

Vote of confidence, by Helen Disney

02-05-2008

As this issue of Public Finance went to press, Gordon Brown was facing the first real electoral test of his premiership, with Labour expected to take a hammering in local elections and with the London mayoral race looking too close to call.

The government's list of problems has been stacking up like lost luggage at Heathrow Airport's Terminal 5 — the banking sector remains in crisis, house prices are falling, the cost of living is rising and the Parliamentary Labour Party is still smarting over the abolition of the 10p rate of income tax, despite the prime minister's recent concessions.

To cap it all, a new report by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust claims that, regardless of Labour's performance in the elections, the UK's voting system is no longer to be trusted.

According to its research, British elections fall short of some international standards laid down by the United Nations and the Organisation for Security and

Co-operation in Europe, leaving the system vulnerable to fraud, especially in regard to postal and electronic voting.

These methods were introduced to improve choice for voters and thus increase turnout, but might actually be risking the integrity of the electoral process, according to the trust's report.

On the plus side, electoral turnout does seem to have improved in recent years. Voter numbers in local elections have been steadily increasing to around 40% last year, after slumping to an all-time low of 28% in 1998. But will concerns over security damage this progress, and how serious a problem is electoral fraud, based on the available facts?

In January last year, the Committee on Standards in Public Life said the police had reported almost 350 cases of electoral malpractice to the Crown Prosecution Service since 2001.

In the past seven years, there have been an estimated 42 convictions for electoral fraud in the UK and, in 2004, a judge overturned the results of two local council elections in Birmingham after deciding there had been systematic and large-scale postal vote rigging.

Newspapers also reported on allegations of widespread postal vote rigging in the 2004 local and European elections. The government waited until it had won a renewed mandate at the 2005 general election before introducing any reforms.

Yet the trust report describes its Electoral Administration Act 2006 as having 'proved deficient in combating electoral fraud'.

Most recently, just last month, three men, including a former mayor, were jailed in Peterborough for attempted postal and proxy vote fraud. And more election fraud trials are pending around the country. If another similar scandal were to be exposed after this week's polls it could put yet another dent in voters' confidence.

Stuart Wilks-Heeg, author of Purity of elections in the UK and a lecturer in social policy at the University of Liverpool, suggests that all voters should be required to show a photo identity card. This is considered standard practice in some other European Union member states, such as Spain.

Wilks-Heeg also recommends that campaign spending at constituency level should be capped to prevent abuse of the system in key marginal seats, where poll outcomes often rest on a handful of votes and yet have a highly significant impact on the parties' fortunes.

Finally, he argues that new safeguards against voting fraud, which have already been introduced in Northern Ireland, should be extended to the rest of the UK.

Criticism of the UK system is not confined to this report. Both Scotland's Gould report and the Electoral Commission have also called for voting to be made more secure. The commission would like the current system of household registration replaced with individual voter registration, to make the electoral register safer and more accurate.

At the pan-European level, legislators are suspicious too. The Council of Europe warned in January that British elections had become 'childishly simple' to rig. Surveys confirm that public confidence in UK elections was already low in 1997 compared with that for other western European nations.

The voices concerned about electoral integrity certainly appear to be authoritative and mounting, so why the lack of action or attention from the government? Most of the suggested reforms appear to be simple and the benefits of securing the system also far outweigh the risks. While some of the measures might incur public spending, so too do the increasing number of trials.

Given the PM's current woes, he can ill-afford a further breakdown of public faith in his administration or in politics more broadly. If electoral fraud mars the results of these elections, could it prove to be a bigger stain on his reputation than the outcome of the elections as a whole?

Helen Disney is chief executive and founder of the Stockholm Network, a pan-European think-tank