

The Last Days of the United Kingdom? Reflections on the Morning After the British General Election of 2015

By Alex Brianson

Introduction: A 'new normal' in UK elections?

The general election held in the UK on May 7th was one of the most fascinating in its history. For the first time in living memory, the previous election in 2010 had produced a coalition government, between the Conservatives (or Tories) and the Liberal Democrats (or LibDems). Most observers expected this to establish a 'new normal' in UK politics, in which the UK at last joined the European mainstream of multi-party coalitions. All the opinion polls before election day indicated a result that was too close to call, with the Tories and Labour, the two largest parties in the Westminster Parliament, being potentially capable of generating a coalition or workable minority government.

Instead, the old pattern re-established itself, albeit with an important new twist. The Conservative Party increased its number of MPs and was able to form a government with a small majority (predicted to be 329 seats in the 650-member chamber), but the LibDems imploded, losing nearly fifty of their seats. The Scottish Nationalist Party swept the board in Scotland, winning 56 of the 59 seats in that country. UKIP managed to gain an impressive share of the vote (as I write on the morning of 8th May, they are predicted a share of 13% across the country), but this was likely to result in a small number of MPs. The Green Parties of the UK (there are separate organisations for England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) did reasonably: although there was no breakthrough for them, the sole Green MP, Caroline Lucas, was returned to Westminster with a significantly increased majority and almost 1 million people voted Green.

In this article I discuss the implications of the UK's most recent general election for Britain's membership of the EU. In what follows, I discuss four key issues – the results and why people voted as they did, how the incumbent administration fared, and the fortunes of both UKIP and the UK Green Parties. I then draw some initial conclusions about the role of 'Europe' in the campaign, and the implications of the election for the UK's membership of, and role in, the EU. *I argue that there may indeed be a 'new normal' in British politics, but that it's not the one most people expected: we appear to be seeing a state with clear political divides between its component countries, but not a country that is finally conforming to the continental European norm of multi-party and coalition politics.* However, before this it is necessary to provide a background political context, and it is this that I now proceed to do.

UK politics in 2015

The UK's electoral system, which works on the 'first past the post' (FPTP) basis, is supposed to provide single-party government even when the largest party in Parliament has nowhere near a majority of the votes. This is because what counts is the number of seats in Parliament won by each party, and in each constituency it is quite possible, indeed usual, for the winning candidate to have less than 50% of the vote. When this is translated to the national level, it means that a large majority in the House of Commons can be won with just over 40% of the votes cast. For instance, Margaret Thatcher's landslide majority of 144 in 1983 was won with a vote share of 42.4 %; Tony Blair's equivalent of 179, in 1997, was achieved on 43.2% of the vote.

However, alongside the unanticipated event of a Tory-Lib Dem coalition in 2010, several significant changes have been taking place in the UK's politics over recent years, not least

regarding the impact of devolution to the various countries of the UK other than England and the rise of a right-wing populist party in the form of UKIP (the United Kingdom Independence Party). This has produced a state that is divided along new cleavages, and the emerging political cultures of the four countries of the UK – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (NI) – are increasingly distinct from each other. To understand the environment in which the general election took place, it is helpful to probe into these issues a little further.

When the Labour government of 1997-2001 devolved power to Scotland and Wales, as well as Northern Ireland as part of the peace process there, it set in train dynamics that were unforeseen. In all three cases, devolution of limited powers has led to calls for greater autonomy, and although the UK system remains ‘asymmetric’ in its devolution (that is, the various countries of the UK have different degrees of devolved power), Edinburgh, Cardiff and even Belfast have become more independent from London over time.

In Northern Ireland, politics works differently from in the rest of the UK, largely as a result of the so-called Troubles and their lasting impact on society there. The largest political parties in the province divide on axes of nationalism (i.e. the wish for ultimate union with the Irish Republic) and unionism (the wish to remain part of the UK), as well as left versus right. The Northern Ireland Green Party rejects such sectarianism. In this part of the UK, the election campaign was generally seen as a damp squib; NI parties campaigned on issues that were largely outside the UK national agenda, and the health minister was forced to resign after making homophobic remarks, but generally NI politicians spent several weeks fighting another battle in their quixotic struggle. That said, the anticipation of a very close result in Westminster did mean the NI debate linked to its pan-UK equivalent in some ways; the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) expected to be a key player in London by giving its support to a Tory-led coalition. This was not to prove the case, providing a ray of sunlight in a difficult night for those on the left in UK politics outside Scotland.

The situation in that country became especially interesting towards the end of the last parliament; in 2014, a referendum on independence for Scotland was nearly won by the nationalists, and was only defeated by promises of greater devolution from each of the main Westminster parties. In the brief period between the referendum and the general election, the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) became ever more popular, as the coalition appeared to be reneging on its promises to give more power to Edinburgh. In addition, the Labour Party’s pan-UK position on accepting a policy of austerity, albeit with less swingeing cuts and a repeal of the hated ‘bedroom tax’, did not inspire voters in Scotland, where the political compass tends to point further to the Left than in England.

For the LibDems, joining the coalition government in 2010 was a Pyrrhic victory. It gave individual LibDems several ministerial positions, and made their leader, Nick Clegg, Deputy Prime Minister. However, it also meant joint responsibility for government policy, and this had emphasised harsh forms of austerity. Conservative voters tended to support such policies, but as a more centrist party the LibDems have a left-wing which was unhappy with many of the coalition’s measures. Many of those who had voted LibDem in 2010 also felt betrayed by their abandonment of policy promises made in their manifesto, such as the abolition of University tuition fees (which the coalition in fact trebled). Thus, although they were not expecting a wipe-out, realistic LibDems were expecting to lose several seats in Parliament.

UKIP had established itself as a major force in opinion polls since the 2010 election, largely by attracting former Conservative voters who considered the Cameron leadership to be too

socially liberal, but also former Labour voters who felt abandoned by the party's increasingly middle-class focus. Immigration became the particular focus of UKIP politicians, and they were so successful in shaping the public discourse, alongside a largely right-wing and shallow media, that they 'won' the European Elections of 2014. In that same year, two Conservative MPs resigned from the Tory party, joined UKIP, and retained their seats in by-elections. As a result, many observers expected a breakthrough for the party in the General Election, although it was also recognised that the electoral system would limit their potential gains.

Finally, the other 'small' parties had good general election campaigns, aided by barnstorming performances in the national TV debates. Nicola Sturgeon, the SNP leader, was generally considered the 'star' of the campaign, but Leanne Wood (leader of Plaid Cymru, the Welsh nationalists) and Natalie Bennett (leader of the England and Wales Green Party) also won plaudits. However, as neither the SNP nor Plaid Cymru field candidates in England, their gains, if they materialised, would in the first instance be felt in Edinburgh and Cardiff. The Greens, however, hoped for a boost from a campaign that saw them receiving a steady 5-8% in the opinion polls. This, of course, is not a huge level of support, but it was both sustained and greater than in previous elections.

The Election results and how to explain them

In the event, the elections had two obvious big winners: the Tories, who increased the number of their MPs and managed to gain a majority in the House of Commons, and the SNP, which won almost every seat in Scotland. UKIP made big gains in terms of its vote share in England and Wales, but returned only one MP. The big losers were Labour and the LibDems, with significant soul-searching expected to take place in both parties. The reasons for this situation are probably both political and constitutional.

There are two political factors which appear to have shaped the results, and they share links to the situation in Scotland. The first is that the Conservative national campaign, which emphasised two key things – the need to keep Labour from reversing the progress they claimed to have made on the economy, and fear of what would happen if there was a Labour-SNP coalition – seems to have been successful in England. The second is that the SNP campaign, which emphasised the need to break with the politics of austerity and to strengthen Scotland's voice in London, was clearly successful in Scotland. In other words, England has voted for the right and centre-right, while Scotland has voted for the centre-left and left.

The constitutional factor that helps explain the result is the first past the post electoral system. This helped the SNP achieve its landslide in Scotland (winning 56 of 59 seats) on an impressive apparent vote share of 50%. It also helped the Tories gain a majority nationally, and more clearly in England, on a vote share which is not yet clear at the time of writing, but which is definitely far less than the percentage of the seats in Parliament than they won. With a winner takes all system such as FPTP, what counts is the number of constituencies in which a party comes first, not overall share of the vote.

Labour in particular will need to ask why it did so badly, losing almost all its seats in Scotland to the SNP and not gaining enough from either the Tories or the LibDems in England to make up for the lost ground this represented. Its slightly more left wing stance than in 2010 didn't prove attractive to voters outside its traditional heartlands of London, Wales and the North East of England. It seems likely that their manifesto was too tepid for Scottish voters, but not 'common sense' enough to tempt large numbers of the blue collar vote in England to support the traditional working class party. The dilemma for the party is now whether to go

left, in an attempt to attract back its lost voters in Scotland, or go right, in an attempt to attract those who voted Tory and UKIP. The Liberal Democrat losses, while proportionately much worse than Labour's, are probably easier to explain: the party appears to have paid the price for mismanaging its coalition days, and alienating its left-wing side while losing many of its right-wing voters to the Tories.

UKIP: the lion that mewed?

UKIP can take heart from the results of the election, in a way that belies the fact that it lost one of its two MPs and that its leader, Nigel Farage, narrowly failed to win the seat he contested. Initial claims have been made by UKIP that their potential voters often chose the Tories instead out of fear of the SNP and what it might be able to achieve in coalition or even a lesser partnership with Labour. If this is true, and it has initial plausibility, then the Tory claim to have been the best way to keep the UK together seems to have gained traction in England. Nonetheless, UKIP received a good share of vote (estimated currently to be 13%). Across the country, UKIP took votes from Labour as well as Tories, e.g. in the case of Ed Balls, Shadow Chancellor until the election, who lost his seat to the Conservatives by just under 400 votes.

Both the UKIP seats at Westminster had been won at by-elections, which traditionally follow a different logic from national elections; although the loss of one of these MPs will be a disappointment for the party, it is not a disaster. Indeed, a positive 'spin' that it can now make is that for the first time in its history it has won an MP at a General Election. It would be too much to claim that UKIP is now a force to be reckoned with in every part of the country. However, it seems clear today that such a prospect is credible in the near future; the UKIP lion *did* roar, but not as ferociously as the more sensationalist analysts had suggested. One issue to ponder, however, is the future of Nigel Farage. He said he would resign as party leader if he failed to win his seat, and it is difficult to see how he can retain his image as a straight-talking, trustworthy man of the people (although he's a member of the social elite in the country) without keeping his word. That said, he has stepped down before, and returned subsequently... I predict he will step down but then be re-elected Leader, either straight away or in time for the next general election.

The Green Parties: failing to flower?

The result for the Green Parties of the UK was superficially disappointing, despite the success of Caroline Lucas in retaining her seat with a significantly increased majority. Green candidates received approximately 1 million votes nationwide, meaning this was the most successful general election for the parties ever. Their anti-austerity platform clearly struck a chord with more voters than in the past. However, in parliamentary terms this leaves the Greens more-or-less where they were, with one MP and the potential for more, but no massive surge in their favour. Seats that Greens had hoped to win in England did not fall their way; however, this was always unlikely, and the Greens can take heart from coming second in Bristol West and third in Norwich South. Greens have the potential to build strong local bases in specific parts of the country, from which future gains may occur. However, unless the electoral system is changed, it is difficult to see significant numbers of Green MPs in the near future. 'Green' issues, such as climate change and biodiversity loss, were almost entirely absent from the campaign; if these issues rise in public interest, then the Greens are better placed than ever before to capitalise on such a change, but for the present they are very much less broadly supported than UKIP.

The UK election and Europe

As a campaign issue, the EU did not figure as a major topic of discussion. This is in keeping with previous elections, during which neither of the main parties saw political capital to be gained from bringing the issue to the fore. That said, 'Europe' figured in the campaign in two ways, albeit slightly indirectly. The first is that the Tories repeatedly claimed to have made the UK economy the strongest in Europe, and painted the eurozone as an example of how *not* to run an economy. The second was more frequent, and focused on immigration. This was one of the main issues of the election campaign, and although it was made reasonably clear to voters that many of the 'foreigners' in the UK had a perfect right to be there under EU legislation, my hunch is that this actually increased Euroscepticism rather than diminishing it.

Over the past few years, UKIP has been outflanking Tories on the right in many policy terms, and also in terms of Euroscepticism; it had a significant impact on the coalition's stance on the EU throughout the 2010-15 government, helping galvanise the Conservative Party's own right-wing to push a Eurosceptic agenda within the party and the country. Although UKIP is small in Westminster, it is popular in the country, and I expect its influence on government policy on EU membership to continue.

Conclusion: A Disunited Kingdom heading for the Brexit?

It is very hard to read the runes with security on the morning of an unexpected general election result. However, it seems that two tentative conclusions can be drawn. The first is that the UK is becoming a more differentiated state, in terms of both political culture and political representation. It is true that Wales and Northern Ireland traditionally have political make-ups that differ from England and Scotland, albeit with many similarities between Cardiff and Edinburgh. With the results of the 2015 election, however, the UK has become a much more divided polity, with each of the main parties enjoying strengths in particular parts of the country but seemingly unable to go beyond them (with the partial exception of the SNP, which swept the board across Scotland, but is for obvious reasons unable to win seats in England).

Although in the short term this situation is unlikely to result in the break-up of the UK, the potential for such a radical change is clearer today than for decades. If, as seems likely, both the Tories and Labour maintain right-of-centre positions in order to bolster their electoral chances in England, this is likely to increase the sense of alienation in Scotland, which has clearly voted for an anti-austerity, more solidaristic politics that is almost diametrically opposed to the Tory plans, which that party will now be able to implement as a majority government (albeit with a very small majority).

The second conclusion is that if the Tories keep their promise to hold a referendum on the UK's membership of the EU by 2017 – and I would be stunned if they did not, given that their majority is too small to risk losing any MPs – then this is likely to become a major fault line in UK politics. However, I think this fault-line will be territorial rather than on the left-right axis. Labour may conduct a campaign to stay in the EU, but this is likely to be lacklustre and played primarily for the right to say 'I told you so' if things go badly after a British withdrawal.

The two major opposition parties in Westminster, Labour and the SNP, are unlikely to work well together, since the hatred between Scottish Labour voters and the SNP is likely to be even more bitter now that Labour's grip in Scotland has all but fallen away. The LibDems have become an irrelevance for the length of this Parliament, meaning that the traditionally most pro-EU of the UK parties will have very limited influence. I would anticipate that in these circumstances the UK may well vote to leave the EU, and that this is particularly likely

in England. Should that be the case, I predict that the SNP would demand a new referendum on independence for Scotland. In that case, by 2020 we may well be seeing a radically different UK, in which by leaving the European Union, Britons cause the break-up of their own. Is this the 'new normal' of British politics?