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The UK general election: A revolution in waiting?

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Editorial

The long-awaited milestone

The British general election is now only days away. Rarely has a British general election result been more open. In the weeks that have passed since Gordon Brown met with Queen Elisabeth and asked for her consent to call a general election, the parties have been campaigning eagerly to hold on to old parliamentary seats and win new ones. Election manifestos have been launched, TV-debates held. For all the major parties, much is at stake. Brown and Labour are fighting to retain their majority of seats in the House of Commons, and with that their offices in Whitehall. While a working majority for Labour remains a remote prospect, a fourth term with Labour in office is not as unrealistic as it seemed only a few months ago. For David Cameron and the Tories, by contrast, the campaign has been tougher than some early opinion polls indicated. The Tories' steady and long-term lead on Labour on the opinion polls has shrunk to almost nothing.

At the same time, the Liberal Democrats have emerged a far stronger political competitor than anyone would have predicted. The Lib Dems, and party leader Nick Clegg, are faced with a historic window of opportunity to become a full-scale political player in British politics, potentially transforming the British political landscape from a 2+ to a full three-party system. Indeed, if the Lib Dems do as well in the election as they currently aspire to, there is more than a good chance that Britain will face major political reforms in the near future.

This issue of *British Politics Review* is dedicated entirely to the general election, offering a wide range of articles on the topic. Per-Kristian Foss shares his thoughts on the Prime Ministerial duel between David Cameron and Gordon Brown, while Mariette Christophersen addresses central aspects of the strategic thinking upon which the Conservative party's election campaign is based. Moreover, Øivind Bratberg looks into the Liberal Democratic Party's stated political bargaining points, which they must be expected to push forward in the event of a hung parliament, and Kristin M. Haugevik discusses why foreign policy is unlikely to play a major role in the final stages of the election campaign.

Mark Oaten outlines what he sees as some of the major challenges related to coalition governments – a highly conceivable outcome of the forthcoming election. Jim McGuigan looks into the consequences for cultural politics of the New Labour era while Simon Hart looks into the political agenda of the British countryside in the election. Finally, against the backdrop of a crisis of confidence in the way Westminster works, Tony Wright addresses the issue of parliamentary reform which lurks behind the general election itself.

Øivind Bratberg and Kristin M. Haugevik, Editors

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Confidence in Brown or renewal with Cameron?

By British Politics Review Guest Writer Per-Kristian Foss, Høyre (the Norwegian Conservative Party)

Per-Kristian Foss (Høyre) has been a member of the Storting since 1981 and a prominent spokesman on financial policy and a range of other policy areas. From 2001 to 2005 he was minister of finance in the centre-right coalition government. Deputy leader of Høyre from 2002 to 2008, Foss also chaired the Oslo branch of the party from 2000 to 2004. In the present parliament, he is the the second vice president of the Storting.



both the main parties close to the centre, the distinction between them is less acute and mobilisation more uncertain. Among the Tories themselves there are those who think Cameron should have opted for clearer blue water and more policies inspired by the Thatcher era rather than honing the floating voters of the centre.

Gordon Brown faces some similar challenges in Labour. The large deficits require that pledges on new public expenses are postponed. Moreover, the fatigue of many years in government is also visible in the party. Brown was chancellor for such a long period that he cannot liberate himself from a share of the responsibility for Britain's financial difficulties. The question is whether he can convince the voters that the major cause is the international credit crunch rather than his government's own policies over the last 13 years.

Cameron has argued convincingly that deficit budgets appeared prior to the credit crunch, and that the continuous growth of a centralised bureaucracy under Labour has done little to improve the welfare state. The Conservative shadow chancellor George Osborne is adamant that the government machinery will be scaled down to what it was before Labour took office in 1997. Popular appeal is sought by proposing a pay freeze for MPs and cuts in the salaries of ministers

and leading government officials.

But many years have passed since the Tories were last in government. Brown and his Cabinet will use experience as their strongest card to claim their superior capacity to weather the current financial storm. "We know what we have,

"Cameron has engineered a required renewal of Conservative policies. The Tories are closer to the centre ground now, pledges on tax cuts are no longer the core strategy and calls for further privatisation are moderate."

but not what we get", will be a recurrent theme in Brown's message to the voters. This is a message that may work but which will hardly enthuse. Labour may also compare Britain to other EU member states which are perceived to be worse off as a result of the downturn, and with any luck Brown should be able to supply fresh statistics showing that

the worst part of the crisis has passed. Internationally, there are already signs to this effect.

David Cameron has put much work into modernising the Conservative Party. His style of leadership is more American than traditional Tory. Party policies have been imbued with a social dimension, and environmental degradation and climate change have become part of the agenda. However, Cameron's efforts to erase the image of the Tories as the party of the upper class have not reached all members of his parliamentary party. When confronted with the question of whether MPs should be permitted to travel on business class, Sir Nicolas Winterton justified his privileges in claiming: "They are a totally different type of people. I like to have peace and quiet when I'm travelling."

David Cameron may not be the most conventional Eton student to have led the Conservative Party, but class prejudice against the Tories may still influence voters. There are, after all, many Labour voters who must be swayed by Cameron if the Tories are to win on 6 May; even more need to shift allegiance to provide him with a working majority.

Much is to be gained, but much is also to lose for the youthful party leader who is trying to re-establish the Conservative Party as a party of government. With personality and credibility important elements of the campaign, a lot will be decided by the three televised debates between the party leaders.

To a greater extent than used to be the case at British elections, the campaign this time will be a duel between two party leaders, Gordon Brown and David Cameron. Politics in Britain has become increasingly personalised, a development encouraged (though not initiated) by the premiership of Tony Blair.

Under normal circumstances, the election on 6 May should result in a clear-cut victory for Cameron and the Conservative Party. The Tories have enjoyed a comfortable lead in the polls, and the Labour government has been hampered by conflicts over Brown's leadership. In the economy, a gruelling budget deficit and growing unemployment have characterised the last two years. Disillusionment with the government may increase as Labour's core voters in the North are hit by the social impact of the downturn as well as the difficult restructuring of British industry.

However, regaining power is not an easy task for the Conservatives. The party has been through an unusually lengthy period in opposition under transient leadership. David Cameron may become the first leader since John Major to remain in his post beyond a general election. To his credit, Cameron has engineered a required renewal of Conservative policies. The Tories are closer to the centre ground now, pledges on tax cuts are no longer the core strategy and calls for further privatisation are moderate.

Nevertheless, despite Cameron's personal popularity and a reformed political platform the Conservative lead on Labour has been reduced. With



The exam awaits. David Cameron has renewed his party but has yet to close the deal with the British people.

The case against coalition government

By Mark Oaten, MP for Winchester

The greatest fear? If you believe the polls the next British election could be the closest in thirty years. At the time of writing the Conservative lead over Labour has, in some polls, gone down to just two per cent. Put another way, not enough for victory.



Mark Oaten (Liberal Democrats) has been the MP for Winchester since 1997. From 2003 to 2006 he was the party's shadow home secretary. Oaten has authored several books, including *Coalition: the Politics and Personalities of Coalition Government from 1850* (Harriman House, 2007). He is standing down from Parliament at the forthcoming election.

Such are the peculiarities of the British voting system, the first past the post system, that the Conservatives need a huge swing to have just a one seat majority. A hung parliament, with neither party able to muster a working majority, is a very real possibility.

And so begins some soul searching about coalition governments. Is Britain ready for its politicians to experiment with compromise rather than confrontation? Is it right that a political party can get 22% of the popular vote but less than 10% of the parliamentary seats, as happened to the Lib Dems in 2005?

To add fuel to the constitutional fire Gordon Brown has signalled a change of Labour policy on the issue, announcing his desire to have a referendum on the voting system, proposing the Alternative Vote as a compromise. Not quite Proportional Representation (the Holy Grail for my party) but a significant shift nonetheless.

For some reason I am fascinated by coalition governments. How effective are they; who decides on policy; is the claim that they lead to weak and ineffective government really justified? I set out to try and tackle some of the myths us British hold about them and find out for myself. And who better to turn to than the experts on the continent?

I have travelled to several countries and met with MPs, speakers, journalists and academics in Italy, Germany, Austria and others. What I quickly began to understand was coalition governments are far far more complicated than they first look.

I was fascinated to learn how coalitions were put together. You had smokey rooms in Italy and Austria where MPs from different parties would share a drink and put the deal together. You had formal and official joint manifestos published in Germany

outlining the coalition agreement, principles and policies. In Estonia there was the "garlic coalition" - a deal put together over one meal in the garlic restaurant in Tallinn.

Personalities are clearly crucial to a successful coalition as well. Leaders can make or break agreements by their flamboyance or stubbornness, but equally important are the relationships built further down the chain with deputies, party leaders and other officials.

The role of the media was also incredibly interesting. In so many of these countries I visited the media seemed to tolerate, or at least understand, the need to allow MPs time to reach decisions and compromise. Of course they would print rumour and commentary on events but it all seems to be done in such a civilised manner. I just can't imagine the British press - with their determination for answers now, now, now - to have the same tolerance.

But, at the same time I also heard a lot of pessimism and frustration from the people I spoke to. I would always ask what advice they would give to the British on their voting system. More often than not I heard back "keep it the way it is". For the losers coalitions can be frustrating things. The former speaker of the Italian parliament said to me that if the UK got a coalition next time around then "we can both cry together". Hardly a ringing endorsement!

Like everyone else I am attracted to the ideals of a coalition government because it means more of the electorate is represented and because it leads to compromise. It is a welcome break from the constant adversarial approach in Britain, the never ending calls for resignations, inquiries and sackings.

So coalition has a lot to commend it for. But I couldn't help having nagging doubts about whether Britain was really suited to coalition Governments. We have our own experiences of it - most recently the Lib/Lab pact during the mid seventies - and that isn't remembered fondly at all. I started to come to the conclusion that coalition governments were ineffective. Rather than confront issues they avoid them, diluting their policies rather than taking on their coalition partners or their party members. They can be very unstable things without a clear sense of direction. When policies run out they drift rudderless to an election.

British voters want tough governments that are given a mandate and the majority needed to achieve that. If the electorate judge them to have failed on their election pledges they will be voted out at the next election. In the meantime, they want a government that can act quickly and with purpose.

Now, whether they get that from the current system is another debate. But the majority

"But British voters want tough governments that are given a mandate and the majority needed to achieve that. If the electorate judge them to have failed on their election pledges they will be voted out at the next election."

of the British prefer to see their party leaders shouting at each other across the gladiatorial arena of the House of Commons. The British media wouldn't have it any other way.

And then there are the constitutional issues. When it comes to hung parliaments we are on uncertain ground. I have done a lot of research into this and I don't think

anyone is quite sure who has the right to form a government in the event of a hung parliament. We don't have a President that can hold the ring while negotiations take place, as they do in other countries.

But, I want to end on a positive note because despite all that, I have seen that coalition can work very effectively indeed. I promise this is not just because I am writing for a Norwegian audience, but when I visited Norway I found a country that dealt with coalition in a mature way and actually made it work.

Politicians appeared able to make compromises and run a country effectively at the same time. Norway seems to be able to take tough and quick decisions and, crucially, plan for the long term, not just the short term. And while I believe a lot of this was cultural there were some interesting constitutional arrangements that could be usefully adopted elsewhere. Having fixed terms without the possibility of dissolving parliament, for example, appeared to me to be crucial. Coalition partners knew they were stuck together for four years and so just got on with the job.

Do I think Britain is ready for coalition? No I don't. I think the media, MPs and public are so used to the way we do things now that anything else would seem too strange. And because of that I don't see any coalition lasting long. I don't think the Liberal Democrats should prop up any of the two parties but instead fight for our own policies on an issue by issue basis.

Therefore, while we could be about to witness the closest election in decades I still think, when the dust has settled, it will be business as normal in the UK.

The Countryside Alliance Rural Manifesto – how to heal the rift between countryside and government

By Simon Hart

Last year, in time for the imminent UK General Election, The Countryside Alliance published a new Rural Manifesto for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We want it to be read, to generate discussion and to make people from cities and rural areas alike think about the future of the countryside.



Simon Hart is chief executive of the Countryside Alliance, a position he has held since 2003. A previous director of the Campaign for Hunting, Hart has been one of the leading voices in the promotion of hunting and the livelihood and way of life in rural Britain.

The Rural Manifesto covers five topics: *housing, education, farming, the repeal of the Hunting Act and services*. This is not a random choice, nor are these five necessarily the most important issues for everyone in the countryside. What they do represent is a five piece jigsaw with each piece connecting with the others. Some have huge practical implications, whilst others make important political statements. Some issues are devolved whereas others remain the domain of central government, but the future of the countryside has an importance that bridges political boundaries.

Everyone in the UK is feeling the impact of the recession. Everywhere there are real pockets of deprivation and concerns about our quality of life, the environment and the kind of landscape we want to live in.

Our countryside is a national treasure admired around the world and it is also a home and workplace. Those who live and work there can be forgiven for feeling at times that it does not receive the political support it deserves. Divisive politics, media

misrepresentation and a lack of understanding can create a gap between rural and urban areas. Yet there should be no conflict over "town or country". The challenge is doing the best for *both* town and country.

Community is central to rural life which is why the Rural Manifesto attaches real significance to affordable rural housing – the chance for local people to live locally,

to fill schools, support local services and, keep families together. The countryside has always evolved and rural people understand the social and technical requirements of the 21st Century. This generation knows how to change, but it wants the opportunity to do so in the countryside it grew up in. There is no single solution to the problem of affordable housing. However, by simplifying the development process, giving powers to local communities and providing the right fiscal incentives the Government can empower local communities to meet their own housing needs.

Children and young people have become disconnected from the countryside and all children should have a better understanding of the natural richness of the countryside and what it is like to live and work there. Outdoor education improves young people's confidence, social skills and understanding of the environment and it must become a core subject in the National Curriculum.

Farming continues to form a vital piece of the rural jigsaw. It is about feeding the nation good healthy food, rearing animals,

that farmers have the stability they need to make long-term decisions and investments.

On hunting we argue that tolerance and respect are the hallmark of mature politics. We argue the need for workable legislation that can be understood by the police, the courts and those it affects. We argue that prohibiting any activity only works when

"Farmers are not subsidised park keepers, but open air businessmen, embracing traditional production with modern technology."

there is overwhelming evidence that it is causing a demonstrable harm. The Hunting Act should be repealed.

Rural services are the glue which holds communities together but, for years, rural public services have been in much faster decline

than equivalent services in urban areas. The problem of access to services in the countryside is inseparable from public transport problems. Without adequate public transport rural communities are more dependent on car ownership to access basic services such as healthcare, education and banking. For geographic and social reasons the need for viable public transport in rural areas is far more acute than in urban areas.

We are more than mindful of the economic situation any incoming Government will face and are not being unrealistic about demanding increased expenditure in some areas. Indeed proposals such as cutting the rate of VAT for repair, maintenance and home improvement work has even raised tax revenue in other European countries. Most of all, by adopting the proposals in the Rural Manifesto political parties will be signalling an end to the divisive politics which has dogged

the relationship between the countryside and government over the last ten years.

It is time for government to engage with the countryside as it actually is, not as some anachronism of a Wales that never really existed. The Rural Manifesto points the way.

To find out more about the Rural Manifesto go to www.countryside-alliance.org.uk



Rural platform. Meeting in the town of Crewkerne, Somerset, for the traditional Boxing Day hunt, 26 December 2006. Photograph by Charles Fred. Published under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 License (accessed at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/charlesfred/334010663/> on 22 April 2010).

maintaining a landscape responsibly and above all keeping communities together. Farmers are not subsidised park keepers, but open air businessmen, embracing traditional production with modern technology. Policies, at both a UK and an EU level, should acknowledge the many overlapping functions of farming and not promote one element at the expense of another. Any policies, should as far as is possible, be future-proofed so

Foreign policy - a wild card in the British general election?

By Kristin M. Haugevik

The international scene. National elections are rarely fought over foreign policy issues, far less won over them. Even at the height of tension over the Iraq war, and faced with profound criticism at home, Tony Blair managed (if only just) to win the British electorate's trust for a historic third term five years ago.



Kristin M. Haugevik is a research fellow at NUPI, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and Vice President of British Politics Society, Norway.

The intuitive explanation as to why this was at all possible is that although foreign policy issues do engage British voters, they are seldom sufficiently important by themselves to swing an election outcome. Accordingly, at the upcoming general election this May, voters are likely to be more concerned with domestic issues such as unemployment, education, health care, immigration and tax cuts, than they are with foreign affairs.

In addition to domestic issues trumping international ones, at least two other reasons can be listed as to why foreign policy tends to play a secondary role in British election campaigns. The first is that heated foreign policy issues in the past have had a tendency to split the major parties internally almost as profoundly as they have strengthened the boundaries between them. Britain's relationship with Europe and the EU is the most illustrative case in point. Party leaders on both sides of the political spectrum, from Harold Macmillan, Edward Heath and Harold Wilson to Margaret Thatcher, John Major and Tony Blair, experienced deep-seated and harsh debates within their own parties over Europe. For Thatcher, internal party divisions over Europe were eventually what brought an end to her career as Conservative party leader. Thus, while Europe and the EU remains an issue that engages British voters, putting it too high up on one's list of election campaign priorities may quickly become a double-edged sword. The image of a party fighting with itself is, after all, difficult to sell to the public.

A second likely explanation for the modest role played by foreign policy in British election campaigns is that the differences between the parties are actually not that distinct within this domain. In 1960, the British scholar Frederick S. Northedge drew attention to the "normal consensus on questions of foreign policy between the two front benches" in British politics. Fifty years later, this observation still seems to ring largely true. While the

three major parties do have their distinctive foreign policy ideologies, truly polarised debates over foreign policy are few and far between. As in postwar Norway, foreign policy consensus seems to be the general rule rather than the exception in Britain. Britain's identity as an engaged international actor, a former world hegemon, a competent military player, a close ally of the United States and a somewhat cautious partner in Europe and the EU has survived numerous shifts in government.

Europe, obviously, is still a recurring topic for discussion, and could have become more significant in the current campaign had the election been called sooner. Last autumn, there were speculations in the British press that the Conservatives would seek to reverse the British ratification of the Lisbon Treaty if they came to power before it had been approved by all EU countries. Since that time, however, the last of the stalling EU countries have signed the treaty and the window of opportunity - which was narrow to begin with - now appears to be closed for good.

This is not to say that party differences over Europe do not remain. A quick glance of the three major parties' election manifestos suggests that they do. The Liberal Democrats - currently the most pro-European of the three major parties - sees cooperation

with Europe as "the best way for Britain to be strong, safe and influential in the future". Labour somewhat more moderately endorses the vision of "a strong Britain in a reformed Europe", while the Conservative manifesto states that Britain should "be positive members of the EU", yet calls the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty "a betrayal of [Britain's] democratic traditions". On the issue of Britain joining the Euro, the Conservatives essentially say "never", the Liberal Democrats yes - in the long run, while Labour will await the outcome of a national referendum. In sum, it could be argued that the parties' basic attitudes to Europe are different, but the policy strategies they outline are less so.

Other foreign policy issues have also not generated substantial political debate in the current election campaign. The ongoing Chilcot inquiry into Britain's role in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, although subject to much public attention as well as political tension, will not be submitting its final report until after the general election. With Tony Blair gone from the domestic political scene and the last British troops out of Iraq since 2009, Britain's military role in Iraq thus seems to be a topic for past rather than present political debates. On these issues, the differences between the Conservatives and Labour are in any case only minor. The Liberal Democrats did oppose the Iraq war, and have marketed themselves as "critical supporters" of the operation in Afghanistan, but have so far not made this a central part of their campaign message.

In sum, and today's globalizing world notwithstanding, domestic issues still seem to matter more than international ones to national election outcomes. At the time of writing, there are few indications that the upcoming British general election will be any different in this respect. At the end of the day, elections are essentially about getting more votes than your political opponents, and at the moment there seems to be few votes to win by placing the spotlight on foreign policy issues.

A minor addendum might still be in place: Out of three historic televised prime ministerial debates this April, one was entirely devoted to international affairs. The issues discussed ranged from Europe, national defence, terrorism and climate change to Afghanistan, Iraq and the Middle East. Could this increase the electorate's concern with foreign policy this election? Perhaps. Will it impact significantly on the election result 6 May? Probably not.



Global role. Britain's involvement in international affairs is an essential part of government policy, yet unlikely to dominate neither the election campaign nor the outcome.

David Cameron's election strategy - a winning formula?

By Mariette Christophersen

The final lap. Of the 45 million people eligible to vote in the forthcoming General Election in the UK, only a small proportion in so-called marginal constituencies will determine which party gets to form the next government. That is the inevitable result of the First-Past-the-Post electoral system coupled with single-member constituencies in what is effectively a two-party system. Most constituencies are "safe seats" where the party colour has not changed in 30 or more years. The battleground in the run-up to the election, therefore, unfolds in what is known as marginal constituencies - where a swing of just a few percentage points could make or break either party's chance of victory.



Mariette Christophersen works in the House of Commons as a political adviser to a Conservative MP and member of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee. She holds a Master's degree in EU politics and governance from the London School of Economics (LSE).

This backdrop shapes the election strategies of the two main parties, not least the Conservatives who are vying to win this year's election after thirteen years in opposition. The Conservatives have long since identified the target seats it must win in order to secure a working majority in the House of Commons. Over the past couple of years the party has undertaken extensive research and invested heavily in the use of focus groups to map out where, and towards whom, to concentrate their attention.

The Conservatives' election strategy can in general terms be explained by the median voter theorem first introduced by the Scottish economist Duncan Black in 1948. Black demonstrated how, in a two-party system such as in the UK, the main parties both converge towards the middle of the political spectrum in order to scoop up the median voter who tends to hold the key to any election victory. David Cameron has intentionally positioned the Conservatives closer to the centre of the political spectrum than ever before.

His rationale is that by modernising the party and trying to distance it from its traditional right-wing Thatcherite heritage he can secure the support of the voter group that is pivotal to his victory.

Commentators agree that the median voter who secured the landslide victory for Tony Blair and his New Labour in 1997

was "Worcester woman". She was a typical middle class mother in her 40s or 50s who had previously voted for the Conservatives, but was swayed by Tony Blair's charismatic and youthful energy and his policies targeted to woo the middle class.

Strategists have identified a handful of demographic groups the support of which will be decisive in winning this year's election, and perhaps the most important is Worcester woman's younger sister: "Holby City woman". Named after the BBC hospital drama, Holby City woman is in her 30s or early 40s, and is an average earner employed in the public sector typically as a nurse or a teacher. She is married, has young children and elderly parents, and her political priorities are as a result mainly health, education and care for the elderly. She has voted for Labour in the past but is a floating voter whose support is pivotal in winning this year's election. Crucially, Holby City woman lives in the middle England heartlands of Yorkshire, Lancashire and the West Midlands - all bursting with constituencies at the top of Cameron's target list.

The quest for Holby City woman's vote has shaped most of the Conservatives' election strategy, influenced many of the policies Cameron has put forward, and has been a main drive behind his notion of a progressive conservatism. In the last couple of years Cameron has promised radical reform of the education system by introducing a Swedish-style model of schools with limited state control; he has

promised to protect the NHS; he has pledged to recognise marriage in the tax and welfare systems; and he aspires to make Britain "the most family friendly nation in Europe".

In a bid to modernise the Conservatives' image, Cameron has actively sought to secure more female MPs after the next election than ever before by introducing controversial all-women

shortlists for safe seats. The next parliament will also see a record number of gay, lesbian and ethnic minority Tory MPs. By seeking to better reflect the demographic make-up of modern Britain, Cameron is striving to present the Conservatives as a modern and inclusive party fit to govern in the 21st century.

The question remains whether this strategy is working. Despite the Conservatives' relentless spending and campaigning in marginal seats, the poll lead has narrowed considerably over the last eighteen months. Labour has, like the Conservatives, identified working mothers as a key demographic in the coming election and its biggest backer, the trade union Unite, is now matching the Conservatives' spending in target areas.

Another issue is the extent to which Cameron has left the bulk of the party behind in his bid to modernise. Many backbench MPs have voiced concern that the election campaign lacks a clear message and that Cameron's reformist agenda has gone too far. And it is unlikely that such criticism will die down after the election. Although most of the older, more traditional Tory MPs are standing down at the

election, many of the incoming MPs are less progressive than Cameron might have hoped. A survey by the grassroots website ConservativeHome has found that the new cohort set to enter the House of Commons are predominantly Thatcher's children rather than Cameron's. Many of them have, for instance, criticised the lack of focus on issues such as immigration in the election campaign.

Critics have warned that Cameron's priority to reach out to centrist voters risks alienating the traditional conservative voter base who care more for curbing immigration and clawing back powers from the European Union, than for making Britain the greenest and most family-friendly nation in Europe. Disgruntlement among this voter group risks some of them switching allegiance to parties such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP) or the British National Party (BNP) at the election. Nevertheless, opinion polls show that the narrowing Conservative lead in the past year has benefited Labour rather than the smaller far-right parties, which corroborates the view that the key to winning this year's election lies in the political centre-ground.

At the time of writing, Gordon Brown has just announced that the election will take place on 6 May. David Cameron faces a huge challenge as the party needs an additional 116 seats and the biggest swing since 1931 in order to secure a majority of just one seat. This is set to be the closest and most exciting election in a generation. Cameron is in fighting form and up to the task, and supporters are eagerly awaiting polling day when his election strategy may prove to be a winning formula.

"[T]he narrowing Conservative lead in the past year has benefited Labour rather than the smaller far-right parties... The key to winning this year's election lies in the political centre-ground."

Interpreting the result on 6 May

By Øivind Bratberg and Atle L. Wold

Uncertain change.

The election campaign of 2010 may be remembered in the future as the point at which British politics took a different direction. The rise of the Liberal Democrats signals a

first step away from the overwhelming dominance of two parties at Westminster, a dominance which has been maintained at Westminster by the in-bred bias of the "first past the post" electoral system.

Interpreting election outcomes is a difficult exercise. Looking back at the 2005 election, a dominating interpretation was one of the British electorate giving Tony Blair and his government "a bloody nose". That is, controversial reforms in the public sector (such as foundation hospitals and the increase of tuition fees) and, most essentially, the war in Iraq, led to a judgement among voters that punishment was due. Yet, with a Conservative party not yet entirely ready for government, Labour would have to stay. Thus, more votes could be cast for the third party, the Liberal Democrats, to ensure that the government was returned, but with a much-reduced majority.

Whether such considerations are really dominant when voters make up their mind is perhaps doubtful. Even if they were, however, only the relatively few voters in marginal constituencies are able to influence the overall balance at Westminster. For the rest, staying at home or switching party is a signal, but hardly a decisive one for the choice of government.

What interpretations should apply, then, if the Liberal Democrats sweep through the election to land at a result close to or equalling one of the two larger parties? Surely, it will be a mandate for change in British politics. One of Nick Clegg's clearest arguments is for change in the way politics is conducted, that is, a strengthening of democratic accountability and, in the medium perspective, electoral reform to allow for greater proportionality between the share of votes cast for a party at the national level, and the number of MPs returned for that party. Secondly, a Liberal renewal of democracy should also imply more autonomy for local government and a new emphasis on strengthening civil liberties against the monitory state.

Thirdly, change is also in the air with regard to market regulation. Curtailing banks is



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to be done by ring-fencing peaceful retail banking while clamping down on the more risky investment adventures on which British banks have embarked since the deregulation of the late 1980s. Market reform also includes ensuring the Post Office remains in public ownership and encouraging cooperatives and small businesses. The Liberal vision for the British economy is one of more environment-friendly enterprises, a better balance between big and small, and a reduction in the dominance of the financial sector. Finally, one would expect the Liberals to press for a kinder, gentler society, with stronger communities. In policy terms, this will be reflected in less authoritarian policies on crime and imprisonment as well as immigration.

If the Liberal Democrats obtain a similarly strong results as suggested by polls during the campaign, this could be well be the dominant interpretation in the weeks ahead. Britain has voted for change - in the domains of politics, the economy and the way communities are organised.

If the election results in a hung Parliament where support from the Liberal Democrats would be needed for the new government, one may ask whether a small dose of Liberal ideas can be injected in any of the two larger parties to create a sustainable - yet different - mandate for the road ahead.

Labour is often taken to be the party closest to the Liberal agenda. This is the thesis of the unresolved centre-left, a progressive coalition which has far too rarely materialised to divest the Conservative side of political power.



The changemaker. Nick Clegg may become a key actor in defining the road ahead in British politics. But how should his message for change be interpreted?

Yet there are major obstacles between Labour and the Liberal Democrats today. Their respective views of the state remain fundamentally different. Where Labour sees redemption in state action, Liberals frequently see a fearsome, patronising and centralising machine. Civil liberties are part of this debate, where the Liberal Democrats have taken a consistent stance against the Labour government on issues such as compulsory ID cards, the extended detention without charge of terrorist suspects and the tightening of immigration law.

Yet on most of the fundamental issues there are overlaps between the parties. Liberal Democrats, just as Labour, want a more redistributive society. Both parties are champions of public services and supportive of the devolved settlement and European integration. The largest remaining problem may be one of personnel: if change is the word, the continuing premiership of Gordon Brown may be hard to accept for the Liberal Democrats.

On the other side, David Cameron and the Conservative Party await. If the Conservatives emerge as the party with the largest electoral support, the Liberal Democrats may feel compelled to try to strike a deal with them. Both parties do believe there should be a change of government; both believe the financial crisis was, to a considerable extent, Labour's fault; both say that renewal of democracy is now imperative.

Beyond this there are however major obstacles to cooperation. The Liberal principle of electoral reform meets scarce support among Conservatives committed to the existing system, which - as David Cameron has repeatedly pointed out - is more likely to give a clear mandate for government by yielding stable majorities in Parliament. And there are more of these clashes of principles between the parties in the offing: Liberal wishes for a strengthening of devolution and a stronger dedication to Europe are two policy areas of particular poignancy. Finally, on classic left/right issues involving taxation, public services and redistribution, most observers agree that the Liberal Democrats have been, and remain, closer to the centre-left.

The election result of 2010 will reflect a multitude of considerations among voters, views which can hardly be summarised without ambiguity. Parties offer programmes, voters give their opinion, and then parties enact. Chances are, however, that this time around, the process will be more complex and long-lasting than at any election since 1974, when none of the parties gained a majority (and a new election ensued within the year). Exciting times are ahead for anyone fascinated by the tactical game and the unexpected effects of British elections.

New Labour and neoliberal cultural policy

By Jim McGuigan

After hegemony. A principal feature of neoliberal policy is to reduce all questions of public policy to economic questions, usually understood as a matter of "market forces". That orientation operates widely in the world today irrespective of party politics. Social-democratic parties across Europe are no exception to the general rule. They have tended to adapt to changed conditions everywhere over the past thirty years, sometimes reluctantly.



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So, in Britain, when Labour gained power in 1997, it might have been expected that the policies of the outgoing Conservative government would at least be arrested if not necessarily reversed. Instead, New Labour sought to deepen and extend the market disciplines introduced by Margaret Thatcher's governments since 1979. Which is not say, however, that New Labour policy was indistinguishable from Thatcherism. The rhetoric and to some extent the practice of the Blair and Brown regime's post-Thatcherism was more socially inclusive and ostensibly progressive across a range of policies, including cultural policy.

In fact, public spending on culture rose sharply, especially in the publicly subsidised arts. Moreover, the Department of Heritage was renamed the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). New Labour promoted culture at first with the slogan of "cool Britannia". Luminaries of the audio-visual and music industries were invited to Downing Street to schmooze with Tony Blair. By the end of the year, though, when unemployment benefit was denied struggling young musicians, the pop stars' support evaporated and no more was heard of cool Britannia.

Cultural hyperbole was, in effect, combined with economic reductionism, as can be illustrated by three major features of New Labour cultural policy over the three unbroken periods of government up to 2010. First, there was the Lottery funded *Millennium Dome* expo on a south-eastern peninsula of the Thames in 2000. Second, consequent upon the apparent success of Liverpool 2008's European Capital of Culture the decision was made to introduce regular competition for a national *City of Culture festival*. Third, extravagant rhetoric concerning the value of "the creative industries" to the British

economy and urban regeneration has become increasingly - and desperately - pronounced during the course of the regime.

The New Millennium Experience was originally a Conservative project aimed at recalling the Great Exhibition of 1851 to be funded by the Conservatives own newly introduced National Lottery. New Labour adopted the project and the Tory claim that it would cost "the taxpayer" nothing, while at the same time associating it rather more with the post-war Labour government's 1951 Festival of Britain. Quite apart from the view that the Lottery is an informal tax on the poor, a great deal of taxpayers' money was actually spent on buying and only partially reclaiming a deeply toxic site. Corporate sponsorship in the end only amounted to about 15% of the billion-pounds-plus costs. Most sponsorship came from American business and a huge amount of public money was spent on promoting it, not to mention the various obscure contractual deals and other sweeteners offered by government. The poorly designed expo amounted to little more than a propaganda exercise for transnational and neoliberal business.

"Extravagant rhetoric concerning the value of 'the creative industries' to the British economy and urban regeneration has become increasingly - and desperately - pronounced during the course of the regime."

in Europe to be constructed and owned by the Duke of Westminster. On the face of it, Liverpool is now an attractive city for the professional-managerial class to live in and shop, though the economic recession is hardly improving business prospects in the city.

The term creative industries was introduced to the world in a DCMS mapping document in 1998, where it was declared: "The value of the creative industries to the UK domestic

product is [...] greater than the contribution of any of the UK's manufacturing industry" - quite a declaration for the one-time "workshop of the world". The figures for this are somewhat exaggerated yet chiefly based on Britain's comparative prowess in the design of video games. Neither armaments nor pharmaceuticals, Britain's leading manufacturing

sectors, tend to get mentioned in such documents.

In a second edition of the mapping document three years later, "creative industries" were defined economically as "those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property". This cultural philosophy was given its fullest expression in a document, *Staying Ahead*, commissioned by the DCMS from the Work Foundation in 2007 where creative industries are treated as the core element or base of the British economy, which represents a curious and utterly bizarre combination of both economic reductionism and cultural reductionism. It is neither good economics nor good cultural policy.

Thatcher's governments shifted the British economy from manufacturing and extractive industries towards majoring in service and financial industries,

a global policy orientation that would be inconceivable were it not for the mass armies of cheap labour in poorer parts of the world, most notably China today. It was a policy that proved apparently very successful in the short term. New Labour accepted it completely and uncritically. It is hardly surprising, then, that Britain is now, after thirteen years of Labour government, in such a parlous state in the aftermath of the global financial crisis.



Impoverished or richer? Liverpool is an instructive example of the Labour government's programme for urban renewal. Shopping centres such as Liverpool One have transformed inner-city areas.

The former world port of Liverpool lost half of its population since the Second World War, becoming one of the most deprived casualties of deindustrialisation and global economic transformation in the industrialised countries of the North. Rebuilding much of the city centre for the 2008 European Capital of Culture Festival removed large parts of working-class housing, banishing yet more poor people to the outer suburbs and satellite towns. Space was cleared for the biggest shopping centre

Rebuilding the House: signposts for the road ahead

By Tony Wright, MP for Cannock Chase

Dr. Anthony Wright (Labour) has been an MP since 1992 and chair of the Public Administration Select Committee in the House of Commons since



1999. A prolific author on political history, ideology and social democracy, he has contributed widely to political debate in Britain. He is standing down from Parliament at the forthcoming election.

From July to November 2009 Tony Wright chaired the Reform of the House of Commons Committee set down by the Prime Minister to consider a range of proposed reforms to the working procedures of the House. The following manuscript is his speech in the House of Commons on 22 February 2010 accompanying the committee's report on "Rebuilding the House".

I do not need to remind the House of the circumstances in which the Committee was established. It used to be said that political reform was a matter for constitutional anoraks, which overlooks the fact that anoraks are precisely what are needed in a storm. And Parliament has been battered by the most ferocious and damaging storm in its modern history. There is a massive enterprise of restoration and reconstruction to be undertaken. Let nobody think that once we have attended to the expenses issue, or had a general election, all will be well. As Mr. Speaker said in a speech in Oxford just a couple of weeks ago: "The challenge that faces the House of Commons is not simply about rescuing its reputation but is about restoring its relevance."

Parliament's reputation will be restored *only* if its relevance is re-established. A window on our world has been opened by what has happened, and it will not be closed again. Fundamental questions are now being asked about what the House does and what its Members do. If anyone doubts this, they need only look at the consultation document on MPs' expenses issued by the new Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority: "The time is right", it says, "for a discussion on the proper role of a Member of Parliament, with a view to establishing a shared national understanding." Be warned; this issue is not going to go away, nor should it.

Our terms of reference were deliberately

more modest, although not I believe unconnected to this larger task. We were not invited to reform Parliament in a more general sense, or to pronounce on the role of a Member of Parliament, and I would be the first to recognise that there are important matters which we have not been able to deal with (even given a generous interpretation of the "closely connected matters" in our terms of reference). But reform is a process, not an event; and we claim only to have made a start. The three matters we were directed to examine - appointments to Select Committees, the scheduling of business, and public initiation of proceedings - were long recognised as requiring attention. But they also all raised fundamental issues about the role of Parliament, to which we sought to apply consistent principles.

For example, in relation to Select Committees, we concluded that it could not be right for the House's scrutiny Committees to continue to be chosen, directly or indirectly, by those they were charged with scrutinising. Hence our recommendation for election: of the Chairs by the whole House, and members by their parties. Not only would this remove some of the problems that have caused difficulty in the past; but would also give a positive boost to the profile and authority of the Committees themselves. In case anyone is worried that our proposal is too radical, we remind the House that in the 18th century members were elected by secret ballot to Select Committees, with Members placing their preferred names in large glasses on the Table.

In relation to the business of the House, we concluded that it could not be right in a sovereign Parliament to have its business controlled so completely by the Executive (as enshrined in the stark words of Standing Order No. 14). As we say in our report, this both demonises Governments and infantilises Members. Hence our recommendation for a Backbench business committee to take responsibility for non-ministerial business; and for a House business committee to construct an agreed programme of business, ministerial and non-ministerial, to be put to the House for its approval.

Not only would a Backbench business committee reclaim for the House what had been lost and rightly belonged to it; but also provide the mechanism to enable the House to make imaginative innovations in the way it organises non-ministerial business. Similarly, a House business committee

would want to ensure that all legislation received proper scrutiny, which we all know is not the case at present.

In relation to the public initiation of proceedings, we concluded that representative democracy could be strengthened if the public had a more active role in our proceedings. Hence our recommendation for an improved petitions system, and for further work on public initiatives. We also suggest a mechanism whereby Members can give their support

to propositions which, if sufficiently endorsed, can trigger motions for debate and decision.

We make many other recommendations along the way - from the size of Committees to the operation of Opposition days, from sitting times to the Intelligence and Security Committee - but these three areas are the main focus of our

attention. Some hon. Members may want to dissent from some of our particular recommendations; but what would be disappointing - and troubling for a view of Parliament - would be if there was dissent from the principles which underpin these recommendations.

There is another principle I want to mention, which appears in bold throughout our report. This is the principle that an elected Government should have the means to implement the programme on which it has been elected. That is fundamental to democratic politics. Nothing in our report cuts across that, contrary to what some may believe, which is why ministerial business is protected. But it does not follow that effective scrutiny is therefore unnecessary, or that the House should not control its own business. As Robin Cook never used to tire of saying, good scrutiny makes for good government. This is a particular challenge in a system of unseparated powers where the Executive controls the legislature, and where the party battle dominates everything, but it makes it even more necessary to meet the challenge.

That is what our report tries to do; and to set the balance in the right place between the Executive and the legislature, between governing and scrutinising, between party and Parliament, and between democratic politics as the exercise of power and democratic politics as the control of the exercise of power. There has been imbalance in these respects in the past, as is now widely acknowledged, and any reforms have to get the balance right now.

"As Robin Cook never used to tire of saying, good scrutiny makes for good government. This is a particular challenge in a system of unseparated powers where the Executive controls the legislature..."

Rebuilding the House: signposts for the road ahead (cont.)

By Tony Wright MP

This issue of balance occurs on every occasion that parliamentary reform is contemplated or discussed. I have just been reading my way through the two-day debate in the House in February 1979 on the Procedure Committee report which proposed the Select Committees. The report was introduced by the Conservative MP Sir David Renton who commended it to the House with these words:

"For many years Governments of both main parties have enjoyed dominion over the House of Commons. That is not merely because they have had a majority, large or tenuous, but more because of their power, which has grown over the last 100 years or so, of controlling business, including controlling, in effect, the amendment of Standing Orders. The recommendations in the report would help to restore the balance between the Government and the rest of the House in ways that would be advantageous to both. They would also be advantageous to the people who sent us here." [Official Report, 19 February 1979; Vol. 963, c. 55.]

I could use identical words today in presenting our report. Then almost the only voice of resistance to the Procedure Committee's recommendations came from the then Leader of the House, Michael Foot, who feared for the vitality of the Chamber. Now we fear for the vitality of the whole House. But the most interesting contribution came from Enoch Powell, and I offer it as reassurance to those who think that we are seeking to redress the balance too far. Enoch Powell reminded hon. Members: "The House comprises parties and, for most of the purposes of the House, its partisan character overrides its corporate character." He went on to say:

"It is therefore courting disappointment to take the report and say 'Here are proposals which, if we enact them, will redress the balance of power between Government and House of Commons and will put us, the Back Benchers, in the envied positions of power and influence now occupied by those upon the Treasury Bench.' If that is the notion on which we approach the proposals, we are in for a disappointment, but that does not justify our not addressing ourselves on a lower plane of expectation to the major recommendations of the Committee." [Official Report, 20 February 1979; Vol. 963, c. 336.]

There seems to me to be much political wisdom in those words, and I call them in aid of our own proposals if it enables some to support them on this "lower plane of expectation". I am sorry to have detained the

House with a reminder of a similar moment in the past; but I hope it is helpful in the present. I note, in passing, that a decade earlier, in 1965, reform-minded Labour MPs (including the present Father of the House) had tabled a Commons motion calling for comprehensive modernisation of the House: among their demands was "hostel accommodation" for Members. It has taken half a century, and an expenses scandal, to revive that one.

It has not been entirely straightforward to get to this point with our report, but I believe that we are now nearly there. It has been cheering to see the enthusiastic support for our proposals both from within the House and from outside. It is clear that people have not given up on their Parliament, even if they have recently despaired of some of its Members. Even in this pre-election period, when party disagreement is obligatory, seemingly on everything, it is significant that all the party leaders have given their support to this reform initiative. I pay particular tribute to the role of the Leader of the House, and to the shadow Leader of the House, and to the constructive tension between them in a good cause.

"We know that the House stands at a critical moment in its history. Something has gone wrong, beyond the expenses issue, and we have an obligation to put it right. Our constituencies are cultivated as never before, but the vitality of the House is diminished as never before. More is expected of us than just cheering or jeering."

I say that we are "nearly there" for two reasons. First, because it is essential that the House has an opportunity to vote on all the proposals in our report, not just those which meet with the approval of the front benches. That is why I would have liked the House to be given an opportunity to vote on the draft resolution proposed by the Committee, which could have been done on an amendable motion. But this is not a moment to be churlish. We still have to nail down one or two matters, but we are nearly there.

Second, though – and this is the crucial point – this package of reforms is not for the front benches to accept or reject, but for Members to decide on. They have to decide what kind of House they want, and what they think their own role in it is. When Robin Cook asked that question in 2002, Members opted, narrowly, depressingly, for the status quo. After what has happened recently, I hope that enough Members will now conclude that the status quo is no longer an option.

Let me conclude by saying this. There was no parliamentary golden age. When there was supposed to be – in the middle of the 19th century – Gladstone was already writing about "The Declining Efficiency of Parliament". Nor was there a golden age when politicians were loved. It was in the 1960s that Henry Fairlie wrote that: "Today, more than ever, the politician appears to be held in contempt". Members of Parliament work harder now; they are more professional; and are much better supported in their work.

When all this is properly said, though, we know that the House stands at a critical moment in its history. Something has gone wrong, beyond the expenses issue, and we have an obligation to put it right. Our constituencies are cultivated as never before, but the vitality of the House is diminished as never before. More is expected of us than just cheering or jeering. Members of this House have a number of roles; but the fundamental task of Parliament is to hold power to account. Our proposals are designed to strengthen Parliament in that fundamental role. We call our report "Rebuilding the House" because that is what is required –



Pinnacle of debate. The House of Commons, Westminster.

BPS seminars in 2010: "After New Labour" and "the UK general election"



During the winter months of 2010, British Politics Society, Norway, has hosted two exclusive seminars at the University of Oslo. On 16 February, the Rt Hon **John Hutton MP** visited Oslo under the heading of "After New Labour: towards a new era in British politics?" Hutton, a Labour MP since 1992, was Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (2005-07), Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (2007-08) and Defence (2008-09) under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Addressing a large audience in Oslo, Hutton's lecture expressed pride and satisfaction with Labour's accomplishments and confidence that the era of Blair and Brown has shifted the balance in British politics towards the centre-left.



Four weeks subsequent to John Hutton's visit, **Professor Andrew Gamble** addressed a similar BPS seminar on the topic of the forthcoming general election. Reflecting upon the dominant issues of the forthcoming general election, Professor Gamble addressed the peculiar circumstances of the election and raised the question of whether 2010 could constitute a watershed in British politics similar to 1979. In terms of international consequences, Gamble emphasised that these could easily be overstated and reminded of the broad continuities in Britain's relationship to Europe and the wider world.

More about the events, including the full manuscript of John Hutton's speech, is found at mail@britishpoliticssociety.no

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Forthcoming edition of *British Politics Review*

The general election awaits, but what follows thereafter? The next issue of *British Politics Review* looks closer at the consequences of the election.

What is the composition of the new Parliament elected in May? How will the process of parliamentary reform proceed? And, the two fundamental questions underlying much debate: who governs Britain, and what will be the consequences for policy as well as for the political system itself?

To Labour, the election may mark the end of an era in government and the start of a process of renewal. For the Conservative Party, 6 May could entail the long-awaited chance to govern or yet another period in the waiting room. But perhaps the largest unresolved issue among the parties: how will the Liberal Democrats fare? And, in the event of a hung Parliament, how will they proceed?

Change is in the air in and around Westminster, and the election has potentially

large consequences for policy areas, regions, organisations and people. Where politics matter, elections are the ultimate milestones. May may imprint precisely that perception in Britain. As usual, the *Review* will draw upon articles both from political, academic and journalistic sources. Contributions from readers of *British Politics Review* are very welcome.

The summer edition of *British Politics Review* is due to arrive in July 2010.