



Biuletyn informacyjny

04/2010

BRITISH GENERAL ELECTION BY GAVIN RAE

Britain is entering an era of both political and economic uncertainty. While the Conservative Party won the largest share of the vote at last week's parliamentary elections, it was unable to command an overall majority in parliament that would have allowed it to form a new government. Therefore, after 13 years in opposition, the Conservative Party has returned to power through forming a coalition government with the Liberal-Democrats. This first full coalition government since 1945 faces an intense economic crisis and has committed itself to a range of painful and immediate public spending cuts.

It was not supposed to have been like this. Up until just a few months ago the Conservatives were riding high in the opinion-polls and were seemingly set – under the guidance of its young media-friendly leader David Cameron – to win a large majority at the polls. The story was one of Labour decline, with the population looking for change after 13 years of a Labour Party government presided over by an unpopular Prime Minister Gordon Brown. Why was the Conservative Party unable to sufficiently capitalise on such a favourable political situation?

The answer to this question can be found in the long-term decline in support for the Tories. After winning over 60% of the vote at the 1931 elections, support for the Conservative Party (leaving aside short-term oscillations) has steadily decreased. By 1992 – the last time the Conservatives won an overall majority – the party won 42% of the vote, which then fell into the low 30s in 2001 and 2005 and only rose to 37% in 2010.ⁱ It is becoming increasingly difficult for the Conservatives, that had historically been considered as the 'natural' party of Government in the UK, to win a level of support in large areas of the country necessary for it to govern independently. This can be most clearly shown by the fact that the Conservative Party only won one seat in the whole of Scotland, where it exists as the fourth largest party.

Yet the other major issue underpinning the election result was the failure of the Labour Party to raise its vote. For more than 20 years after the Second World War, Labour regularly gained a share of the vote that was slightly short of 50%. The party then entered a period of electoral decline, which was particularly pronounced in the early 1980s, after a section split from the party and fused with the Liberals. When Tony Blair led the party to victory in 1997, Labour gained 43% of the vote. Despite the Blairite rhetoric of a new 'third-way' and expansion into the 'radical centre' the party only recovered the level of support that it had enjoyed in the early 1970s. Tony Blair's land-slide victory in 1997 was not due to Labour achieving an exceptionally high vote, but rather the consequence of a collapse in support for the Conservative Party.

The Blairite project was successful in keeping the Labour Party in power both when the economy was growing and when the Conservative Party vote was depressed. During the period of high economic growth from the end of the 1990s the British economy was swelled with credit, unemployment declined and Brown openly boasted that the government had overcome the era of economic 'boom and bust'. During these years the Labour Party

2010 election results for three main parties

Party	% of National Vote	Number of MPs
Conservative Party	36.1	306
Labour Party	29.0	258
Liberal-Democrats	23.0	57

was able to introduce some real progressive reforms – such as implementing a minimum wage, significantly increasing investment in health and education, advancing the peace process in Northern Ireland and introducing devolution in Scotland and Wales. However, these were accompanied by policies of deregulation and liberalisation and overshadowed by the disastrous decision to back George Bush's military adventures in the Middle East. All of these contributed to a steady decline in support for the Labour government and a distancing of the party from its social and activist base. By the time Brown had replaced Blair as Prime Minister in 2007, the economic boom was turning to bust and the party seemed destined for a new electoral disaster.

While the Labour Party lost the 2010 elections, it did manage to retain large sections of its support. Although the party's share of the vote declined, it did so at a much slower pace than had occurred during the previous two elections.ⁱⁱ Large sections of society remember the devastation caused by Thatcherism and feared the present Tory programme of huge public-spending cuts (alongside tax breaks for the rich). Once Gordon Brown had finally freed himself from his Blairite shackles in the last week of the election campaign, he was able to expose the fundamental differences that still exist between the two parties and underline the achievements of the Labour Party government. Unfortunately, this was all too little too late

With the Tories struggling to capitalise on Labour's difficulties, the third force in British politics – the Liberal Democrats – emerged as a serious contender. Again this can be understood by considering the long-term changes occurring in British politics. Support for the Liberals has steadily increased from a low of just 2.6% in 1951. Although the Liberals lost 5 seats in the recent election, its actual share of the vote increased to 23%. The incongruity within the British electoral system has ensured that the Liberal's have always gained a proportion of the parliamentary seats far below its actual national vote. In contrast the Conservative Party – which has large support in the sparsely populated and wealthy rural areas – has disproportionately gained from this electoral system. Therefore, the major concession of the Conservatives to the Liberal Democrats, in order to lure them into a coalition government, was its offer of holding a referendum on electoral reform (although this is only likely to be a partial reform of the political system.)

Beyond these long-term and immediate political concerns the British election was dominated by the shadow of the economic crisis that hangs over the whole of Europe. The European Commission has predicted that Britain will have the largest budget deficit (12%) in the whole of the EU by the end of this year. Faced with a huge banking crisis in 2008, Brown pumped billions of pounds into propping up these institutions and preventing the collapse of the whole banking and finance system. Now these very structures, which eagerly soaked up public money, are demanding that the new government introduces wide-ranging public-spending cuts, which will mean reducing the living standards of millions of low and middle earners. During the election campaign all three parties proposed such cuts, with the one difference being that Brown proposed delaying them until the recovery had been secured. Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg, is from the right of the party and openly called for 'savage' public spending cuts before the election. In face of market pressure and in line with personal political conviction he has decided to form a government with the Tories based upon a programme of extensive public spending cuts. This has made a mockery of the Liberal's claim to be a party of progressive change.

As the dust settles on one of the most remarkable elections in the UK for a generation what future is there for the left in Britain? Firstly, the election has shown that no serious alternative yet exists to the left of the Labour Party. At the height of Blair's unpopularity, coinciding with the war in Iraq, there seemed some possibility that forces to Labour's left would be able to make advances. The most successful alternative left party has been the Respect Party, which has built some pockets of local mass support in areas of London and Birmingham, through challenging the twinned offensives of war and racism. However, the party lost its only MP at this election and struggled to attract the support of Labour voters who were most concerned with preventing a Tory victory. Also, although the Greens did manage to win its first parliamentary seat at this election, it still made virtually no impact at a national level.

The main battleground for the left will therefore take place within the Labour Party. The Labour Party remains connected to and funded by the trade unions (something that this new government may attempt to outlaw as part of its political reform agenda) which differentiates it from the other main parties. However,

Labour's right-wing will now attempt to replace Brown (who himself is not on the left of the party) with someone) who will deepen the party's Blairite trajectory. If the Labour Party follows such a course and it succumbs to the agenda of economic austerity, then it will remain isolated and be unable to win back the support that it has lost in recent years. Rather the Labour Party should help to unite broader left forces (including those to the left of Labour and those inside the Liberal Party who are opposed to a coalition with the Tories) in order to resist the offensive of the Conservative-Liberal government and its programme of making low and middle earners pay for the financial crisis.

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