

# Death of the secret ballot

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Postal voting does not revitalise interest in elections  
– but it does encourage electoral fraud

**T**here are two big questions about the local elections on Thursday, but only one of them is being asked. The first is whether people will bother to vote. The emerging rule of British politics appears to be that the bigger the issues at stake, the smaller the choice. The Liberal Democrats' pathetic capitulation ensures that no major party in England now represents the people who may have wished to use their vote to protest against the war with Iraq. The smaller parties in most constituencies are locked, by first-past-the-post elections and the lack of state funding, into electoral insignificance.

The second is a question seldom asked of a British election: will it be free and fair? While British people may regard the process of choosing between almost identical candidates as unspeakably dull, we retain an affecting faith in its deportment. After all, we invented the idea, and we send election monitors all over the world to ensure that lesser beings are implementing it properly. Our complacency is beginning to look ill-founded.

The government's problem is that it needs to raise the vote. It knows that there is little prospect of revitalising people's interest in politics until some significant difference between the major parties re-emerges, but it cannot present us with distinctive policies without upsetting the powerful agents – everyone from Lord Sainsbury to President Bush – it seeks to appease. It also knows that a government elected by a small proportion of its people is a government whose claim to legitimacy is dubious. So, rather than expanding our choice, it has sought to boost the turnout by

## MONBIOT | DEATH OF THE SECRET BALLOT

tinkering with the mechanics of voting. In doing so, it has also enhanced the opportunities for interfering in the way we vote.

Under the Representation of the People Act 2000, all electors are now entitled to apply for a postal vote without presenting a reason for not turning up in person. Convenience voting seems to be working. About three times as many people (7.7% of the electorate) voted by post in the local elections last year as in previous ones. Encouraged by this success, the government has now scrapped the polling stations in 33 of the elections on Thursday; 3.6 million people are no longer entitled to vote in person. If this approach is popular (and already, in places such as Rotherham and North Lincolnshire, the vote has beaten the entire turnout in the last local elections), it could be applied universally. British people might never need to enter a polling booth again. During last year's local elections and the general election of 2001, some candidates began to discover just how convenient the new voting can be.

The new technique for winning votes is simple, effective and legal. You pick up a stack of postal-vote application forms, then walk from door to door asking voters to fill them in. You either leave the forms with the voters or encourage them to complete the forms on the spot, then take them back and deliver them to the registry yourself. By this means you come to possess a list of the people who have applied to vote by post in your constituency. Postal-voting forms are all sent out on the same day; to seek to govern the way that confused or vulnerable electors may vote, you merely need to arrive at their homes soon afterwards. Your conversation goes something like this.

"Hello, I'm Algernon Scroggs, your Bring Back the Poll Tax party candidate. I was just wondering whether you'd received your postal-voting form." "I don't know. Is this it?" "Yes, that's the one." "What do I do with it?" "You put a cross next to the name of your favourite candidate. If, for example, you wanted to vote for me, you'd put your cross just there. Would you like to borrow my pen?" "Like this?" "Yes, that's it. Shall I witness it for you?"

This approach has already proved to be devastatingly effective in old people's homes and sheltered housing and among those who have difficulty with English. It is not hard to see how it can influence the decisions of people who either don't understand what is happening or wish to oblige their authoritative visitor. If the candidate is already a councillor, and voters live in accommodation provided by the council, they can, if they don't understand their legal rights, be made to feel concerned about the conditions of their tenancy, without any actual threat being issued. These are among the long-established reasons for the secret ballot. The secret ballot has just been thrown to the wind.

As ruthless parties in every British constituency wake up to these opportunities,

## MONBIOT | DEATH OF THE SECRET BALLOT

elections will come to be decided less by people's voting preferences than by the swiftness and the lack of scruples of the canvassers turning up on voters' doorsteps. The universal postal votes the government is introducing permit party activists to follow the postman down the street, then hover over voters as they fill in their forms.

The new procedures also introduce plenty of scope for criminality. The act permits candidates to gather up the postal votes and take them to the polling station; during the last local and general elections there were allegations from several constituencies that candidates had collected uncompleted postal voting forms from people who didn't understand what they needed to do, and filled them in themselves. Electors may also request that their postal votes are sent to a different address; in places such as Birmingham, Bradford and Pendle, in Lancashire, candidates are alleged to have filled in voters' application forms, ensuring that voting slips were sent to their own addresses or those of their brothers, cousins or friends, then either forged voters' signatures or taken the forms to the voters' houses. There candidates could bully them into voting on the spot, or pretend that signatures were being collected for another purpose.

The electoral commission's response to these abuses is amazingly relaxed. It suggests that "candidates, agents and local party workers should not handle ballot papers", but proposes that this be enforced by a voluntary code of conduct. Far from introducing restrictions on their ability to distribute application forms, it believes that the practice should be encouraged, because the hazards are outweighed by "potential gains in terms of increased participation". In the short term, the aggressive pursuit of postal votes will encourage participation, even if that participation is not entirely voluntary. But little could be better calculated to damage people's faith in the electoral process – and therefore, in the long term, their turnout at elections – than the perception that votes are being unfairly solicited.

There is no substitute for democratic choice. People will regain their interest in elections only when they see that there is something worth fighting for; in other words, when they see that there are either significant differences between the major parties or realistic opportunities for the minor ones. The gimmicks intended to encourage us to vote in increasingly pointless ballots will engender the very cynicism the government claims to be contesting. #