

# LSE Election Experts reflect on the Election result

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*We asked our election experts to reflect on the election results, and on what their implications might be in terms of the make-up of the next government. This is what they said:*

**Françoise Boucek** – Department of Politics, Queen Mary, University of London

*There are several key policies on which the Conservatives and Lib Dems agree including schools and tax relief on low earners. But more importantly, Cameron has indicated that the Conservatives are willing to set up a committee to examine electoral reform. What form this will take is too early to tell but there are very democratic ways of going about this as demonstrated by the citizens' assemblies on electoral reform set up recently by some Canadian provinces with the final choice put to referendums requiring 'special' majorities to be endorsed. Cameron has stressed the urgency of getting agreement quickly so that the government can start working as soon as possible. In my view this will happen more rapidly than some pundits indicate. The Lib Dems are said to have detailed proposals ready to put on the table and I wouldn't be surprised if a new government was in place by early this week.*



**Professor George Jones** – LSE Government

*We now await the outcome. If the advocates of PR eventually have their way we will have similar such waiting periods for haggling after every general election.*

**Dr Stuart Wilks-Heeg** – University of Liverpool

## **Democracy – back to basics**

*What does it say about the state of our democracy when we can project election outcomes on a daily basis throughout a campaign, using sophisticated opinion polling and forecasting techniques, but we cannot devise a voting system which can cope with a fairly moderate increase in turnout in some densely populated urban areas?*

*The scenes of voters standing in length queues for an hour or more on Thursday night, only to be denied their chance to vote because the polls had closed have rightly caused outrage. Legal challenges of some kind are almost certain. The Electoral Commission has already announced that a [detailed review will be undertaken](#).*

*While we have not seen anything quite like this in living memory, a number of recent elections in the UK have experienced serious administrative or technical problems. The most notable case was the Scottish Parliament and local government elections of 2007, where problems with the design of ballot papers, the organisation of the count and with the electronic counting system caused scenes of chaos and led to an independent review.*

*Other examples include the problems with electronic counting at the GLA elections in 2000, postal ballots being sent to the wrong electoral wards in Hull in 2004, and computer systems crashing during electronic voting pilots in local government elections in Swindon in 2007. There are numerous others.*

*Having documented all these cases and others in [a report for the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust in 2008](#), I could only confer with the conclusions reached by the Association of Electoral Administrators and the Electoral Commission that our systems of electoral administration were at breaking point. In several polling districts on Thursday they fell apart.*

*How did things get this bad? The causes are rooted in the combined impact of a national agenda of 'electoral modernisation' and attempts by local authorities to bring about efficiency savings.*

*Under the electoral modernisation agenda, local electoral administrators have been bombarded with new requirements – including the extension of postal voting to anyone who requests it, rolling registration and monthly updates of the electoral registers, late registration up to 11 working days before polling, and the collection and checking of personal identifiers for postal ballot verification.*

*All of this has been achieved without any real increase in the budgets which electoral administrators have at their disposal. Indeed, electoral administration budgets in many local authorities are likely to have fallen in real terms over the past decade.*

*Electoral administrators have managed to adapt, but inevitably they have also cut corners. In some local authorities, registration levels declined as a result of reduced expenditure on the annual canvass of registers. It is possible that some will have cut the numbers of polling stations and/or polling station staff over the years, on the assumption that 'supply' could be reduced in view of falling levels of voter 'demand'.*

*It has almost become a cliché to say that we can't 'do democracy on the cheap'. But cliché or not, as the nation comes to terms with the outcome of the 2010 General Election, we would do well to remember that there are certain basics in a democracy which really must not be compromised.*

#### **Tony Travers** - Director, LSE Greater London Group



*It is rare that a British general election produces three losing parties, but the May 2010 contest has come close to doing so. The Conservatives, who won the biggest number of votes and seats, failed to win a majority. Many Tory supporters will see this result as a failure for the party, which it is. Labour will have lost almost 100 seats, which is a poor result by any standards. Their vote share, at 29 per cent, will be only slightly above the catastrophic depths plumbed in 1983. The Liberal Democrats have passed across the electoral sky like a fantastic comet, leaving virtually no trail. Their vote share will be just one per cent higher, winning fewer seats, than in 2005. Given the phenomenal success of Nick Clegg during the leaders' debates, the Lib Dems' final result will surely depress the party.*

*Now we must await the results of inter-party horse-trading. Gordon Brown can remain in Downing Street for as long as there is the possibility that he might stitch together a deal with the Liberal Democrats and possibly the SNP, Plaid Cymru and/or some MPs from Northern Ireland. If it became clear Brown could not construct such an anti-Tory alliance, he would surely have to offer David Cameron the opportunity to form a minority government. To be certain that he could govern effectively, Cameron would need to be sure that the Lib Dems would give him broad support on the Budget and other key issues. There would need to be a deal of some kind, perhaps involving some constitutional issues such as reform of the House of Lords.*

*None of the party leaders will wish to be seen as being obstructive, or creating a risk that Sterling will fall dramatically. The Eurozone financial crisis has created an alarming backdrop to the British general election. The markets will presumably react negatively if the wrangling between the political parties drags on for too long. Gordon Brown has allowed some space today (Friday) for Cameron and Clegg to consider their options, though he has also come forward with an offer a referendum on proportional representation (PR).*

*Labour's sudden conversion to a referendum on PR derives directly from its desire to stay in office, despite having done badly in the election. There had been no such offer during the past 13 years. The Conservatives, given their antipathy to PR, are unlikely to be able to give Clegg an equivalent offer. Several complex issues would have to be decided before a Lab-Lib deal could be concluded. Such issues include: the type of PR to be offered in a referendum; timescales (eg, would the referendum take place at the end of a full Parliament, or perhaps within a shorter period); and how to ensure that neither the Commons nor the Lords could*

scupper the necessary legislation.

*In the end, Nick Clegg will have to decide whether he wants to risk being accused of keeping Labour in office after 13 years of power, and with the Conservatives ahead in terms of seats and votes. There are big risks for the Liberal Democrats whoever they choose to side with. Another general election within a year or so now seems very likely.*

**Charlie Beckett – POLIS Director**

*In media terms, what have we learnt?*

- 1. That opinion polls during an election campaign are an expression of sentiment, not intention*
- 2. That the TV debates shook up the campaign but they were platforms to perform, not parliaments to decide power*
- 3. That the right-wing newspapers were unable to shift votes significantly, as the Tory share declined over the last month*
- 4. That journalists were right to report the campaign process, but wrong to confuse polls, online memes and TV performance with real politics*



**Dr Gus Hosein – LSE Information Systems and Innovation Group**

*On issues relating to civil liberties and technology policy, I think that there is a great deal of common ground between the Tories and the Liberal Democrats, and ways to side-line Labour. Cameron may want to come out as a strong leader on the economy and issues that are specific to Tory policy, so he may try to act on National Insurance. Alternatively, if he takes this vague 'national interest' approach, then he may seek policies that are popular with LibDems. This means: cut down IT budgets including some of the more contentious databases (in DCSF and Health most notably), get rid of the ID Cards and (if the LibDems play their own cards right) the second generation fingerprint-based passport, and revisit the retention of DNA. This is austerity with liberalism, and it will side-line Labour.*



**Dr Leandro Carrera – LSE Public Policy Group**

*Last night's results provided us with some stunning surprises. The first was that the exit polls aired at 10 pm proved to be incredibly correct. Even when there are now only 22 seats to call, it seems that the conservatives will obtain around 305 seats, the Labour party will hover around 260 and the liberal democrats will achieve a disappointing number of 55 seats. And here comes the second surprise of the night, the appalling performance of the Liberal Democrats, which fell well below some polls and experts' expectations of anywhere from 80 to 100 seats. It is clear that the first past the post system punished once more the liberal democrats. However, the Liberal Democrats may turn this defeat into a victory if, as it is expected, they enter into negotiations to form a new government with the conservatives, the most likely outcome as it is the party with the largest number of seats and given Clegg's reluctance to talk to Gordon Brown. In this sense, it seems clear that the key piece of negotiation to form part of government will be a clear commitment to change the electoral system during the term of the next Parliament to some type of proportional representation. And this is the last surprise, because if this is achieved, the Liberal Democrats will have turned a disappointing performance into a significant victory.*



**Tim Leunig - LSE Economic History**

*The guardians of our constitution, an almost hereditary class of men who still wear tights and advise Queen and Government, say that Gordon Brown has the first right to form a government. That is a deeply conservative position – the*



*advantage of incumbency. But David Cameron and Nick Clegg – taking their cue from the voters – think differently. They think that the views of the people of Britain, democratically expressed through the ballot box, matter more than some convention whose rationale – if there ever was one – is lost in the mists of time. That is the first constitutional change for this parliament. The question now is, will it be the last?*

