#) , by Brendan O'Neill spiked 02 March 2011

[Ed Miliband shares cross-party platform to promote AV](#) , Patrick Wintour, Guardian 29 March 2011