

The Westminster Model strikes back, both in Britain and in Canada ... but pressures for multi-party politics are still increasing

Blog Admin

Last week saw majority government restored at the fourth time of asking in Canada, while UK voters rejected a switch away from first-past-the-post, and punished the third party Liberal Democrats severely for their behaviour in the coalition government. So the 'Westminster Model' approach to politics clearly has some life left in it. Yet [Patrick Dunleavy](#) finds that in both countries, the turbulent swirl of political alignments shows no signs of returning to two party politics. In Canada the previous third party has leapt into the main opposition slot, and in the UK the Scottish National Party swept to an overall majority of Scottish votes. Voters in both countries still show continued disenchantment with their top two parties and an increasing pluralization of political alignments.



Last week brought lots of good news for Westminster Model traditionalists on both sides of the Atlantic. In a nationwide referendum UK voters emphatically refused to swap first past the post at Westminster for the Alternative Vote (AV), and in local elections punished the Liberal Democrats severely (and almost exclusively) with the loss of two fifths of their councillors. The combined vote of the top two (Conservative and Labour) parties in these polls once again rose back above seven out of ten voters in England. In [the Canadian general election](#), the Conservatives gained a clear parliamentary majority, bringing to an end a run of three previous general elections that produced only minority governments. Surely, these signs indicate the continuing strengths of the Westminster Model, its resilience in the face of challenges, the attachment of voters to its simple methods of counting votes and allotting political responsibility?

Yes, but only in some respects. True, a single Westminster model country now has a majority government. And in the AV defeat, Nick Clegg and his colleagues have achieved an almost unparalleled catastrophe for constitutional reformers – one that will re-legitimate first past the post and lead to a freezing of Westminster elections for at least two Parliaments.

Yet it's worth digressing a little here to note some of the special circumstances of this extraordinarily damaging outcome. In her book, [The March of Folly](#), the historian Barbara Tuchman emphasized the quality of 'wooden-headedness' needed to achieve a full-blown policy fiasco – an ability to undertake courses of action long foretold to be foolish, but persist in them against all serious advice. And so it was with the Liberal Democrat's high command, both in the general and in the particular.

In the general, what political calculation could have led a party to want to sell coalition governments to the electorate by breaking so clear and emphatic an election pledge as not to increase student fees, and break it in such a '[shock doctrine](#)' way by tripling those fees? What logic impelled Clegg and co to want to play the political-business cycle so nakedly by proposing unrealizable public spending cuts concentrated in the first three years of office?

In the particular, it took a special kind of arrogance to think that constitutional changes could be imposed on UK voters without any prior consensus-building, without any form of [inquiry into systems](#) and without allowing any choice for voters. In the micro, the party had a far better and more implementable reform option available to it – the [Supplementary Vote](#), already successfully used in London for the mayoral elections, accepted by London voters in 1999 by more than two to one, and invulnerable to 90 per cent of the distortions flung at AV by the successful 'No to AV' campaign. The compound result was that in not a single district of the country was there a majority for the reform option.

The churning of political alignments

Yet both in Canada and the UK, there remain very strong signs that voters are far from accepting any form of return to two-party politics, the foundation upon which any Westminster model system must rest. As the table below shows, Stephen Harper won a resounding majority on less than a 40 per cent vote share, and following only a marginal increase in support, largely because the opposition to the Conservatives was split – and split in a uniquely turbulent way.

May 2011 Canadian general election results	Change in vote share	Per cent 2011 Votes	Per cent 2011 Seats
Conservative Party	+2	39.6	54.2
New Democratic Party	+11	30.6	33.1
Liberal	-8	18.9	11.0
Bloc Quebecois	-4	6.1	1.3
Other	-2	4.8	0.3
Total		100%	100%
Effective number of parties		3.42	2.41

The long-standing third party in Canada, the New Democratic Party (NDP), surged strongly from third place to overtake the Liberals, who have always placed first or second before in national vote shares, and indeed were for long periods what political scientists call a 'dominant party' in Canadian politics. A large part of the NDP's success reflected the Liberal's poor leadership and political timidity in opposition.

But the NDP also surged on a backlash against the Bloc Quebecois, a separatist party demanding independence for Quebec, which lost ground heavily at these national elections. The 2011 result pushes the traditional two-party share of the vote (i.e. Conservatives plus Liberal) to below 59 per cent, down from 65 per cent in 2008. The key political science index of how many parties there are, the 'effective number of parties', actually fell from 3.78 in 2008 to 3.42 in 2011, chiefly because the Liberals did so poorly.

Turning to Britain, the main turbulence occurred in Scotland, where the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats achieved historic low vote shares, Labour support stagnated, and the Scottish National Party surged to the first-ever overall majority in the proportionally elected Edinburgh Parliament. The exceptionally shrewd SNP leader, Alex Salmond, dwarfed his major party competitors within Scotland, and is now set fair to call a referendum in on independence in 2014. Whether this is won or lost, the devolution of powers to Scotland looks certain to deepen significantly. And all three UK-wide major parties will have to up their game to survive or flourish in Scotland, especially perhaps Labour.

In England huge chunks of the northern Liberal Democrat vote deserted the party, but their leadership can take some comfort in knowing that around 12-15 per cent of voters stuck with them, through thick and thin. The Greens made progress in winning some council seats, but no councils. Labour re-built its vote share but fell well short of surpassing the coalition parties combined. The vote share for UKIP and the BNP fell, perhaps reflecting David Cameron's tactics of attacking multi-culturalism – but their potential to gain votes is still there, as Westminster by-elections have demonstrated.

So in both Canada and the UK, last week saw a continuing disillusionment with existing major parties, a restless surging amongst voters for another plausible option when one presented itself, and as [Charlie Beckett](#) noted on this blog, a disillusionment and lack of belief in major party politics. Last week too it is unsurprising that Conservatives in Canada and the UK were the major beneficiaries of a fragmentation of alternative parties, considering that they were buoyed up by favourable media empires and business support.

But still the sands are shifting beneath the Westminster model, with a constant drumbeat of political pluralization that heralds the advent of more multi-party and more conditional political alignments. Yesterday, in the highly undemocratic one-party state of Singapore, the ruling party won 81 out of 87 seats in the legislature under first past the post (and with rigged constituencies) – but even here its previously dominant vote share dwindled from 75 per cent two elections ago to 60 per cent now.