



British Politics Review

Journal of the British Politics Society, Norway

Volume 10 | No. 2 | Spring 2015



Who will win - and what then?

The UK general election 7 May 2015

CONTRIBUTORS

Andrew Gamble • Kevin Theakston • Francesca Gains • Claire Annesley
Jan Erik Mustad • Glen O'Hara • Malcolm Harvey • Øivind Bratberg

British Politics Review

Volume 10 / No. 2 / Spring 2015

ISSN 1890-4505

British Politics Review is a quarterly journal issued by the British Politics Society, Norway. With contributions from academic and journalistic sources, the *British Politics Review* is aimed at everyone with a general interest in political developments in Britain.

British Politics Society, Norway is politically neutral and has no collective agenda apart from raising the interest and knowledge of British politics among the informed Norwegian public.

Editorial team

Øivind Bratberg [Editor]

Kristin M. Haugevik [Associate Editor]

Atle L. Wold [Associate Editor]

Henry Allen

Postal address

P.O. Box 6 Blindern

N-0313 Oslo, Norway

Email

mail@britishpoliticsociety.no

Website

www.britishpoliticsociety.no

Print

Reprosentralen, Oslo, Norway

Cover photo

10 Downing Street, London, headquarters and residence of the British prime minister.

Photo: Sergeant Tom Robinson RLC/MOD. Licensed under OGL via Wikimedia Commons - http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:10_Downing_Street._MOD_45155532.jpg#/media/File:10_Downing_Street._MOD_45155532.jpg.

Manuscripts

Within a relatively broad framework, *British Politics Review* welcomes articles on British politics and society, preferably related to the thematic area set for each issue (announced in the previous issue and on our website). Please contact the editors at mail@britishpoliticsociety.no

Subscriptions

100 NOK pr year

Please contact us at

mail@britishpoliticsociety.no

or visit our website.

Editorial

Who will master the politics of fragmentation?

On 7 May, the British electorate will elect the 56th Parliament of the United Kingdom. Election day is a day of celebration for democracy itself. It is also a day of hope and fear, where the cards will be redistributed between the competing forces of British politics. There is much to hope for, and much to be feared.

To the Conservative Party, 2015 is the year that its historical role as the natural party of government should be reinstated, confirming that the economic policy engineered to take Britain out of recession has succeeded. "Austerity", Andrew Gamble writes elsewhere on these pages "has not worked for the Conservatives as they hoped. It has not eliminated the deficit, and the recovery is very fragile... But austerity has worked well for the Conservatives as a political strategy." The Conservative narrative that has obtained such authority directs the blame for economic misery on the opposition: it was the profligate Labour government of 2005-10 that took the nation's economy off course. Cuts do hurt, but they are necessary, and once the patient is cured a smoother, more balanced economy awaits. The mountain that Ed Miliband, the Labour leader, has to climb, is thus one of credibility: can his party govern the country in a manner that is economically responsible while willing to act to create a more equal society? And in personal terms, does Mr Miliband have the required capabilities as statesman, liberating himself from the academic image in which he has been framed? Beyond - or rather between - the two are the Liberal Democrats, mercilessly marked by the experience of coalition government which has damaged the innocent image of the party.

The fate of these three parties will be essential to the kind of government that will lead Britain after 7 May. Yet the realities of British politics today are not captured within two or two-and-a-half political tribes. Politics is in a state of fragmentation, as confirmed by an electoral campaign which more than anything has put on display a set of sub-cultures: Environmentalists, Eurosceptics, Scottish nationalists, each with a party to call their own. To what extent is the electoral system capable of accommodating this diversity? And when it comes to government formation, who will master the new politics of fragmentation, to become not the supreme leader in an 'elective dictatorship', but the team-leader of a benevolent coalition? Only the next weeks will tell.

Øivind Bratberg and Atle L. Wold (editors)

Contents

General election 2015: a journey into the unknown? <i>Glen O'Hara</i>	pp. 3-4	Having your cake and eating it: No independence, but an increasingly SNP Scotland? <i>Malcolm Harvey</i>	pp. 10-11
What do the UK party manifestos offer to women #GE2015? <i>Claire Annesley & Francesca Gains</i>	p. 5	Does party politics in Northern Ireland matter in a UK general election? <i>Jan Erik Mustad</i>	pp. 12-13
David Cameron as prime minister 2010-15 <i>Kevin Theakston</i>	pp. 6-7	Popular disengagement from politics in Britain of 2015 <i>Øivind Bratberg</i>	pp. 14-15
Has austerity worked? <i>Andrew Gamble</i>	pp. 8-9	The results last time: the general election of 2010	p. 16

General election 2015: a journey into the unknown?

By Glen O'Hara

Many commentators argue that the present British General Election is the most unpredictable and exciting for a generation. The main governing party, the Conservatives, seems to be running at about the same level in the polls registered by the largest Opposition bloc, in the shape of the Labour Party. Newly-emboldened 'challenger' or 'outsider' parties are making enormous strides in public esteem: the United Kingdom Independence Party, which calls for the United Kingdom to withdraw from the European Union, was last year able to re-elect two Conservative MPs who defected to them during this Parliament, and is running at about 14-15% in the opinion polls. The Green Party, meanwhile, has enjoyed a massive surge of membership that has taken the number of its active supporters past the junior governing party, the Liberal Democrats, and propelled it to perhaps 6-7% in the polls.



Glen O'Hara is Professor of Modern and Contemporary History, Oxford Brookes University. His research interests range across the economic and social policies of British governments, on which he has written and edited a number of books. He writes regularly on current affairs in a personal capacity, both for The Independent and across a range of other periodicals and blogs.

In a first-past-the-post electoral system more used to pitting one party against another in each area, and giving each constituency to the party gaining the most votes, this makes for an unprecedented amount of uncertainty as to who will win each seat. A few constituencies have become four- or even five-way marginals, contested and winnable by not only Labour and the Conservatives, but the Liberal Democrats, UKIP, the Greens and the Nationalists. Some Members of Parliament seem likely to be returned by less than a third of the actual voters in their area. There will undoubtedly be some shock results. Watford, just north of London, seems to be a genuine three-way marginal that any of the three more traditional parties could win; cosmopolitan and vibrant Bristol West, in the West of England, could be captured by Labour or the Greens, or retained by the incumbent Liberal Democrat.

But in actuality, the result of the voting itself is rather less uncertain than newspapers and the television news always argue. The media always want to present elections as 'neck and neck', or 'on a knife edge': that is what sells newspapers and keeps viewers watching. But the Conservatives and Labour secured about 65% between them in the 2015 election; they seem destined to gain a very similar share of the vote this time, with Labour rising, and the Conservatives falling, only a little. The Liberal Democrats are unpopular, shedding millions of their voters as a result of their perceived lack of faith in running on a left-of-centre platform and then forming a government with the right-of-centre Conservatives. Having gained 23% in 2010, they will be happy to gain even about 10% of the vote this time (they are currently registering only in single figures in the polls). That means that they will shed many seats to the Conservatives and Labour – ten or more to both major parties – boosting, rather than weakening, the 'big battalions' in the House of Commons. Outside Scotland, the cruel logic of Britain's seat-by-seat voting system – which rewards very concentrated but not well spread-out votes – will likely limit the amount of upheaval on election night. The Green Party might win one or two more seats to add to their one. UKIP might return up to perhaps four more MPs.

It is in Scotland where the election's major story will probably unfold. Recent polls limited to that country, backed up by constituency polling conducted by the Conservative Peer Lord Ashcroft, show more than a 20% swing away from Labour, and towards the SNP. This is an unprecedented, era-defining movement in Scottish politics, one that has stayed relatively steady since last September's Scottish independence referendum, and which defies past electoral history. Even landslides such as Labour's 1997 victory, or the recent shock Labor victory in Australia's Queensland state election, saw swings of 'only' about 10% and 14% respectively. Very little like this apparent Scottish upheaval has ever happened in a settled, advanced, peacetime democracy.



Labour seem to be paying for their negative campaign for a 'no' vote in the Scottish independence referendum, in which they defined their message more by what Scots cannot do or have rather than what they might secure on their own; their neglect of party infrastructure and their membership in areas they have long perceived as their 'heartlands' has undoubtedly hurt them; and their referendum alliance with the Conservatives, who also recommended a 'no' vote last year, has clearly hurt them.



A multi-party system. The historical leaders' debate of 2 April 2015 (televised on ITV and chaired by Julie Etchingham) united seven parties in total. It was a telling illustration of the multi-party preferences evident among British voters.

Above all, the SNP, which dominates the Edinburgh Parliament and has governed Scotland since 2007, has begun to appropriate the idea of 'Scottishness' itself – left-leaning, positive about the possibilities of purposive government action, anti-austerity and above all 'patriotic'. A party such as Labour, focused on the whole of the United Kingdom, finds it difficult to focus either its energies or its resources on a single foe in just one part of the UK. The SNP might win between 35 and 50 of Scotland's 59 seats, taking perhaps 20 and 30 seats from of the 41 Labour secured in the last election. If they do so, they will be in a strong position to win next year's Scottish General Election, and then perhaps insist on a second independence referendum – which this time will probably be closer than the first.

The Conservatives seem likely, though not assured, of having a small polling lead by the day of the actual election. Labour's polling numbers are very poor as regards economic competence and leadership. Labour is still widely blamed for the economic crash of 2007-2008, though with less intensity than it was; Labour's leader, Ed Miliband, has not been able to 'cut through' the electorate's detached cynicism about all politicians, and indeed at one point in the Parliament was the least popular Leader of the Opposition in British history. Together with the party's losses in Scotland, this situation may prove fatal to Labour's hopes of becoming the biggest party in a 'hung' Parliament in which no party has an overall majority, by far the most likely outcome when voters neither particularly like nor trust both of the parties who can form and lead an administration. So David Cameron might be able to continue as Prime Minister, but with an overall majority seemingly beyond him, the size of the shrunken band of his Liberal Democrat allies

will be critical. If the Liberal Democrats can return only 20 to 25 MPs, even the two parties together may not be able to command a majority in Parliament, and will have to rely on Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party, or perhaps even UKIP, to win key votes. It will be a demanding vote-by-vote battle, and it may drain

the Government of all energy and purpose. Mr Cameron has been forced to promise an in-or-out referendum on EU membership by his highly Euro-sceptical party; he will have to deliver that at least, or his supporters may terminate his leadership.

The uncertainties multiply only once the election itself is over. Will the Liberal Democrats, whose numbers might well have been cut in half, wish to continue their fractious coalition with the Conservatives? At the current moment, the rank-and-file members of that party are much less minded than they have been to carry on with this arrangement. It has made them deeply unpopular, and threatened the very existence of their party. They may well cavil at another coalition, and refuse to accept a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU – without which they are of no use to the Prime Minister whatsoever. They might try to extract a higher price for their cooperation than they did in May 2010, insisting on the adoption of proportional representation in local government, or a much slower pace of budgetary austerity. The Conservative leadership has been forced to promise that it will consult its MPs before forming another coalition, and they in their turn may well reject such terms. In that scenario, it is hard to see how Mr Cameron will be able to carry on as Prime Minister. He will lack the numbers to carry the House of Commons with him, and he will have to give way to a rainbow coalition led, with great uncertainty and probably to little effect, by Mr Miliband – or whoever replaces him as Labour's leader.

The certainties in which the British have lived for many years seem to be coming to an end. Will they retain a two-party system, or will the SNP, the Greens and UKIP manage to break the ice? Will the Union of England and Scotland survive? Will the British remain in the EU, or spin off into an as-yet-to-be defined Anglosphere? At present, no-one knows the answers to any of these questions. That is what makes this a journey into the unknown.

What do the UK party manifestos offer to women #GE2015?

By Claire Annesley and Francesca Gains

The UK party manifestos for 2015, launched ahead of a tightly fought election battle, are pitched directly to women in an attempt to capture their votes. Parties do this for good reason: women form 52% of the electorate and women are more likely to decide who to vote for closer to polling day. If we add to this the fact that women have been particularly hard hit by tax and benefit changes during the Coalition years, it means that targeting and mobilising the different groups of female voters is potentially vital in the key target seats for all parties. There are three different kinds of policy promises parties make to target women's votes: Parties can choose to emphasise the policy areas that women prioritise politically; party manifestos can make a direct appeal to issues that uniquely affect women; or parties can set out policies to improve equality between men and women. So what is on offer to women in the five main UK party manifestos – and Labour's manifesto for women? Here are some highlights:



Francesca Gains is a Professor of Public Policy at the University of Manchester. She has a long term research agenda examining gender & policy making.

Claire Annesley is Professor at the Dept of Politics, University of Sussex, with a research expertise on gender, politics and policy.

Policy areas that women prioritise politically. Women – including Conservative women – express greater support for public services in general and they are more strongly opposed to public sector cuts and austerity. Ahead of GE2015 all parties are competing to demonstrate that they will protect the NHS and education: both Labour and UKIP promise, for example, to deliver 8,000 more GPs, 20,000 more nurses. But the Greens have a strong anti-austerity message proposing 'a larger public sector and higher taxation' and offering, for example, to provide 'free social care funded by taxation on the same basis as the NHS'. Likewise, the Labour manifesto sets out how it will fund and recruit '5,000 new home-care workers' which the party refers to as 'a new arm of the NHS' and the Lib Dems have gone for an annual '£250 Carer's Bonus'.

Issues that uniquely affect women. Parties have made commitments to improving support for pregnant women and new mothers, with both Labour and UKIP pledging to fund 3000 more midwives. The Conservatives want to ensure that women 'have access to mental health support during and after pregnancy, while strengthening the health visiting programme for new mothers' and the Greens plan to 'make it illegal to stop nursing mothers feeding their babies in a public place'. Women are also directly targeted through measures to tackle violence against women and girls. For example, Labour pledges to publish 'a Violence against Women and Girls Bill, appoint a commissioner to set minimum standards in tackling domestic and sexual violence, and provide more stable central funding for women's refuges and Rape Crisis Centres' while the Conservatives will work 'to ensure a secure future for specialist FGM and forced marriage units, refuges and rape crisis centres'. The Greens promise to

spend £100m over the next Parliament to 'ensure consistent long-term funding for a national network of Rape Crisis Centres'. Uniquely UKIP has also pledged ahead of GE2015 to abolish the five per cent VAT rate on sanitary products, such as tampons – but only if the UK leaves the European Union.

Policies to improve equality between men and women.

Manifestos set out how parties will support women and men to balance work and caring responsibilities. For GE2015 support for childcare is prominent with the Conservatives' last minute but un-funded pledge to increase the provision of free childcare for three and four year-olds from 15 to 30 hours per week. Labour's long-term and costed promise is to increase free childcare for three and four year olds from 15 to 25 hours per week. Additionally, Labour will 'ensure all primary schools guarantee access to wraparound childcare from 8am to 6pm' – also suggested by UKIP. The Lib Dem's pledge to extend provision of 15 hours free childcare first to all two year olds, and then to working parents of children aged nine months to and two years. Labour has also set out plans to 'double paternity leave from two to four weeks and increase paternity pay by more than £100 a week' and to introduce grandparents' leave, allowing grannies and granddads in paid employment to take up to four unpaid weeks off per year in order to help with childcare. The Lib Dems propose to 'expand Shared Parental Leave with an additional "use it or lose it" month to encourage fathers to take time off with young children'.

There is one other issue which we think undecided women voters should consider. To really get things done in Government you need women in Parliament to keep up the pressure on ministers to deliver. And you need women in Government with power and resources to steer through policy. Otherwise manifesto promises will remain just that. In the context of GE2015, getting issues that appeal to women voters into party manifestos is one thing. But the next step is to ensure that policies for women are 'red-lined' in coalition negotiations and agreements. Women's issues could be sidelined if the party strategists who pushed for their inclusion are not included in subsequent coalition negotiations. In terms of women's representation and inclusion in politics and decision-making there is clear blue water between the two parties who have the opportunity to lead the next coalition Government. The Labour party has long championed women's representation in Parliament and has promised a gender balanced cabinet. The Conservatives – through promoting some prominent and talented women in the last Government – will trail significantly in terms of female representation in the next Parliament and the party continues to face a problem in getting women in the inner sanctums of power, both due to the pipeline issue and the personal commitment of David Cameron. It is welcome to see the parties reaching out to women voters but undecided women out there should remember: fine words butter no parsnips!

The text has previously been published at <http://www.feminizingpolitics.ac.uk/>

David Cameron as prime minister 2010-15

By Kevin Theakston

David Cameron admitted in a pre-election press interview that the job of being prime minister had been harder than he thought it would be. Prime minister's questions (PMQs) were, he said, the worst part of his week – 'It's a bloody bear pit in there.' Then there was the constant pressure of decisions and problems, and very often, he admitted, 'you're looking for the least worst option.' He was frustrated by what he called 'the buggeration factor' in government – the difficulties of making something happen, with the endless consultations, constraints like judicial review and freedom of information, an unresponsive bureaucracy, and just the time needed to get action. In meetings he would burst out: 'I asked three months ago for this to happen. I was asked two months ago whether I really wanted it to happen. I *do* want it to happen. Can it happen now? Please.'



Kevin Theakston is Professor of British Government and the Head of School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds. He has a long-standing research interest in British prime ministers and the civil service as well as constitutional issues. Theakston is the author of *After Number 10: Former Prime Ministers in British Politics* (Palgrave, 2010) and *British Foreign Secretaries Since 1974* (Routledge, 2004).

Five years in Number 10 Downing Street is pretty much the average figure for prime ministers over the last century – and in fact seven of Cameron's 18 predecessors as PM over the last 100 years had shorter tenures than his. The really unsuccessful British prime ministers have typically held office for only one to three years before losing a general election, presiding over economic crises, or resigning or being over-thrown because of foreign policy disasters (think Brown, Callaghan, Douglas-Home, Eden, Chamberlain). In contrast, the top dogs usually enjoy several terms of office, win re-election, set the agenda and leave a big domestic policy legacy and/or win wars (think Thatcher, Blair, Attlee, Churchill, Lloyd George).

There is little in the way of a formal job description for British prime ministers against which we can assess their performance. One way forward is to borrow from Fred Greenstein's influential study of US leaders' political skills and leadership style (*The Presidential Difference*, 2001), and weigh up how Cameron has done in terms of key leadership tasks, demands and challenges. Prime ministers, on this view, have to: communicate – organize – show political skill – set out policy aims and visions – process advice and take decisions – cope with the stress of the top job and show emotional intelligence.

"Cameron is more like Blair than like Brown or Major in terms of media savvy presentation skills, and knowing how to sell and promote himself and his policies, and to reach out, connect with and persuade the wider public."

Cameron excels at the public **communication** aspects of political leadership. He is highly accomplished at the frontman aspect of being prime minister and has been the government's most effective communicator. Cameron is more like Blair than like Brown or Major in terms of media savvy presentation skills, and knowing how to sell and promote himself and his policies, and to reach out, connect with and persuade the wider public. He is good on television, and accomplished and statesmanlike at big set-piece occasions. He is very good at appearing 'prime-ministerial'. He has also been quick on his feet, sharp, confident and pretty effective in the gladiatorial jousts at PMQs.

In terms of **organising and running government**, Cameron had declared before the general election that he wanted a more collective Cabinet government style of policy-making and decision taking. The imperatives and dynamics of coalition made that a necessity. But the Cabinet has not originated policy or taken more than a small proportion of government decisions. It is Cabinet committees that have been the crucial decision-making bodies in the coalition. Cameron's creation and use of the National Security Council (comprising key ministers, officials, and defence and intelligence chiefs) to run foreign affairs and defence policy contrasts with the more informal 'sofa government' methods that served some of his predecessors in No. 10 so ill (as seen with Blair and Iraq).

Cameron entered office determined not to copy Gordon Brown's (ineffective) control-freakery, micro-management and meddling. He initially let his ministerial 'barons' run their fiefdoms with a very large degree of independence.

But a modern prime minister needs to look 'strong' and cannot detach himself too much without provoking media and political criticisms when things go wrong. Cameron learned the hard way that a PM can be too relaxed, broad-brush and hands-off, and after a couple of years became more of a 'chief executive' than a 'chairman' figure. 'I don't set myself up as some sort of El Presidente', he told an interviewer, however.

Reacting against the New Labour methods, it was a mistake to scale down the prime minister's No. 10 backup after the 2010 election. It soon became clear that No. 10 needed to strengthen its policy expertise and its oversight and control over the rest of Whitehall, and sharpen up its party and political operation, and after a couple of years Cameron drafted in more special advisers and strengthened staff and capacity at the centre.

Cameron's **political skills** have been a vital factor in keeping the coalition show on the road. He has looked comfortable and at ease at the head of a coalition, and equipped to deal with the politics of a coalition, in a way that it difficult to imagine, say, Thatcher or Brown being. Positive personal chemistry at the top is essential for coalition governments to work. From the start, Cameron and Nick Clegg were reported to get on well together and to have a close rapport. Certainly the coalition's two top figures seemed to get on better than Blair and Brown did under Labour, though inter-party and ministerial relations steadily became more 'transactional', formal and business-like, with more tensions, airing of party differences and conflicts of view.

More problematic was Cameron's relationship with his own party. He has faced party management issues, with discontent and suspicion among Conservative MPs who have complained about the leader and his inner circle being remote, exclusive and arrogant. The Tory right has been especially unhappy. Backbench rebellions have been at unprecedented high levels. 'I wish I'd done better at taking my party with me', Cameron recently admitted.

Cameron can hardly be said to have provided the sort of radical **policy vision** and driving sense of mission that Thatcher did in the 1980s. But pragmatists – even opportunists – have been much more common in Number 10 than vision-driven politicians. Cameron has often been described – and has described himself – as a non-ideological, practical, 'whatever works', 'One Nation' type of Conservative, sceptical and pragmatic. 'I don't believe in isms', he once said. Some observers insist that 'he never goes the whole way on anything' – 'he believes things, but nothing too much'. From the start of his leadership Cameron insisted that he wanted to be as radical a social reformer as Thatcher had been an economic reformer. But his impatient and iconoclastic adviser Steve Hilton left Downing Street in 2012 frustrated that Cameron was more of a reactive than a transformative prime minister and leader.

In terms of **cognitive style** – how leaders process information and advice and approach decision-making – the nimble Cameron has been very different from Brown, who was obsessed by details, ponderous, inflexible and

vacillating. 'Themes not details' are said to be his forte. He is said to pick up ideas quickly and to be intelligent but also to be more interested in resolving problems and making things happen than in philosophy or theories. So-called 'intellectual' PMs have often been failures. In the end, judgement rather than cleverness, and a clear mind rather than an original one, is what is needed in the occupant of Number 10.

Cameron also scores highly in terms of the **emotional intelligence** now widely recognized to be an important component of successful political leadership. Cameron comes across as untroubled by inner demons and well adjusted. He seems emotionally secure, self-confident and comfortable with himself. He has an easy manner, is optimistic, cool and usually calm under pressure, and he can keep things in proportion. Underneath the personal charm and ease, however, he is determined, tough and can be ruthless. Deficiencies in emotional intelligence may not necessarily prevent a leader from governing successfully, but in Gordon Brown's case a more even temperament would have been an asset and helped him weather the demands of office and lead his government more effectively. Cameron and before him Blair fit the model of the more emotionally literate leader that modern politics seems to require.

In terms of the key leadership abilities, skills and characteristics Greenstein's model identifies, Gordon Brown can certainly be seen as someone who was not well equipped for the highest office, even allowing for the fact that he was very unlucky in the circumstances and problems he faced during his time in Number 10 between 2007 and 2010. David Cameron, in contrast, can be seen to have performed well and to have strengths under several of these key headings. He is a strong communicator; he made some sensible decisions about

the organization of his government; he can be a skilful political operator; he has shown flexibility and pragmatism; he seems to be able to handle the intellectual and personal challenges of the premiership. He has faced, to be sure, huge political and economic challenges. But it cannot be said of him – as it was said of Brown – that he has not been up to the job of being prime minister.



Head of government. David Cameron takes questions during a PM Direct session at EasyJet in Luton, 16 July 2010. Crown copyright / The Prime Minister's Office.

Has austerity worked?

By Andrew Gamble

As the British general election approaches the Conservatives have sought to place the focus firmly on two issues - the economy and leadership. Before the election campaign began they had established a polling lead of up to twenty points over Labour on economic competence and also on whether David Cameron or Ed Miliband would make the better Prime Minister. The Conservatives' pitch on the economy has emphasised firstly that the Conservatives have cleared up the economic mess they inherited from Labour in 2010, halving the deficit in five years, and laying the foundations through their balanced and sensible approach for an economic recovery which is now one of the three most robust in the OECD. Secondly the Conservatives have emphasised that the job is only half done, that it would be madness to give the keys back to the party which crashed the car, and that only the Conservatives will ensure that the deficit is eliminated during the next Parliament, and that the economic recovery will continue. In the March Budget in 2015, the Conservatives indicated that if re-elected there would be severe spending cuts in 2016 and 2017 at least as big as the cuts implemented in the 2010-2015 Parliament, but that austerity would end in 2018, there would be a rise in public spending in the last year of the Parliament, and large tax cuts ahead of the election in 2020. The economy would grow at an average rate above 2 per cent for every year of the next Parliament, banishing the memory of the 2008 crash and its difficult aftermath.

The Conservative prospectus at the coming election is therefore clear. Austerity has worked. The Government has stuck to its principles and its original plan, despite a great deal of criticism from its opponents and from economists on both sides of the Atlantic, and it has been vindicated. The only problem with this account is that it is



Andrew Gamble is Professor of Politics and Emeritus Professor at Queen's College, University of Cambridge. His research over several decades spans political science, economics and history. His most recent book is *Crisis Without End?: The Unravelling of Western Prosperity* (Palgrave, 2014).

untrue. Austerity has worked for the Conservatives but not in the way they describe. It has been a triumph of statecraft rather than a triumph of policy.

In opposition between 2005 and 2010 the party leadership had backed Labour's spending plans, only arguing for a different balance between tax cuts and spending on public services. After the financial crash in 2008 the Conservatives became fiscal hawks, and after they formed a Government with the Liberal Democrats following the inconclusive 2010 election George Osborne seized the opportunity to declare that Britain's economy was facing a dire emergency which required a dramatic remedy. His budget planned to eliminate the deficit by the end of the Parliament in 2015, and to ensure that the accumulated national debt was falling, with the bulk of the adjustment (80 per cent) coming through spending cuts rather than tax rises. The Conservatives' Coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats, endorsed the diagnosis and the remedy, although they had criticised austerity policies before the election, and had they remained in opposition they would undoubtedly have been among the fiercest critics of the policy that the Coalition now pursued. Their presence in the Government helped legitimate the new strategy and blunted criticism of it. Labour's spending policies were blamed for the financial crash and the sharp increase in the deficit in 2008-2009, rather than the crisis in the international financial system and the behaviour of the banks.



New deal. David Cameron speaking during his first press conference as Prime Minister, 12 May 2010.

The strategy laid out by Osborne had a simple logic. Draconian cuts in spending would restore credibility to the UK's fiscal stance, and bring about a strong recovery by 2012, allowing the Government to relax the austerity and announce major tax cuts in the run-up to the election in 2015, ensuring the return of a Conservative majority Government. It did not work out like that. Partly because of the crisis in the eurozone, partly because of the severity of the cuts the Government imposed, the modest recovery which was already under way in 2010, helped by a devaluing currency and the countercyclical effect of maintaining spending at a high level disappeared.

The Government found during 2010 that the economy was in danger of slipping back into recession, and that its fiscal position was again deteriorating. Osborne adroitly changed course, while still insisting that he was adhering to his original plan. He softened his targets for spending cuts, pushing back most of them into the next Parliament. He was rewarded by recovery finally getting under way in 2013/2014, but this is not the recovery he was hoping for in 2010, powered by a rebalancing of the economy towards exports and investment.

The balance of payments has widened dramatically, and the recovery is being driven once again by increasing personal debt, a new housing bubble stimulated by Government policy, and also (ironically) by the failure of the Government to meet its target of reducing immigration to the 'tens of thousands'. Instead it has remained over 200,000 per year, much of it from other EU countries. Productivity remains very low, which is part of the reason why living standards have been so squeezed for most British citizens. Osborne said that 2010 was the first election in modern British history in which the average voter had been worse off than in the previous election. 2015 is now the second.

Austerity as the economic policy George Osborne set out in 2010 may not have worked, but austerity as a political narrative used to accuse his political opponents of economic incompetence has been highly successful. Labour which spent most of the Parliament in denial about the need for austerity has now endorsed its own version of austerity in its 2015 manifesto. Labour has emerged belatedly as more fiscally responsible (as well as more economically literate) than the Conservatives. The original plan for fiscal retrenchment which Alastair Darling as Labour Chancellor put forward in 2009 which Osborne derided as too timid turned out to be tougher than the actual plan which Osborne implemented. But Labour after 2010 did not stick with the Darling plan and set themselves up as critics of austerity and fiscal retrenchment. This left the field open for George Osborne. The most fiscally conservative Chancellors in British political history have generally been Labour – Philip Snowden, Stafford Cripps, Roy Jenkins. Conservative Chancellors have often been much more fiscally irresponsible while claiming the mantle of fiscal conservatism. The same pattern can be seen in this election. In a very close race the Conservatives have made a series of extravagant spending promises, not just the lavish tax cuts for the end of the next

"Austerity as the economic policy George Osborne set out in 2010 may not have worked, but austerity as a political narrative used to accuse his political opponents of economic incompetence has been highly successful. Labour which spent most of the Parliament in denial about the need for austerity has now endorsed its own version of austerity in its 2015 manifesto."

Parliament, but also £8 billion extra for the NHS, £4.5 billion to fund the Right to Buy for Housing Association tenants, raising of the inheritance tax threshold, more spending on schools, help with pre-school child care, coupled with the already announced extra financial help for pensioners, and major investment plans in the North of England (the Northern Powerhouse). The list goes on and on. This showering of gifts on all the key sections of the electorate where the Conservatives need to win votes looks financially reckless, and sits oddly with the Government's urging that the job is only half done, and austerity must continue for at least three more years, and at a redoubled pace.

Labour has its own spending commitments, which are more modest than the Conservatives', but they would also find managing the public finances to be extremely difficult if they were in government after the next election. Both parties have spending ambitions beyond the fiscal base that is likely to be available to them. Both are relying on the increase in revenues which comes from sustained economic growth. Whether that growth will materialise is uncertain. What neither party will do is commit to tax increases which will almost certainly be needed if the fiscal targets are to be achieved. There are so many areas ringfenced in the public accounts, like the NHS, that the Institute of Fiscal Studies has

calculated that the cuts in other programmes, such as defence, industry, welfare and local government will need to be up to 20 per cent. This is on top of the swingeing cuts these departments have already had to absorb.

Everything is topsy-turvy in British politics at the moment, with insurgent parties – particularly the SNP in Scotland, and UKIP and the Greens in England – challenging the dominance of the mainstream parties. Austerity has not worked for the Conservatives as they hoped. It has not eliminated the deficit, and the recovery is very fragile. The Bank of England still keeps its interest rate at 0.5 per cent, the lowest in its history, and deflation has become a serious risk. But austerity has worked well for the Conservatives as a political strategy. It has disguised the fact that they are not really committed to fiscal conservatism as a principle, but want to return to 'privatised Keynesianism' as fast as they can. It has been a bravura performance. Whether it is enough to secure them another term of office is not yet clear.

Having your cake and eating it: No independence, but an increasingly SNP Scotland?

By Malcolm Harvey

Much and more has been written about Scotland's independence referendum in September 2014, where a record Scottish turnout voted apparently decisively in favour of remaining within the United Kingdom. Yet seven months on from the defeat of their *raison d'être*, the Scottish National Party (SNP) goes from strength to strength: membership has increased fourfold, newly-elected leader Nicola Sturgeon reportedly won the seven-party UK-wide leaders debate in March, and opinion polls show the party making a considerable advance on their current haul of six seats in the UK Parliament. What explains the continued advance of the SNP? And what impact will such an advance have on the constitutional future of the UK? To look at these present and future changes we must first – briefly – take a look at the recent past.



Malcolm Harvey is a researcher at the School of Social Science, University of Aberdeen and Scottish Centre on Constitutional Change. He is the co-author with Michael Keating of *Small Nations in a Big World: What Scotland Can Learn* (Luath Press Limited, 2014).

and delivered while those which could not be done were blamed on Westminster. The 2011 Scottish Parliament election vindicated this strategy, with the party returning a previously unthinkable parliamentary majority. Establishing a majority government thus prepared the ground for the SNP's long-desired referendum on independence.

By contrast, the general election for the UK Parliament in 2010 returned the exact same result in Scotland as in 2005: Labour dominating with 41 of the 59 seats, the Liberal Democrats second with 11, the SNP with six, and a solitary Conservative MP returned in the borders. In addition to the 2012 local authority elections (in which the SNP overtook Labour to take the most first preference votes and the most council seats) and the 2009 and 2014 European Elections, in which the SNP comfortably won the most votes (albeit narrowly failing to increase their representation) this suggested a trend. In 'first order' elections – for the UK Parliament – the Scottish electorate continued to support their 'traditional' preference: Labour. In 'second order' elections (for Scottish, local and European levels), they were more likely to lend their support to the SNP.

That trend appears to be about to change.

Opinion polls ahead of May's UK General Election consistently have the SNP on anything between 45 and 52 per cent of the Scottish vote – giving them up to 54 of the 59 Scottish seats, with Labour reduced to 4 and the Liberal Democrats only holding onto their historic Orkney and Shetland stronghold. The Conservatives, despite polling around 15 per cent, would, once again, be wiped out in Scotland. Were this the outcome – and without a substantial reversal in fortunes prior to the election itself – it'd provide a significant shock to political map of Scotland, with extensive political and constitutional ramifications for the UK.

"Neither the Conservatives nor Labour would relish a deal with the SNP – indeed, both have ruled out a formal arrangement, while the SNP have said they would provide support to a Labour government, but not to the Conservatives."

When Labour and the Liberal Democrats in Scotland campaigned for a Scottish Parliament through the Scottish Constitutional Convention in the early 1990s, the SNP were initially against the proposal. There was a fear – vocalised by former SNP leader Gordon Wilson – that the party would be trapped in a "devolution swamp"; that the Scottish public would think devolution within the UK was enough, and that independence, by extension, was not required. For the first two terms of the Scottish Parliament, it appeared that the electorate agreed: while support for the SNP was substantially higher in Scottish Parliamentary elections than it was in UK elections, the party and their objective of independence remained peripheral concerns in Scottish politics.

This changed somewhat with the return of Alex Salmond as SNP leader in 2004 as he positioned the SNP as an 'alternative government' to the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition which had led the Scottish Executive since the establishment of the parliament in 1999. The SNP won 47 seats to Labour's 46 in the 2007 Scottish Parliament election, and the party consequently took office as a minority government. From then onwards, a clear strategic change was apparent. The SNP would now attempt to use office success to build support for independence: populist policies in devolved areas (abolishing tuition fees and charges for prescription drugs) could be pursued

Why is this happening? There are a number of explanatory factors. Support for Labour in Scotland, even in UK elections, has declined since the party's landslide victory in 1997. In that election, they took 46 per cent of the vote in Scotland. By 2005 – Tony Blair's third election – that number was 40 per cent. A slight increase (with Scottish MP Gordon Brown leading the party) in 2010 saw Labour rise to 42 per cent in the last UK election, but this likely had more to do with the personal popularity of Gordon Brown in Scotland. Ipsos-MORI polling bears this out. At the same time, support for Labour in the Scottish Parliament has fallen from 39 per cent in 1999 to 29 per cent in 2011, a decline which is apparent in elections at all levels.

The fall in Labour support in elections for the Scottish Parliament allowed the SNP to experience government for the first time. And while – particularly during their period of minority governance – they haven't always managed to deliver upon their preferred policy positions, they have retained popularity in opinion polls and remain a popular government. That government popularity is regularly double that of the satisfaction ratings of the UK government. The favourability of SNP leaders Alex Salmond and, subsequently, Nicola Sturgeon, are much higher than their Labour counterparts. Indeed, some polling even suggests that Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron has a higher favourability rating in Scotland than Labour leader Ed Miliband. Evidence here that, in terms of personality politics – a clear strength of the Labour party in the Blair years – the party has fallen behind the SNP and the Conservatives in the battle for popularity.

There is also the small matter of the referendum. The Union prevailed by a margin of 10 percentage points (55-45), yet it is the parties who campaigned for independence who now look like the winners. The SNP in particular recovered from the referendum quickly, resolving to utilise the UK election to return more SNP MPs to, in Alex Salmond's words "hold Westminster's feet to the fire" on delivering further powers for the Scottish Parliament. Their message that a strong SNP contingent of MPs would better "stand up for Scotland" appears to resonate with voters, with Panelbase polls suggesting more than half of respondents agreed with that sentiment. Add in the fact that the highest Yes votes – in Dundee, West Dunbartonshire, Glasgow and North Lanarkshire – were recorded in areas with higher levels of deprivation and unemployment. These areas have historically been Labour strongholds – but it appears that the referendum has loosened these allegiances.

Even in No-voting areas, historic partisan alignment has declined. Among these voters there was no desire to break up the UK, but at the same time, satisfaction with the SNP in government prompted expectations that the party would be best placed to continue to deliver if they were also well represented at Westminster. This was classic "have your cake and eat it" territory: these voters do not support the SNP's primary constitutional objective

of independence, as they demonstrated in September, but they recognise that within the UK, a sizeable SNP presence might be able to ensure Scotland continues to benefit from the continuing Union.

What does this mean beyond May's election? Well, firstly, the prospect of Labour losing over 30 MPs in Scotland means their opportunity to deliver majority government is limited. It is possible, but any losses in Scotland would have to be offset elsewhere, which given current polling appears unlikely. Instead, the UK is heading for a second hung parliament in a row – and on this occasion the coalition negotiations will have an additional edge. Neither the Conservatives nor Labour would relish a deal with the SNP – indeed, both have ruled out a formal arrangement, while the SNP have said they would provide support to a Labour government, but not to the Conservatives. This means some kind of supply and demand deal is a possibility, though that would depend upon the numbers elected. At this stage, the possibility of a second General Election in 2015 should not be ruled out.

Many hoped that the UK's constitutional future would be decided by September's referendum. Instead, that future remains up for debate due to a number of unresolved questions which will be drawn centre-stage by the presence of a substantial block of Scottish independence-supporting MPs after the election. The UK's lopsided system of asymmetric devolution (in which English laws

remain the purview of the UK Parliament, while the Scottish Parliament enjoys extensive powers over its own affairs) will be subject to intense scrutiny. Seeing legislation for England potentially decided by Scottish MPs is likely to re-ignite the debate on 'English votes for English laws' beyond the bounds of the Conservative Party.

While the UK's first-past-the-post electoral system unlikely to produce an outcome which accurately reflects the multi-party politics now apparent in the country, the SNP, due to its geographically concentrated vote, may be able to garner a considerable number of MPs, in contrast with UKIP and the Greens. The election will provide a neat illustration of these systemic failures. In its wake, constitutional issues look likely to remain on the table for the foreseeable future.



Changemaker. Nicola Sturgeon, leader of the Scottish National Party, is at the forefront of the new multi-party Britain. Her party is also an essential ingredient in the political and constitutional debates arising from a more fragmented party system.

Does party politics in Northern Ireland matter in a UK general election?

By Jan Erik Mustad

After the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998, party politics in Northern Ireland has mainly focused on power sharing. However, with a changed political landscape and the two large Westminster parties looking more to the non-English nations, perhaps the Northern Irish parties ought to matter more in Westminster.



Jan Erik Mustad is Senior Lecturer at Agder University College, Norway, and the author of numerous books on British politics and society. He is a regular commentator in the Norwegian media.

In post-devolution Northern Ireland focus has primarily been on power sharing between unionists and nationalists. From the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA - the Belfast Agreement) in 1998, the political framework created in its aftermath contributed to the normalisation of the Province in an attempt to move the attention away from violence and disturbances onto political processes. After the St Andrews Agreement in 2006, an agreement that is a ratification of the GFA, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin (SF) took over power sharing of the Northern Irish government from the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) with the DUP as the largest party.

Voting in Northern Ireland is mostly block-oriented, meaning that nationalists most likely vote for either SF or SDLP while unionists vote for unionist alternatives, most notably the DUP or the UUP. Even though we have seen intra-community dynamics, voting behaviour is relatively predictable within the respective blocks. Predictability when it comes to social class was once the rules for British politics overall, contributing to a system of stable majority governments.

Thus, while power-sharing has been the rule in the re-established Stormont Assembly, majority rule has been the custom in Westminster. That is clearly no longer the case. The 2010 election was far from traditional in the sense that suffrage ended in a Hung Parliament and, subsequently a coalition government. All predictions for the May election point in the same direction, and this time around, particularly the

unionist parties, as is to be expected, have positioned themselves vis-à-vis the Westminster parties.

The Northern Ireland parties do not exist elsewhere in the UK. Together with the First-Past-the-Post (Simple Majority) election system this has in many ways barred the Northern Irish parties from having much political interaction with other UK parties. Sinn Féin's long time abstentionism from Westminster obviously created a wide gulf between London and parts of Northern Ireland as direct rule - from 1972 until 1998 and partly between 1999 and 2007 - practically disenfranchised an increasing part of the electorate. It should be added that the SDLP has taken its seats since the party was established in 1970, but the democratic deficiency inherent in the political structures have made the unionist road to London considerably shorter than the nationalist one. Identity, culture, religion and politics have made the unionist parties more immediately disposed to Westminster even though they truthfully have not played any significant role in UK politics.

With the changed UK political landscape, unionist parties have a renewed cause for collaborating with Westminster. In the 2010 election, unionist parties returned 9 (DUP 8 and 1 independent who is former UUP Sylvia Hermon) of the 18 seats from Northern Ireland while the nationalists returned 11 (SF 8, not taking seats and SDLP 3) with the cross community

Alliance Party (a non sectarian-across-the-divide party) filling the final seat. With recent polls suggesting a new Hung Parliament, the DUP and the UUP agreed on an election pact on 18 March in order to avoid a split in the unionist vote and with the intention of reducing the number of non-unionists being elected.

The move was heavily criticised by the SDLP's Alban Maginnis who claimed that this was «sad and disappointing and amounted to a sectarian carve-up». He contended that «progressive politics is about trying to tackle sectarianism, not to embolden

sectarianism or to entrench sectarianism» (ibid.). Hence, the SDLP ruled out a similar pact with SF, also because of SF's policy of abstentionism, meaning that the Irish republicans do not take up their seats at Westminster.



Visual divergence. The logos of the two largest parties on the unionist and the nationalist side, reflect their diverging roots and loyalties.

The Electoral Reform Society blames the election system claiming that «the idea that parties step down in some seats to maximise their votes in others through an alliance with another party is a direct result of the outdated First Past the Post system...The attraction of electoral pacts for general elections, which themselves become little more than a sectarian carve-up of Westminster seats between the dominant parties, would be undermined if a truly representative electoral system were implemented».

Regardless, Peter Robinson, the leader of the DUP and First Minister of Northern Ireland, defended the pact saying it was not undemocratic. With a unionist pact in 4 of the 18 constituencies, the question is more how well the Alliance Party will perform this time rather than what the distribution will be between unionist and nationalist parties. Still, the Westminster parties will look to all the nations with increased interest as the 2015 election seems to move towards a Hung Parliament, meaning that all the parties are more alert towards possible coalition constellations than ever before.

In 2010 the UUP and the Conservative Party formed a partnership that would, according to the UUP, «end the semi-detached political status of Northern Ireland». But the attempt to take the UUP into the mainstream of British politics «gifted the DUP with an opportunity to present themselves as a strongly defined ethno-regionalist party». Electorally, this paid off for the DUP, returning 8 candidates in 2010, while the link-up between the UUP and the Tories ended miserably for the historically more popular unionist party, the UUP, sending no candidates. Moreover, Sylvia Hermon, who was elected from the North Down seat in 2010 as an independent unionist, left the UUP in 2009 due to the Tory link-up. Hence, in retrospect, there seems to be no doubt that placing the UUP in a British political context had devastating electoral effects for the party and that an electoral pact within the Northern Irish unionist context would be a safer plan. Instead of risking intra unionist rivalry with the consequence of being electorally outflanked, a unionist pact within Northern Ireland would ensure a different outcome, despite the dubiousness with regard to the sectarian argument.

An indication of the little importance Northern Irish parties have in Westminster, is the omission from the televised party leadership debate held 2 April. Both Plaid Cymru (PC) from Wales and the Scottish National Party (SNP) from Scotland participated and Northern Ireland was the only nation entirely without representation. With their 8 MPs, the DUP has a larger parliamentary group than four of the parties (Green Party 1, UKIP 2, PC 3 and SNP 6) that took part in the debate. Still the

broadcasters decided to leave out all the Northern Irish parties, claiming it would be partial just to include the DUP. Instead there would be a leadership debate with the four largest parties in Northern Ireland (UUP, DUP, SDLP and SF) shown on national TV. Nevertheless, the omission from the national debate shows the limited interest British people presumably take in Northern Irish party politics, with parties not existing outside of the province. Furthermore, the broadcasters' argument that if the DUP would be allowed participation, then it would be next to impossible to omit other parties,

especially with a view of how politics works across the Irish sea.

“Unionist parties have traditionally been supportive of the Tories while SDLP has in some cases lent their support to Labour. However, as the political landscape is in the process of change, and indeed fragmentation, elsewhere in the union, the unionist parties in particular are ready to support the Westminster party that will give Northern Ireland a better deal and at the same time work for the cohesion of the union.”

Wisely enough, the DUP has been tactically prudent in communicating which party they support in case of a Hung Parliament. The DUP is really the only party with any clout in Westminster coalition negotiations as the other Northern Ireland parties are too small. Nigel Dodds, the DUP

Westminster leader, has said that the party would not enter into a government coalition, but support what is good for the UK. He continued by saying that DUP's goal as a unionist party «is to see the entire union prosper». Robinson echoed this standpoint by indicating that what the party looked for was a good deal for the union and a good deal for Northern Ireland. «We are open to whichever party I suppose in the first instance constitutionally we would want to go to the party that has won the most seats, but we wouldn't be adverse to speaking to the party that comes in second place».

Unionist parties have traditionally been supportive of the Tories while SDLP has in some cases lent their support to Labour. However, as the political landscape is in the process of change, and indeed fragmentation, elsewhere in the union, the unionist parties in particular are ready to support the Westminster party that will give Northern Ireland a better deal and at the same time work for the cohesion of the union. Striking deals with parties remains possible although neither the Conservatives nor Labour should automatically count on their support. But keeping the door ajar is a good strategy both when seen from the Province's perspective and ditto from the parties' in Westminster. Northern Irish politics is and remains a special case, even though more integration should be a goal for all parties.

Popular disengagement from politics in Britain of 2015

By Øivind Bratberg

The British population has lost faith in conventional politics. That is the common wisdom as we approach an election where, we are told, fragmentation and disillusionment will be put on display. Voters no longer support the parties they used to, and their calls for a more diverse set of parties are thwarted by the electoral system; turnout for the election itself is falling; confidence in the elected politicians is sinking. If these are the harsh realities, one might ask what the relevant medicine might be. Rather than an easy confirmation of general dismay, however, a critical assessment is merited for each of the assumptions above.



Øivind Bratberg is a Lecturer at the Dept of Political Science, University of Oslo and Scholarly Responsible in British Politics Society, Norway.

Do voters no longer support the parties they used to?

British voters drift to a larger extent than before, as do voters in all western democracies. The specific concern in the British case is that voters to a lesser extent support the two parties that were historically dominant and that the electoral system is incapable of handling this move towards diversity. There is some truth in the latter assumption, but some qualification is needed. The first past the post system that is used in Britain means that a simple majority is needed to win in each and every one of the 650 constituencies. Such a system works in favour of two dominating parties – indeed, it is said to be one of the few general truths detected by political scientists that first past the post creates a two-party system in Parliament.

This general truth, however, is loosely based on the idea that parties are more or less equally strong across the land. In the case of a small party with geographically concentrated support, the system may work to its benefit. In fact, effective concentration may take a small party beyond representation equal to its national vote share. The two parties to watch in this regard in 2015 are SNP and UKIP. The Scottish Nationalists may, according to the

polls, return 40-45 Members of Parliament out of Scotland's 59 constituencies. They will do so on the basis of little more than one million votes, but concentrated in Scotland. UKIP reached a similar number of votes across the UK in 2010, without winning a single constituency. This time, an election result of around four million votes could return as little as 3 to 6 UKIP MPs.

It is these discrepancies rather than the fragmentation as such that will represent the largest challenge to the electoral system. Indeed, it is not obvious that the party system is much more fragmented than before. In 1979, the Conservatives and Labour attracted 81 per cent of the votes; in 1997, 73 per cent, in 2010, 65 per cent. But in 2015, the combined support of Labour and the Conservatives could easily increase from 2010. The rise of UKIP is accompanied by the decline of the Liberal Democrats as Britain's third party. The Greens are not large enough to make any real impact. What the small parties *can* and probably *will* do is to dilute enough of the two parties' support to reduce the likelihood that any of the two can command a majority of the House of Commons. That in itself is a challenge to Britain's parliamentary system but also a move towards what is considered normal across most European countries. Coalition government requires some practice but is not in itself a sign of crisis.

Is electoral turnout falling? Turnout for general elections in Britain has decreased over the last two decades, but hardly reflecting a steady decline. In reality, the pattern is a complex one, with low points intersected by elections where turnout has increased. In 1992, it stood at 77.7 per cent which was higher than at any general election since February 1974. Both elections were characterised by high stakes and great uncertainty as to the result. In 1974, it was the then prime minister Ted Heath's response to strikes and labour unrest that initiated the process. "Who governs Britain?" was the question raised by Heath. "Not you, it appears", was the electorate's response, reducing the Conservative vote from 46.4 to 37.9 per cent.



They are leaders of the two biggest parties in Britain, and following 7 May one of them will be prime minister. But how large a share of the present British electorate do they represent?

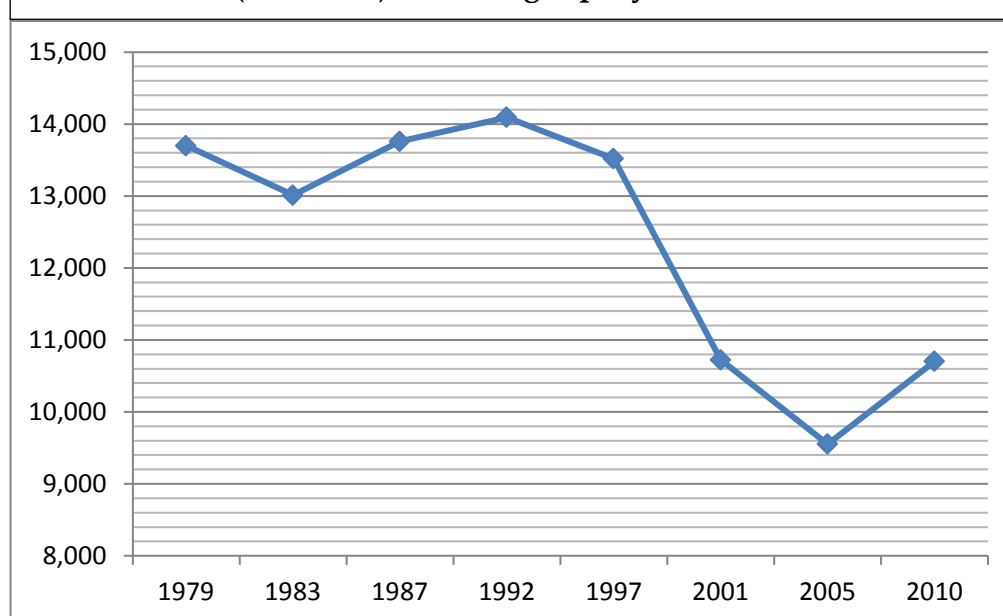
In 1992, it was another Conservative prime minister who took centre stage. The election was John Major's largely forgotten moment of triumph, the confirmation that Major was his own man as PM succeeding Margaret Thatcher and a vote of confidence for his vision of 'Thatcherism with a human face'. It was also a deeply contested election, one where the Labour Party has resurrected after 13 years in opposition but with a leader in Neil Kinnock who could not match Major in perceived governing competence. The result surprised many, going against the expectation that the Conservative hegemony was coming to an end. It was also the last time a general election returned a Tory majority in the House of Commons.

Following 1992, turnout fell sharply in 1997 and then disastrously in 2001, the two Labour landslides that gave Tony Blair a safe parliamentary majority. These were victories engineered by winning a swath of marginal constituencies, with middle-class voters at the core of the electoral strategy. Falling by the wayside were voters in the lower social strata, and particularly in seats that were solidly Labour. In 2001, things were very bleak indeed. The first general election since universal suffrage was obtained in 1928 with a turnout dipping below 60 per cent, it was rightly seen as a warning shot to Britain's parliamentary democracy. It was a prime example of how relative certainty as to the result (at constituency level as well as for the country as a whole) is detrimental to electoral turnout. Since the low point in 2001, however, the arrow has pointed upwards. 2005 saw an open-ended party contest and numerous sources of mobilisation, including young voters who were opposed to the Iraq invasion or to the steep increase in tuition fees for higher education. The 2010 election continued this trend, bringing the turnout back to 65 per cent. With another very open contest in 2015, completing a five-year parliament with a range of controversial issues, there is reason to believe that turnout may climb further this time.

Are voters less willing to engage in party politics? The short answer is yes. Parties lose members, in Britain as elsewhere in Europe, but the decline has been remarkably sharp in the British case. Less than 1 per cent of the UK electorate hold a membership in either the Labour, the Conservative Party or the Liberal Democrats. Thirty years ago the proportion of voters was about four times as high. According to recent estimates, Labour has about 190,000 members, the Conservative Party 150,000 and the Liberal Democrats 44,000. By comparison, the Norwegian Labour Party has 56,000 members from a population one tenth the size. There are however some remarkable developments among the new parties centre stage. The Greens equal the Liberal Democrats in membership numbers. And, sensationally, the SNP now counts a membership beyond 90,000. Both parties represent a form of re-engagement with politics, opening the scene for other debates than the ones that are conventional in Westminster. The independence debate in Scotland mobilised groups that had for long been either passive supporters or non-voters. It is also proof that political debates, in a popular format and dealing with fundamental issues, have not gone off fashion in any way. Politics on the ground has continued along while conventional and more hierarchical forms of party organisation have been less able to renew.

Beyond the dismay, it is possible to conclude that democratic *renewal* rather than disengagement is what best characterises Britain in 2015. Political mobilisation finds new channels and formats. It is driven by new modes of organisation, social media, single-issue campaigns and a willingness to engage where party hierarchies fail to look. This form of renewal is highly likely to continue. To what extent the demands for institutional reform will rise in its wake – with regard to the electoral system as well as the relationship between Scotland and the rest of the UK – is a quintessential question for the years to come.

Number of votes (in millions) behind largest party at the election: 1979-2010



Electoral turnout 1979-2010

1979	76,0 %
1983	72,7 %
1987	75,3 %
1992	77,7 %
1997	71,3 %
2001	59,4 %
2005	61,4 %
2010	65,1 %

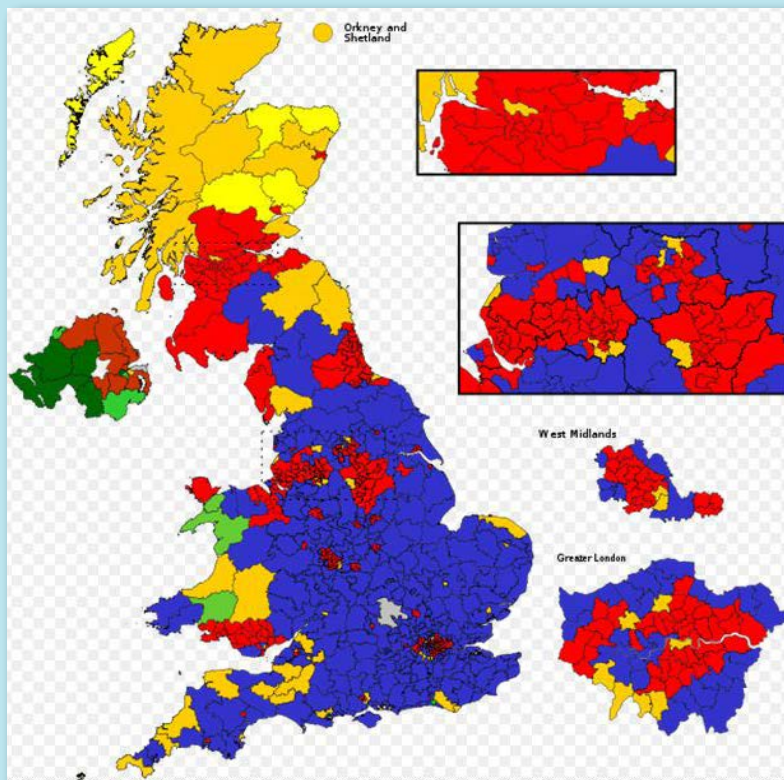
The results last time: The political map of Britain 2010

	Seats	Change	Votes	Vote share	Change
Conservative	307	+97	10,726,614	36,1%	+3,8
Labour	258	-91	8,609,527	29,0%	-6,2
Liberal Democrat	57	-5	6,836,824	23,0%	+1,0
Democratic Unionist Party	8	-1	168,216	0,6%	-0,3
Scottish National Party	6	0	491,386	1,7%	+0,1
Sinn Fein	5	0	171,942	0,6%	-0,1
Plaid Cymru	3	+1	165,394	0,6%	-0,1
SDLP	3	0	110,970	0,4%	-0,1
Green	1	+1	285,616	1,0%	-0,1
Alliance Party	1	+1	42,762	0,1%	0,0
Ulster Conservatives and Unionists	0	-1	102,361	0,3%	-0,1
UKIP	0	0	919,546	3,1%	+0,9
British National Party	0	0	564,331	1,9%	+1,2
Others	1*	0			

*Speaker

The General Election took place on 6 May 2010 across 650 constituencies. The turnout, at 65,1%, improved from 2001 and 2005 but was lower than at any general election from 1945 to 1997. The results prepared the ground for a "hung Parliament" where no single party commands a majority: only in 1974 had such an outcome occurred at any postwar election. The share of votes to other parties than Labour and the Conservatives was the highest since 1918. While the Green Party had its first MP elected, the election was also characterised by an unusually high turnover due to the number of MPs standing down and the electoral swing from Labour to the Conservatives.

Red	Labour
Blue	Conservative
Yellow	Liberal Democrat
Bright yellow	SNP
Green (England)	Green
Green (Wales)	Plaid Cymru
Light green (N.I.)	SDLP
Dark green (N.I.)	Sinn Fein
Red (N.I.)	Democratic Unionist



Membership 2015

Membership in BPS is open to all individuals and institutions with an interest in British politics, society, language, and culture. As a member, you receive subscription to four editions of British Politics Review, invitation to all events organised by the society and the right to vote at our annual general meeting.

Your membership comes into force as soon as the membership fee, 100 NOK for 2015, has been registered at our account <6094.05.67788> (please make sure to mark your payment with your full name). If you have questions about membership, please do not hesitate to contact us by e-mail at mail@britishpoliticssociety.no

Forthcoming edition of British Politics Review

While we await the composition of the new parliament, all indications are that the question of Britain's membership in the EU is going to be a central issue in years to come. What kind of role is Britain going to play in the EU?

The Conservative Party's manifesto sketches renegotiation with

Brussels followed by a referendum on the membership issue, something neither Labour nor the Liberal Democrats are inclined to accept. But whether or not Britain's relationship with the union is put to this ultimate test, there are going to be a number of difficult questions to handle over the coming years.

Could a better balance be drawn between EU law and parliamentary sovereignty? And are there real options available for Britain within contested areas such as justice and home affairs, agricultural policy and foreign policy?

The summer edition of British Politics Review is due to arrive in July 2015.