

THE BRITISH ELECTION AND AFTER: WHAT HAPPENED AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

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The British general election took place on May 6, 2010. A few days earlier Labor Prime Minister Gordon Brown had pronounced that he was "the most optimistic man in Britain, because I have got a plan for the future."¹ This optimism was not shared by the country at large. After 13 years in power, the British voters abruptly terminated Gordon Brown's political life.

The Labour party received 258 seats and 29,0 per cent of all the votes cast (down from 349 seats; a loss of 6,2 per cent of the popular vote when compared with the last election on May 5, 2005). The Conservatives won 306 seats and 36,1 per cent of the vote (up from 209 seats and a gain of 3,7 per cent). The small Liberal Democratic party obtained 57 seats in the House of Commons (down from 63 although they actually gained 1 per cent more votes than at the last election).²

Heatedly debated in the weeks before the election, the possibility of an uncertain electoral outcome actually became true: for the first time since February 1974 the British voters opted for a "hung parliament". No party gained a decisive victory and won a clear parliamentary majority of 326 seats or more. The Conservatives once again became the strongest party but they still lacked 20 seats for an absolute majority.

Incidentally, the Green party won its first parliamentary seat ever and the Alliance party of Northern Ireland gained its first seat since 1974 while for the first time the Ulster Unionist party (UUP) was unable to gain any parliamentary seat. The share of the votes cast who did not support either Labour or the Conservative party was with 35 per cent the highest since 1918. The turnout of 65,1 per cent was relatively high (in 2005 it had been 61,3 per cent and 59,4 per cent in 2001).

Incumbent Prime Minister Brown attempted to hang on to power for a few days. He then resigned twice: on May 9 he resigned as leader of the Labour party with effect from September at the latest. That way, he hoped, he could improve the prospects for a coalition deal during the negotiations that were taking place between the Liberal Democrats and his own party. It appeared that the former were unwilling to enter into a coalition with Labour if Brown remained Prime Minister for any length of time. Yet, Brown's gamble did not bear fruit. The Labour-Lib Dem negotiations made very little progress. Moreover, the media was highly critical and commentators talked about an

immoral coalition of those parties who had actually lost the election by gaining much fewer parliamentary seats than five years ago.

Two days later, on May 11, when instead a coalition deal between the Conservatives and the Lib Dems appeared to be ever more likely, Brown realized the game was up. He went to Buckingham Palace, tendered his resignation and advised the Queen to call for David Cameron. An hour later, leader of the opposition David Cameron arrived at Buckingham Palace and returned to Downing Street as the new British Prime Minister. After all, his party had received the largest share of the vote and he would have been able to govern as head of a minority government, though a predictably unstable one. However, outside Downing Street, in his first speech as Prime Minister, Cameron declared his intention to form a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats. The appointment of Lib Dem leader Nick Clegg as Deputy Prime Minister was also announced. For the first time since the end of Churchill's war-time coalition government in late May 1945, the UK was to be governed by a coalition.

At long last Britain seemed to have adopted the way of governing that was wide-spread on the European continent. Throughout the post-war era coalition governments in Italy and Germany, for instance, have been the rule rather than the exception. While at first the news of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government was greeted with a degree of surprise, within a few days the British media and the general population quickly became accustomed to the new reality. Still, it was a situation which very few people had confidently predicted.

Why had this development come about then? Any analysis of the main reasons will have to point to Gordon Brown's persona and to Britain's precarious economic and financial situation.

With the exception of a few initial weeks after Tony Blair's resignation in June 2007, Gordon Brown's tenure in office as Prime Minister was fraught with difficulties and tension. Brown was a highly unpopular leader. He lacked the personal charisma which characterized Blair, for instance, and he came across as a rather dour and unconnected person. Not least Brown had the misfortune of achieving the fulfillment of his long-standing ambition to become Prime Minister shortly before the housing and consumption bubble in Britain burst and the country was thrown into the midst of the global financial and economic crisis. Although Brown took courageous action by persuading the British parliament to pass a formidable stimulus bill to prevent Britain's banking sector and perhaps the entire economy from collapsing, the British people were not impressed. After all, it was Brown who had been Tony Blair's long-standing Chancellor of the Exchequer and who had tolerated the overheating of the economy and the development of an irresponsible housing boom. Brown also had to deal with the financial shenanigans (the so-called expenses scandal) of a large number of MPs (mostly Labour and Conservative MPs) which had occurred on his watch. He also had to repulse several serious leadership

challenges to his position from within the Labour party. Thus, his premiership was seen as an embattled and a highly precarious one.

Yet, leader of the opposition David Cameron was not popular either. In fact while in 2009 the Conservative party was leading the opinion polls by a wide margin, in the course of the short election campaign the Tories faced rapidly declining poll numbers. Cameron was frequently viewed as aloof and, due to his elitist upbringing, as largely detached from the daily woes of the British people. His youth and boyish looks did not convince the electorate either that it would be wise to entrust him and his gaffe-prone shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, with the fate of the British economy.

Soon, however, the fairly uninspiring election campaign became transformed by three American-style TV debates among the leaders of Britain's three major parties. What had been a rather unexciting campaign, suddenly became a much more dynamic affair. This was above all due to the debating performance of Nick Clegg, the leader of the small Liberal Democratic party. Clegg endeared himself to the British public and the poll numbers of his party grew to unprecedented heights. Moreover, his party was seen as having a lot of "common sense" and a high number of voters expressed great trust in the competence of Clegg's economics expert Vince Cable. Lord Hattersley, a former Labour deputy leader, put it succinctly: "Never before, in my experience, has the general public warmed to a politician with the persona of a sanctimonious Leeds undertaker on a day trip to Bridlington."³

Yet, in the end Clegg and his party did much less well in the general election than almost everybody had anticipated. The Liberal Democrats only gained one per cent more votes than in 2005. Moreover, in actual numbers of seats gained, the Lib Dems, as well as Labour, obtained fewer seats than at the previous election. Only the Conservatives gained additional parliamentary seats but not to an extent which would have allowed them to form a strong stable government without a coalition partner.

When on May 11, 2010, David Cameron promised Lib Dem leader Clegg to agree to hold a referendum on changing Britain's traditional "first past the post" electoral system to some sort of proportional representation or "alternative vote" system, the deal was done. After all, the two leaders themselves had a similar political outlook. While Cameron is on the left of his party, Clegg is well to the right of his party and, with a few notable exceptions, such as their views on Europe, both men's political convictions are not dissimilar.

They are also of almost exactly the same age and share a similar political inexperience. For instance, apart from having being elected leaders of their respective parties, they had never been in charge of a ministry or held any other institutional leadership position. Yet, Cameron and Clegg and their senior advisers were able to compromise on a coalition agreement, and thus on a political and legislative program, within a matter of a very few days. This was quite an achievement.⁴ The Conservatives, however, obtained all major

departments of state: the Foreign Office, the Defence portfolio, the Home office and the Treasury went to the Tories though the Lib Dems would fill most of the deputy posts in these ministries and Vince Cable became business secretary (though not Chancellor of the Exchequer; this job went to David Cameron's trusted lieutenant George Osborne).

Still, the last time the Liberals had shared power in Britain had been the years after the First World War. As it turned out, with the downfall of Liberal Prime Minister David Lloyd George in 1922, the Liberals would be out of power for the rest of the 20th century. The sudden opportunity in May 2010 to share power again with the Conservatives was simply too tempting for many Liberal Democrats. The rumblings of discontent among some of the party's more left-wing backbenchers were ignored. In total more than 20 Lib Dem parliamentarians – and thus more than one third of all Lib Dem MPs – have become members of Cameron's government.

What, then, can we expect from the new British coalition government?

So far the Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition has worked surprisingly well. Even the crisis provoked by the unwelcome news published by the *Daily Telegraph* in late May 2010 that Liberal Democrat David Law, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury (essentially the Deputy Chancellor of the Exchequer) had fallen foul of the rules governing MPs' expenses was quickly resolved. Without much hesitation, and after less than three weeks in office, Law stepped down and a successor was quickly appointed. Cameron and Clegg had skillfully avoided that this episode would turn into the first major crisis for the new coalition government.

The coalition government also quickly agreed on the introduction of a serious austerity program for the country to tackle the UK's 156 billion pound budget deficit. 6,2 billion pounds are to be saved in the course of 2010 with further major cuts to be implemented in the following years. However, apparently the National Health Service (NHS) and school education has been ring-fenced. In fact, the government has announced that it will ask the British public about which services ought to be cut. This, of course, does not sound like wise leadership but more like a desperate attempt to avoid being blamed for any unpopular decisions.

Other measures have also been largely uncontroversial among the coalition partners. The Conservatives agreed to the Lib Dem condition for a referendum on electoral reform and for turning the House of Lords into a mostly elected chamber. Both parties have also agreed to scrap the introduction of Labour's grand, and highly expensive, new ID card system, which was being developed. The new government also intends to do away with the exaggerated surveillance of British cities and towns and with the many restrictions on personal freedoms the British had to endure under Labour. These measures were introduced, or so it was claimed, to make the country safer and defend it against terrorist onslaughts.

With regard to foreign policy issues, so far hardly any disputes have evolved either. For instance, there appears to be little disagreement among the coalition partners about the continued British commitment to fighting the war in Afghanistan. There is, however, a clear tendency among senior government ministers to favour the United States over Europe. In fact, some commentators believe that Cameron and new Foreign Secretary William Hague wish to resuscitate the "special relationship" of the 1940s and early 1950s to the detriment of Britain's European commitment. The day after having been sworn into office, Hague immediately rushed to Washington to consult with his U.S. counterpart, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Europe may indeed prove the sticking point for the coalition with regard to foreign affairs. Traditionally the Lib Dems have been the most-pro European of all major British parties while there are a great number of backbenchers in the Conservative party who are openly hostile to the EU and any further integration. Cameron himself, as well as William Hague, must also be regarded as Euro-sceptic politicians. The new government has already said that it will not participate in the bail-out of Greece and any other EU countries which are in danger of default. The UK will not participate either in the huge EU stabilization fund which was put together in May to underpin the survival of the Euro. The new government is also strongly opposed to any attempts to co-ordinate the EU's tax and spending policies. All this is problematic. While British banks are not much exposed to Greek debt, if Spain or some other EU countries should default, British banks will be greatly exposed and EU and IMF help will be unavoidable. The co-ordination of the EU's finance policies might also well be in the UK's best interest.

And what would happen if the UK itself was in danger of default? This is by no means an unlikely scenario in view of in view of Britain's huge budget deficit and the weak performance of the country's economy. Would major EU countries such as Germany and France feel obliged to rush to Britain's aid considering the UK's recalcitrant attitude toward the Greek crisis? The new government clearly hopes that its austerity program can convince the markets not to target the pound sterling and to provide the country with a breathing space until the British economy has stabilized and perhaps started to grow again. Yet, there does not seem to be a plan B, if this proves unrealistic, as it may well turn out to be. Talk about the intention of the new government to deal with the EU in an "assertive" way, as Foreign Secretary Hague did in early June 2010, will hardly do the trick.

Conclusion

The new British government has undoubtedly got off to a good start. A coalition government consisting of the Conservatives and the Lib Dems may well have been the best solution for the country. It tempers Conservative social and economic extremism a little and brings the Lib Dems' more liberal, less ideological and perhaps more appropriate "common sense" approach to politics into the equation. Still, the two leaders and indeed a great number of senior politicians in both parties are highly inexperienced. And times are

particularly challenging. Within the context of the global financial and economic crisis, the British economy with its crucially important financial service sector in London and the state of Britain's public finances are in very deep trouble. The envisaged austerity program could well lead to domestic unrest and great discontent. Regarding the foreign policy sphere, the new coalition partners may well face severe tension and disagreement over the government's politics toward Europe within their own ranks. Still, so far the new government has avoided most hurdles and is still enjoying a honeymoon period. For the sake of the country, let's hope the honeymoon will last a little longer.

ENDNOTES:

¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/election-2010/7681613/General-Election-2010-Quotes-of-the-campaigns.html>

² Detailed information from a variety of sources can be found here:
<http://www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/ge10/ge10.php>

³ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/election-2010/7681613/General-Election-2010-Quotes-of-the-campaigns.html>

⁴ For the coalition agreement, see
http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/409088/pfg_coalition.pdf