

EVEL, Brexit, and the SNP: what does the 2015 election mean for the House of Commons?

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The Conservatives shocked everyone by winning a small majority at the 2015 General Election, despite predictions of a hung parliament and the possibility of constitutional wrangling over who had legitimacy to form the next Government. As they bed down for another five years, **Louise Thompson** looks at what their unexpected victory means for parliament, focussing on the SNP influx, English Votes for English Laws, and the Brexit referendum.*



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Just as general elections bring the possibility of a new Government, the parliamentary system means that they also bring the possibility of a new type of Parliament. The recent General Election brings much continuity in government. It is still David Cameron sitting behind the Prime Minister's desk in Number Ten and – although there are no Liberal Democrats seated at the Cabinet table, there are still some very familiar faces. But the Commons now looks and feels very different. As MPs meet for swearing in this week we have seen the first evidence of this, with an influx of SNP Members and far fewer Liberal Democrats. There are [record numbers](#) of women and ethnic minority MPs and Conservative MP Alan Mak becomes the first British Chinese Member of the Commons. Even the seating arrangements in the Commons have changed, with the SNP occupying the front benches on the opposition side of the House and the Liberal Democrats being pushed into the far corner of the chamber.

In terms of the dynamics of the Commons we are perhaps back to more traditional terrain. With a single party majority, we can expect the new Government to implement its manifesto commitments with gusto. No longer will the Prime Minister need to gain the consent of the Liberal Democrats. There is evidence of this already, with the [Counter-Terrorism Bill](#) and [Communications Data Bill](#) (or Snooper's Charter as it is more commonly known) both set to be included in the forthcoming Queen's Speech. These are both pieces of legislation to which the Liberal Democrats were firmly opposed in the previous parliament. Much has been written elsewhere about what a small

majority of just 12 MPs may mean for David Cameron, and comparisons to John Major's struggles with his own backbenchers abound. As Phil Cowley writes, the government is [vulnerable in the Commons on paper](#), but in practice any rebellions from the Conservative backbenches is likely to be more annoying than destabilising for the new Government.

But it is the presence of the SNP which could make the 2015 Parliament really interesting. Providing social media with an hour by hour account of their first forays into Westminster, the #Team56 hashtag provides some interesting insights into these new parliamentarians. Firstly, it shows us their remoteness from Westminster. Many, like [Kirsty Blackman](#) appeared to have never been to London before, never mind Westminster. And few have previously worked in politics – as this week's [Scottish Herald](#) report shows. Secondly, like most new MPs, we find that they possess very little technical knowledge of Parliament. They are unsure of procedure and have yet to learn the ways of the House. Natalie McGarry for instance had to be told [how to address other MPs in the chamber](#).

What is most interesting though in the context of the future of Parliament is their overwhelming desire to break with tradition and – [in their words](#) – shake up the elitist clique at Westminster. The new Scottish Members have only been in Westminster for a couple of weeks, but already they have caught [applauding MPs in the chamber](#), broken Commons rules by taking [selfies at the despatch box](#), spoken out about [segregated seating](#) in the Palace dining rooms and Members' Tea Room and have been engaged in a [tussle over the seating arrangements](#) in the chamber, pulling out all the stops to evict Labour stalwart Dennis Skinner from his traditional front row seat on the 'rebels bench'. They are, to quote Natalie McGarry once again, [frustrated](#) by all of the pomp and circumstance.

As the third parliamentary party they are entitled to all of the parliamentary rights of their new status, with two questions to the Prime Minister each Wednesday as well as [chairmanship of two select committees](#) and stronger representation on bill committees. Although their numbers are significant, they are unlikely to be able to force the government into U-turns on the floor of the House. Instead, if they wish to make an impression and constrain the Conservative government, they will need to work much more outside the chamber, in the committee rooms. This is where things could become really interesting.

To get things done in committee they will need to very quickly educate themselves in parliamentary procedure. And to some extent they will be forced to tone down their frustration with parliamentary conventions. Outright opposition will get them nowhere in the confines of a Commons bill committee. They will be forced into working with other parties. And this will include the Conservatives. Informal meetings with Conservative ministers and more subtle tactics of persuasion will prove to be much more effective in bringing about changes to the government's legislation. Their pre-election rhetoric of [locking David Cameron out of Downing Street](#) will therefore need to be toned down.

The stronger SNP presence will also serve as a constant reminder of the more pressing constitutional reform issues likely to dominate the new Parliament. Discussions on the devolution of more powers to the Scottish Parliament have already begun, facilitated by a [meeting between the Prime Minister and the Scottish First Minister](#) in Edinburgh in which David Cameron offered to reconsider devolving further tax and welfare powers in the Scotland Bill. As John Redwood highlights, Scotland and England are [two sides of the same devolution coin](#). Constitutional reform involving Scotland will therefore necessitate constitutional reform in England.

Resolving the English votes for English laws conundrum must also be one of the top priorities. The Conservatives had already committed themselves to this in their [2010 manifesto](#) and wrote in their 2015 English manifesto that it '[cannot be ignored any longer](#)' and outlining a set of proposals which involve only allowing English MPs to scrutinise English legislation in Commons bill committees. They set a timetable for its implementation before the election, promising that the system would be in place before March 2016. There may be a strong will to resolve this decades long problem in British parliamentary politics, but the finer details may need some more ironing out and could cause problems for the Prime Minister. SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon has [already criticising](#) these published plans and, [as others have observed](#), they could easily produce something of a constitutional mess.

With the exception of the much anticipated referendum on Europe in 2017 (or perhaps in 2016 if [recent reports](#) are

confirmed), other constitutional reform issues will probably be much lower down the agenda in this Parliament.

Given the concessions on electoral reform and fixed term parliaments that the Conservatives were forced to make as part of the Coalition Government, they are unlikely to allow themselves to be pushed into other constitutional reforms in the immediate future. Navigating the plans already on the table through what looks to be a more difficult Parliament may leave enough scars without adding any more battles to the list.

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