

“It Doesn’t Quite Feel Right”: The British Election Result

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Region: [Europe](#)

Global Research, May 08, 2015

So fell spin doctor par excellence Alastair Campbell on the BBC’s commentary regarding the exit poll from the broadcaster. The temperature in various party rooms wasn’t quite right either. According to the Beeb’s prediction, the Tories would be increasing their numbers to 316 seats, with Labour getting a reduced 239 when all the results would be in. Another prediction then followed: the conservatives would be able to govern in their own right, heaving past the majority line. Others suggested that the exit poll was “incredible” and “unbelievable”, a sort of forecast from distant Narnia. Treat it with “caution”, claimed the



First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon.

The attempt to “splinter” the conservative bloc from the UK Independence Party side did not materialise. Having ridden a wave of anti-European and anti-immigration protest, the conservative attempt to chew some of that fat from the reactionary side of politics may have neutralised what seemed to be an ominous threat. Poundland Powellism may not have yielded Nigel Farage the numbers he wants, but UKIP has left a large, and very persistent stain of suspicion on the landscape.[1]

The splintering did take place, though it assumed the form of a withering devastation for Labour in Scotland at the hands of the lady deemed the “Tartan Terror”. Shadow foreign secretary Douglas Alexander was butchered in the vote, as was Jim Murphy, the Scottish Labour leader. Sturgeon will be thrilled, with the Scottish nationalists posed to become the third largest power bloc at Westminster.

The Liberal Democrats, the ill-fated coalition partners of the Tory party, were given a predictable mauling by an unforgiving electorate, with an outcome that will probably yield it eight seats. It had held 57. Its former leader, Charles Kennedy, lost his seat to the SNP in Ross, Skye and Lochaber. Business secretary Vince Cable lost Twickenham, a seat he has held since 1997. Lynne Featherstone was defeated in Honsey and Wood Green. Party veteran Paddy Ashdown, having promised to eat his hat at the exit poll result, will have to do just that.

Cleaning out was taking place in other quarters. The headline grabbing George Galloway,

the leader of Respect, who had been reported to the police for sending out information on an exit poll before the vote was concluded, lost his Bradford West seat to Labour.[2]

The election did have its fair share of observations before counting. There was the usual British wonder at queues. A note on the Guardian blog observed: "Democracy in action. Twitter users have posted pictures of long queues outside polling stations up and down the country - a sign of decent turnout or just bad organisation? Here's hoping it's the former." [3]

Well, it was a form of democracy, even if it was hollowed out and qualified. "Face it my beloved Britons," claimed Pablo Guimón, UK correspondent for El País, "you've got a weird electoral system. You might think it's normal that the Greens could get 10% of the vote and just one seat, while the SNP might end up with 4% of the vote and 50 seats. But it's not. Even if it does stop Ukip." [4]

What, then, did this election signify? In the optimistic analysis from Josh Allen in Jacobin Magazine, it proved that there was, in fact, a generative response to austerity and conservatism in Britain. "The coalition government's austerity agenda has fertilized an entire ecosystem of activism that is focused on providing a sustained challenge to neoliberalism, market fundamentalism, and ultimately, capital itself." That challenge will evidently have to continue.

There were the usual eccentric entries posing with variously serious agendas, though these only registered as mild tremors on what was a gradual return to British traditionalism. The "Give Me Back Elmo" Party ambushed Prime Minister David Cameron at a polling station in Oxfordshire with little effect. The party's platform speaks of every child's "right to a Father" and halting "the discrimination against Fathers in the secretive, gender bias family courts and end the emotional child abuse." [5]

A notable fact through this entire campaign was the political inking out of Labour's Miliband, a sort of erasure from history, be it by slander or good old satire. He was bullied into rubbery confusion by presenter Jeremy Paxman, who treated him as part git and part geek. He was excoriated at every turn. Each public relations exercise looked like an attempt to attain tenure in clumsiness and moronic hilarity. The press proved unforgiving.

The response from British media outlets to Miliband's Chatham House speech on foreign policy was a near zero. This suggested much, if only because Miliband expressed no room, let alone interest, in holding a referendum on Europe and Britain's links. "The threat of an in/out referendum on an arbitrary year timetable, no clear goals for [the Tories'] proposed European renegotiation, no strategy for achieving it... poses a serious risk to Britain's position in the world." Such sensibility will get you punished.

One premise, followed with stubborn sleep-walking conviction, has been an insistence that a succeeding coalition government would be impossible. Coalitions are the venereal disease of the establishment - a result of ill-thought through comingling that produces strange offspring. Neither Labour nor the Tories were countenancing that - a distressing unnatural form of government for the traditionalists, because it seems to the political sages that voters do get it wrong. For the Tories, this has paid off. For Labour, it has been fatal. After this election, the fans of coalitions and opponents of rampant majority politics will have to wait for another time.

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Notes

[1] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/05/british-elections-miliband-labour-snp/>

[2] <http://www.bbc.com/news/election-2015-england-32644484>

[3] <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2015/may/07/election-polling-day-live-tories-and-labour-neck-and-neck-uk-votes>

[4] <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/may/05/britain-weird-electoral-system-uk-general-election-europe>

[5] <https://www.facebook.com/givemebackelmo>

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