

Postal voting is a giant fiddle

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Is electoral fraud "very rare" in Britain, as the Department for Constitutional Affairs still insists? Or should we believe Richard Mawrey QC, the judge in the infamous Birmingham vote rigging cases of 2005, that the government is "in denial" about standards of conduct in British elections - especially local elections - that "would disgrace a banana republic"?

On January 29, Mawrey is scheduled to hear two further election petitions, this time to annul the election of a Labour councillor in Bethnal Green South and another in Mile End, both in east London.

In the meantime, the Committee on Standards in Public Life has published its landmark report on the Electoral Commission. This is not only a devastating critique of the passivity of the commission but is also the most significant review for many years of the defects of British elections.

The debate has been hampered by the absence of any central record of the number of cases. In November 2003, the Department for Constitutional Affairs reported to the House of Commons that the Electoral Commission and the Crown Prosecution were to collect the data. Nothing happened. In April 2005 there was a ministerial statement to the Commons that there had been only four recorded prosecutions for electoral fraud in seven years. The operative word was "recorded". Few cases were on a central record because there had been no effort to record them.

When I finally received a set of basic statistics from the Crown Prosecution Service a few days ago, they revealed that there were no fewer than 390 cases of alleged electoral offences in the past seven years. It is not yet known how many of them resulted

in prosecutions. What is certain is that they run a coach and horses through the government's complacent claims.

The high number of cases is noteworthy because it is often difficult to obtain forensic evidence sufficient to justify a prosecution even where it is clear that there has been vote-rigging. The actual extent of fraud is clearly much greater.

For instance, Chief Superintendent Dave Murray, of Thames Valley police, reportedly wrote to the Electoral Commission in 2005 that vote riggers would develop "a feeling of untouchability" because the law made it so hard for them to be successfully prosecuted. Police had uncovered evidence of widespread postal voting fraud in the Redlands ward of Reading. Of 46 postal vote applications examined, only two were authentic. But the identity of those who had forged the applications could not be proved.

Despite the problems involved in prosecuting offenders, there have been at least eight cases since 2001 in which politicians have received prison sentences - Blackburn (Labour), Bristol (Liberal Democrat), Burnley 2002 (BNP), Burnley 2006 (two Liberal Democrats), Coleraine (DUP), Guildford (Conservative), Hackney (one Conservative and one Liberal Democrat) and Havant (one Labour and one Liberal Democrat).

In Oldham, 11 Labour and Liberal Democrat men pleaded guilty and received sentences of 60 to 120 hours of community service. Some impersonated dead electors whose names remained on the town's electoral registers. The registers included obviously fictitious names such as Bollywood stars or even Asian foods.

In several cases the number of forged votes has run into the hundreds or thousands. Mawrey's estimate was of at least 1,000 forged votes in the 2004 elections in the Birmingham city ward of Aston and 1,500-2,000 in nearby Bordesley Green.

My analysis of some 20 cases shows that a majority of them involve wards in inner cities with high proportions of Asians. There are also many cases where this is not a factor and some Asian politicians have been in the forefront of campaigns against voting fraud. A majority involve abuses of postal voting.

The introduction of postal voting on demand has undoubtedly made it much easier to fiddle votes. Although intended to encourage active citizenship on the part of immigrant and socially disadvantaged groups, it may have had the opposite effect.

A voter is able to opt to vote for life by a postal ballot. As Ann Cryer, the Labour MP for Keighley, pointed out, postal balloting effectively disenfranchises Asian women. They are pressured into permitting the father of the family to fill the ballots for the entire household. Prosecutions are rare because people will not report families or neighbours.

The system of postal voting on demand has undoubtedly increased the influence of local party bosses in deprived inner-city areas since it enables them to control dozens or hundreds of postal votes. These local power brokers can be particularly influential in boroughs where there is no overall control. This was the position in Hackney.

The old traditions of "boss" politics in the United States have come to Britain.

This is not only because of the rapid growth of immigrant populations. The stakes are also higher: the new system of substantial payments for local councillors, especially for those in leading positions, has provided an incentive to make a career of local politics.

Three things are clear: first, there are problems of electoral malpractice in a considerable number of British cities. Second, there is a need for far closer examination of the problems (starting with the collection of detailed statistics). Mawrey is right: the political culture of complacency and denial must end. Third, good citizenship and social inclusion are not achieved by making voting procedures so simple that they are wide open to fraud. Increasing voter turnout at all costs is an unwise policy.