

Three more years of Cameron – but it will be a rocky road ahead

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5/8/2015

Confounding the pollsters and the pundits, voters in England have given David Cameron another three years as Prime Minister, collapsed the Liberal Democrats to a shell and dashed the Labour elite's dream of edging back into power via a minority government. [Patrick Dunleavy](#) unravels what was and was not historic in the 2015 general election results.



Expatiating on the historic resonance of this election the BBC's [Nick Robinson](#) says that David Cameron has "defied all those – including at times himself – who doubted that he could ever increase his party's support". Fair enough for journalistic hyperbole, but this soaraway popular mandate boost has been just 0.7 per cent of the popular vote in the many seats counted so far. It may show up as a bit more in the end, but a gain of 1 per cent, achieved largely by eviscerating the support of your coalition government partners, is skillfull, unexpected given the previous run of polls, but not in any way historic. The Tories averaged 44 per cent of the vote in all UK elections in the twentieth century, and under Cameron they are nowhere near that still.

Cameron returns now to 10 Downing Street for a maximum stay of three years. If he sticks to his promise not to contest the 2020 election as Tory leader, he must step down by mid 2018 at the latest to allow his successor a decent run up to the polls. In the interim some bleak challenges will have to be faced by a government with a newly fragile majority. The constitutional turbulence that perhaps induced 2 per cent of English voters to switch , at the last minute, to a 'safety first' vote for Cameron, shows no signs of going away.

A Brexit referendum on whether the UK should stay in the European Union or leave now looms for summer 2016. The previous idea of delaying until 2017 to give Cameron time to rack up some concessions from other EU countries threatened too long a deadening effect on the UK economy and inward investment to any longer be practical. So 2016 it has to be, even though in May that year there will also be a potentially epoch-making Scottish Parliament election.

History lies north

For of course the real history-makers of the 2015 general election are the SNP leadership of Alex Salmond (until last year) and Nicola Sturgeon ever since. They have racked up an astonishing achievement in jumping to over half of all Scottish votes, and from 6 Westminster MPs to 56. We can expect that in May 2016 there is a very fair chance indeed that a majority of voters for the Scottish Parliament will still back the SNP, so that even under Scotland's proportional representation elections, the SNP will govern Scotland to 2020 with a large majority. In this context, any vote for UK exit from the EU, is likely to trigger another secession referendum in Scotland as early as 2017.

Perhaps Cameron will manage these huge threats by successfully persuading English voters once again to take the 'safety first' option of staying in the EU. He would then have set himself up to retire as saviour of the European link, and perhaps even of the UK's Union too. In the corridors of power even previously sceptical Tories are also muttering that a proper federal, constitutional settlement for the UK could yet be done – incorporating an EVEL (English votes for English laws) solution alongside some hardwired protections for Scotland. But given the Conservative's historic quiescence on constitutional change the odds instead favour muddling through.

The shortest suicide note in history

Turning to the other English parties, the Liberal Democrat's thin, sketchy and whiney manifesto – full of complaints

that the big boys ruined their plans for constitutional reform – might well qualify as the shortest suicide note in history. Nick Clegg kept promising in the closing days of the campaign that the Liberal Democrats' performance would be "the real surprise" of the campaign – and so indeed it proved. The party's support slumped from nearly one voter in four in 2010 to just one in twelve, and in more than 60 English seats the Greens beat them into fourth place.

As the 2011 AV referendum campaign showed, and the history of the Liberal party proved in the 1918-39 period, you can only go into coalitions with the Conservatives at the risk of losing your soul. Clegg's amazing decision to extend the Fixed Term for Parliament to 5 years was the only enduring achievement of his period as Deputy Premier, and a very nice gift it is for Cameron and his successor. The Liberal Democrats now face an existential crisis, from which it is hard to see them recovering any time soon, especially as Green voting begins (slowly) to solidify at local level.

The Bourbon Labour elite

It was said of the late Bourbon dynasty monarchs in France that despite living through the French revolutionary and Bonapartist periods, they had "learnt nothing and forgotten nothing". This seems an apt characterization for a Labour party leadership that has had more than two decades to face up to inevitability of constitutional change in the UK, and repeatedly refused to do so (outside a brief period from 1997 to 1999).

A whole generation now of political analysts and reformers have pointed out to Labour that the first past the post voting system becomes incredibly unstable in any multi-party context, and your best bet is to change to proportional representation before you get overtaken. The wipeout of Labour's Scottish MPs proves the point in dramatic fashion, and it will now be very hard for the party to undo. Scotland was long a 'dominant party system' for Labour, but now looks like it has become one for the SNP.

Similarly I have lost count of the times that Labour leaders have nodded sceptically through the arguments that devolution for Scotland and Wales alone was unstable; that a written constitution is needed to restabilize the UK; that House of Lords reform was a century overdue; that the only way for Labour to win was to have genuinely popular leaders and reasonably distinctive policies; and that the party needed a far healthier relationship with its supporters.

Yes, yes, the nodding Labour elites have said. But voters care little for such things – it's the 'bread and butter' issues of the economy and the NHS that matter, not political and constitutional reform. Ed Miliband's whole leadership style was premised on the tactical exploitation of this and that issue, on scraping back to power in a multi-party world without ever trying to resolve the larger issues or achieve genuinely popular policies that might compromise a future Labour government's grip on the levers of power. Even in the post-referendum dealings with Scotland, Labour's devo-max proposals were always as few and as mean little concessions as possible.

And yet what in the end kept Labour's growth in 2015 votes to a dismal 1.5 per cent, despite Cameron's economic policies and the erosion of the NHS? Overwhelmingly it was the collapse of the Liberal Democrats to the Tories and to UKIP (foreseeable under FPTP), and a late 'safety first' reaction against the potential ungovernability that Labour's cumulative constitutional inaction has now induced. The set of issues so 'unimportant on the doorstep' proved very important indeed for voters in the polling booths. Even though Miliband is gone, it is not yet clear that any potential successor has really escaped the mindset of Labour's last fifteen years.

The era of multi-party UK politics

Across Europe almost all countries have five or six main parties, and Britain now is no exception. UKIP's failure to break through in Westminster, and the departure of Nigel Farage as leader, will set the party back a bit, just as some other populists in Europe have also faltered. But Rome was not built in a day, and by boosting their support from 3 to 12 per cent nationally UKIP also has made history. An early Brexit referendum will give them an immediate focus to bounce back – and one that could well boost their party's organizational potential, as the Scottish referendum campaign so clearly did for the SNP. But if Farrage does go, UKIP's next leadership choice will be crucial.

Longer term, UKIP's future could look far wobblier than it does now. If Cameron buries UK exit from the EU as he hopes in a 2016 Brexit vote, UKIP may not fade away. Its anti-immigration (and anti-foreigner) vein will still work for it, along with a push for social conservatism. Much will also depend on whether the Tories chose Boris Johnson, or Theresa May, or someone else to succeed Cameron by 2018. Only Boris has any realistic chance of winning back the UKIP voters for a once-again hegemonic Conservative party on something like 40 per cent support – a difficult feat indeed after a decade for the Tories in power. Yet Tory members may not want to recognize that and could still mis-step, as they have so often since Margaret Thatcher.

Finally, the Greens are still the 'battlers' of British politics, with none of the panache yet of some European counterparts. But the party's roots are growing beneath the surface. So if Labour continues to be paralysed by and to evade the challenges of recognizing that political change has happened, the Greens look certain to grow as a threat on the left. They may also sweep up support from left Liberal Democrats if that party cannot revive.

The combined Conservative plus Labour share of the vote remains stuck at 67 per cent, so there is no revival of the two party system in prospect, even in England. Instead an increasingly fragile British state will lumber on with no clear strategy for achieving stabilization, its constitution unwritten, its unity impaired, and its public services in visible decay. Public sector staff now face acutely declining living standards, and the UK's tax base is eroding as the two main parties combine to maintain the con that you can have European-standard public services on American-level taxes. Here too the 2015 election breaks no trend.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the General Election blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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