

# CLEAR ELECTION WINNERS – UNCERTAIN OUTLOOK

## A REVIEW OF THE GENERAL ELECTION IN THE UK

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### PRE-ELECTION SITUATION

A general election was held in the United Kingdom on 7 May this year. In all 650 constituencies in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, whichever candidate received the largest number of votes in their constituency was elected to the House of Commons (first-past-the-post principle).

The House of Commons elected in 2010 was dissolved on 30 March, initiating the official election campaign. Due to the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act passed in 2011 and the long-term predictability of the election date, it had, in fact, already begun back in January 2015. At that time, the Conservatives headed by David Cameron were hoping to continue in government, ideally with an absolute majority and therefore without the unpopular coalition partner, the Liberal Democrats; Labour under Ed Miliband was looking to prevent precisely that and take hold of the government reins with an absolute majority of its own.

The objective for the Liberal Democrats was to stabilise the party after the disastrous election results in the 2014 European Elections and remain a relevant "kingmaker" in Parliament. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), for its part, was intent on translating its election victory at the same European elections into seats in the House of Commons; and the Scottish National Party (SNP), notwithstanding its defeat in the Scottish Referendum in September 2014, was looking to strengthen its position of power in the House of Commons, building on the surge in its approval ratings and membership numbers since the referendum, potentially joining a coalition with the Labour Party to create a majority. Because of the British electoral system, other parties, such as the

Greens, the Welsh Plaid Cymru and the regional parties of Northern Ireland, had no prospects of gaining a substantial number of new seats in Parliament.

## **ELECTION CAMPAIGN AND POLLS**

The level of polling activity was extremely high during the entire election campaign, right up to election day. One or several of the most important polling organisations (YouGov, ICM, Lord Ashcroft, ComRes, Ipsos Mori) published updated figures virtually daily, all of them forecasting a hung parliament,<sup>1</sup> i.e. a stalemate (in a range of 32 to 35 per cent) between the two major parties (Labour and Conservatives), with neither party likely to secure an absolute majority.

Even during the most heated phase of the election campaign, which involved increasingly harsh attacks on political opponents, an entire palette of election promises to the (voting) public, non-stop public appearances by the leading candidates and intensive press reporting, the polls did not show any substantial or enduring changes.

The occasional outliers, which gave either the Conservatives or Labour a four to six per cent lead for a few days (causing premature speculation on a shift in trend), were regularly refuted by the next poll a few days later. The forecasts remained unchanged right up to the eve of the election, and it is worth taking another look at them in the light of the subsequent election results:<sup>2</sup> Conservatives 34 per cent, Labour 34 per cent, UKIP 12 per cent, Lib Dems ten per cent, Greens four per cent (support for the SNP was listed under “Others” and was therefore not a relevant percentage variable at a national level). With respect to the distribution of seats, the predictions were as follows on the day before the election: Conservatives – 273, Labour – 268, SNP – 56, UKIP – 2, Lib Dems – 28, Greens – 1.

Against this backdrop, it is understandable that the political debate immediately before the election focused entirely on the questions of which coalitions or alliances would have to be forged

- 1 | “Hung parliament” describes the situation where no one party has an overall majority after a parliamentary election conducted according to the first-past-the-post principle.
- 2 | Anthony Wells, “Election 2015 polling: a brief post mortem”, YouGov, 8 May 2015, <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/05/08/general-election-opinion-polls-brief-post-mortem> (accessed 20 Aug 2015).

to form a government with a parliamentary majority or how stable a minority government would be.

With all the criticism raining down on the polling organisations subsequent to the election, one should point out in their defence that the British unrepresentative first-past-the-post electoral system requires complex analyses in all constituencies to obtain truly reliable projections about the distribution of seats, particularly as the large number of marginal seats makes for a high degree of uncertainty. Added to this is the fact that all polls put the proportion of undecided voters between 20 per cent and 25 per cent right up to election day.



Paddy Power – one of London's numerous bookmakers: Those betting on a majority for Conservatives were able to decuple their money. | Source: Ewan Munro, flickr ©①②.

In a country considered the home of betting, it is logically worth taking a look at the bookmakers, who had incidentally predicted the outcome of the Scottish Referendum with great accuracy and were also right in their predictions regarding the first name of the latest addition to the British royal family (Charlotte Elizabeth Diana).

The odds Ladbrokes offered for potential coalitions on the last day before the election predicted a Labour minority government (without official coalition with the SNP but with its acquiescence) as being the most likely (2/1, all the following odds as

at 6 May 2015), followed by a coalition between Conservatives and Lib Dems (11/4) and a Conservative minority government (4/1). More unlikely predicted outcomes were a Labour-Lib Dem coalition (11/4), an absolute Conservative majority (10/1) or an official Labour-SNP alliance (12/1). The highest odds were offered for an absolute Labour majority (33/1) and for a coalition between the Tories and UKIP (33/1). Significantly, the bookmakers did not even consider a grand coalition. The election results thus allowed solid Tory supporters in very optimistic mood to reap a tenfold reward from their bets.

## TV DEBATES

Because there was little by way of publicly visible canvassing (there was no widespread poster campaign, and personal canvassing concentrated on the 80 to 100 marginal seats), most attention focused on the televised debates between the party leaders.

After weeks of wrangling about the form these TV debates should take, with endless discussions and mutual accusations between campaign teams, top candidates and TV stations, a relatively complex, multi-format concept was finally agreed. For a long time, David Cameron refused to take part in a head-to-head debate with Ed Miliband. In view of his position, this was totally understandable from a tactical point of view as the polls generally placed him well ahead of Miliband with respect to his leadership qualities and his personal authority and he therefore had little incentive to offer his direct opponent a platform to potentially reduce this lead. His proposal focused on a debate involving all seven top candidates (a rather awkward format, but one which was ultimately accepted) to avoid the direct head-to-head. Miliband as well as Farage (UKIP) therefore unsurprisingly accused him of "cowardice" and "double standards" (after all, when he was the challenger in the 2010 election campaign, he had admonished then Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown, saying that he should not try to avoid such a head-to-head as voters had a right to make a direct comparison).

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Ultimately, an agreement was reached to go ahead with a total of four different formats:

- 25 March: Appearances by Cameron and Miliband being interviewed separately by Jeremy Paxman for 20 minutes each, followed by a question and answer session with the studio audience which lasted another 20 minutes.
- 2 April: A TV debate with all seven party leaders: David Cameron, Ed Miliband, Nick Clegg (Lib Dem), Nigel Farage (UKIP), Nicola Sturgeon (SNP), Leanne Wood (Plaid Cymru) and Natalie Bennet (Greens).
- 16 April: A TV debate between the “challengers” (representatives of the opposition parties SNP, Labour, UKIP, Greens and Plaid Cymru).
- 30 April: Separate 30-minute interviews with David Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg as part of the *BBC Question Time* program.

While one might be justified in criticising this somewhat confusing variety of formats and long for the big head-to-head battle, the arrangements do reflect the current political situation, with a decrease in the importance of the major parties, fragmentation of the party landscape, and a rise in the importance of smaller parties.

The first truly noteworthy confrontation, which also drew wide media attention, took place in the form of the first TV debate on 25 March.

Previous media stunts, such as the “kitchen appearances”<sup>3</sup> by Ed Miliband and David Cameron, can probably be rated as own goals by the campaign teams. In Miliband’s case, the main message that came across was that he has two kitchens (!) in his home rather than the “down to earth” image that was meant to be conveyed. Cameron’s statement that he did not intend to stand for a third term as Prime Minister (mentioning Teresa May, George Osborne or Boris Johnson – in that order – as potential successor) elicited general puzzlement and quite some consternation among his campaign team.

3 | These were TV interviews staged in each interviewee’s private home environment, in Miliband’s case his London home, in Cameron’s case his house in his Witney constituency in Oxfordshire.

The first “battle” of 25 March had one clear winner: moderator Jeremy Paxman, a veteran of the British TV landscape (he presented the *BBC Newsnight* program for 25 years). He grilled both candidates with direct, uncomfortable and personal questions and made them look like “two naughty pupils ... caught smoking behind the bike sheds” according to one snide comment.

While surveys carried out immediately afterwards placed Cameron slightly ahead, Miliband had achieved his goal: he had undoubtedly reduced Cameron’s lead where image is concerned by displaying great confidence in front of the studio audience and responding to Paxman’s questioning in quite a spirited, albeit ultimately not convincing manner. He exceeded expectations (or fears), while Cameron was more nervous than expected and less poised than his supporters would no doubt have wished for. Of course Paxman focused his probing questions on his interviewees’ most vulnerable traits: Miliband’s leadership qualities and Cameron’s elevated social status. Those who had expected the politicians to position themselves on specific issues or to clarify their stance were disappointed; they only heard general slogans. “We have a long-term economic plan” (Cameron) and respectively “We’re the only party that will save the NHS [National Health Service]” (Miliband).



2<sup>nd</sup> TV debate in April 2015: In order to avoid a direct confrontation with Miliband, Cameron advocated a debate with all seven party leaders. Nevertheless, Miliband found opportunities to attack his rival. | Source: © Ken McKay, picture alliance/dpa.

The “fragmentation” of the party landscape was illustrated most clearly during the second TV debate, which pitted the leaders of no fewer than seven parties against one another. David Cameron (Conservatives), Ed Miliband (Labour), Nigel Farage (UKIP), Nick Clegg (Lib Dems), Nicola Sturgeon (SNP), Leanne Wood (Plaid Cymru) and Natalie Bennet (Greens).

While Miliband and Cameron tried to profile themselves as the only “prime ministerial candidates” through mutual attacks and it looked at times as if Cameron had to contend with six opponents (as his coalition partner Nick Clegg waded in with a frontal attack at the very beginning), in the end it was the three women on stage who were the secret winners: Nicola

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Sturgeon through her poise and because she attacked Ed Miliband from the left together with Wood and Bennet (to his obvious surprise), and Natalie Wood because she gave Nigel Farage a “very British” dressing-down in reference to an unspeakable statement

he made on HIV patients.<sup>4</sup> There was a gruelling “question and answer session”, which lasted for two hours, but did not produce a clear winner. The surveys conducted afterwards indicated a varied public assessment on how the leaders had performed.

During the third TV debate, Miliband found himself isolated and on the defensive, being attacked from both the right (Farage) and the left (Sturgeon and Woods). During the 4<sup>th</sup> and final debate, interest focused on Cameron and Miliband once again (Clegg only played a minor role), with Cameron having the best opportunity to leverage his role as Prime Minister. Once again, no substantial new statements were made on specific issues beyond what had already been said ad infinitum.

## MANIFESTOS

Labour was first to present its manifesto on Monday, 13 April, followed by the Conservatives and the Greens on 14 April, with UKIP, the SNP and the Lib Dems following suit a few days later.

4 | Nigel Farage complained during the TV debate that treating each foreign AIDS patient cost the NHS 25,000 British pounds and suggested it would be more appropriate for this money to be spent on British patients. Natalie Wood countered this statement with the comment “You should be ashamed of yourself”. *The Guardian*, “The ITV Leaders’ Debate”, [http://cdn.theguardian.tv/mainwebsite/2015/04/02/150402HIV\\_desk.mp4](http://cdn.theguardian.tv/mainwebsite/2015/04/02/150402HIV_desk.mp4) (accessed 17 Jul 2015).

The Labour Party presented its 86-page manifesto under the title "A better plan – a better future".<sup>5</sup> The key topics were the economy, taxation, healthcare, education, domestic security, social security, the environment, defence, transport and foreign policy. One significant aspect was the obvious intention to present the party as having a solid economic policy and a definitely positive stance towards business.

Where the unity of the UK was concerned, Labour proposed a Constitutional Convention with the ultimate aim of replacing the House of Lords with an elected Senate of the Nations and Regions, to represent every part of the United Kingdom; it further stated its intention to drive forward the devolution of power to city and county regions. While Labour pronounced itself fundamentally in favour of the EU where the question of EU membership was concerned, it expressed firm opposition to the euro. The party demanded reforms in the EU, albeit without spelling these out in detail. Labour would only be in favour of a referendum if a further transfer of powers to Brussels was on the cards.

The Conservatives presented their manifesto under the title "Strong leadership – a clear economic plan – a brighter, more secure future".<sup>6</sup> Its key topics included the economy,

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jobs and migration, healthcare and education, domestic security, pensions as well as foreign and security policy. On a total of 83 pages, a whole raft of financial commitments and promises were made. The striking thing here was the effort to not only convey the image of a party concerned with economics, willing to make savings and cut social benefits, but also of a party prepared to make concessions to the lower and middle classes through financial benefits and tax concessions, particularly in the area of house building and home buying. There were distinct parallels apparent to the Thatcherite election campaigns of the eighties, with obvious efforts to revive the archetypically British concept of "my home is my castle".

As regards EU membership (not until page 72), the manifesto stressed that there were no plans to join the Eurozone, that a referendum on EU membership should be held by 2017 and that

5 | "The Labour Party Manifesto", 2015, [http://b3cdn.net/labouruk/e1d45da42456423b8c\\_vwm6brbvb.pdf](http://b3cdn.net/labouruk/e1d45da42456423b8c_vwm6brbvb.pdf) (accessed 17 Jul 2015).

6 | "The Conservative Party Manifesto", 2015, <https://conservatives.com/manifesto> (accessed 17 Jul 2015).



the party was in favour of Europe evolving as a “family of nation states” as opposed to one of “ever closer union”. There was an explicit commitment to the transatlantic relationship and to a common foreign and security policy with NATO, while the establishment of a European Army was clearly rejected.

Both parties showed clear signs of wishing to step out of their respective “ideological corner” and appealing to additional sections of the electorate. *The Guardian* published a critical commentary about this approach, stating that both Labour and the Tories were putting forward ideas that ran counter to what they truly stood for. This was illustrated particularly clearly on the front page of the *Daily Telegraph* of 14 April: “We are the true party of working people”, quoted from an announcement of the Tory manifesto. And the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published a similar headline in relation to the manifesto, which translates as “Cameron’s wondrous conversion”.<sup>7</sup>

The criticism voiced in the *Financial Times* was significantly less emotive and consequently had more gravitas; it maintained that all parties were studiously avoiding the real major issues affecting the country, such as the enormous budget deficit.<sup>8</sup>

So while the Tories (“It’s the economy, stupid”) and Labour (“It’s the NHS, stupid”) were fighting over what were the “right” issues to focus on, the temptation was to counter both parties with the statement “It’s all about Scotland, stupid!”, considering the likely lack of an absolute majority at Westminster and the sustained rise of the SNP.

**The First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon came across very positively and as a convincing leadership figure. The SNP seemed to be impervious to criticism and problems.**

By the time of the election, the SNP had over 100,000 active party members, who conducted the election campaign on the ground enthusiastically and addressed voters directly and individually. Added to this was the influence of First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon, who came across very positively and as a convincing leadership figure. The SNP seemed to be impervious to criticism and problems. The huge drop in the oil price has, in principle, made the SNP’s central

7 | Cf. Jochen Buchsteiner, “Camerons wundersame Wandlung”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 15 Apr 2015, <http://faz.net/-hox-8260q> (accessed 17 Jul 2015).

8 | Cf. Janan Ganesh, “Good riddance to a carnival of nonsense and futility”, *Financial Times*, 4 May 2015, <http://on.ft.com/1IbUhx5> (accessed 17 Jul 2015).

referendum argument (economic autonomy thanks to North Sea oil) redundant; but neither this nor the party's performance in government, which has not exactly been overwhelming, has resulted in the support wavering.

With the presence of such a burgeoning regional party, which set out to gain a landslide victory (in which it subsequently succeeded) and whose declared aim was to lead Scotland out of the United Kingdom to independence, this general election took on a significance that went far beyond the question of who would be the next British Prime Minister. James Forsyth summarised this succinctly in *The Spectator*: "A Scottish revolution is coming and everyone's losing their heads."<sup>9</sup>

## SURPRISE RESULTS

After all the polls had predicted a neck-and-neck race between the Conservatives and Labour for weeks right up to the eve of the election, as already mentioned, the exit polls at 10 p.m. on election day initially caused

incredulous amazement until confirmation of a clear election victory by the Conservatives and David Cameron came the following midday.<sup>10</sup> A clear, albeit slender, absolute majority in the House of Commons enables David Cameron to remain in No. 10 Downing Street as Prime Minister without needing a coalition partner to form a majority. All speculation in that direction had become redundant.

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By around 4 p.m. on the day following the election, the official final results had been established after counting had been completed in all 650 constituencies.<sup>11</sup> The turnout was 66.1 per cent (46.6 million voters).

9 | James Forsyth, "A Scottish revolution is coming, and everyone's losing their heads", *The Spectator*, 11 Apr 2015, <http://spectator.co.uk/columnists/politics/9494592/scottish-revolution> (accessed 17 Jul 2015).

10 | At this point in time, the exit polls already placed the Conservatives ahead with 316 seats, just short of the 326 seats required for an absolute majority, but exceeding previous forecasts considerably.

11 | For further details see "Election 2015", *BBC*, <http://bbc.co.uk/news/election/2015> (accessed 17 Jul 2015).

Table 1  
**Results of the United Kingdom General Election of 2015**

Party	Seats	Share of votes in per cent	Number of votes	Change in number of seats compared to 2010 election	Change in number of seats compared to 2010 election in per cent
Conservatives	331	36.9	11,334,576	+24	+0.8
Labour	232	30.4	9,347,304	-26	+1.5
SNP	56	4.7	1,454,436	+50	+3.1
Lib Dem	8	7.9	2,415,862	-49	-15.2
DUP	8	0.6	184,260	0	0
Sinn Fein	4	0.6	176,232	-1	0
Plaid Cymru	3	0.6	181,704	0	0
SDLP	3	0.3	99,809	0	0
UUP	2	0.4	114,935	+2	0
UKIP	1	12.6	3,881,099	+1	+9.5
Greens	1	3.8	1,157,613	0	+2.8
Others	1	0.5	350,005	-1	-2.4

Source: BBC, n. 11.

Table 2  
**Seats by Region**

	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Total number of seats	533	40	59	18
Conservatives	319	11	1	0
Labour	206	25	1	0
Lib Dem	6	1	1	0
SNP	0	0	56	0
UKIP	1	0	0	0
Plaid Cymru	0	3	0	0
Northern Irish Parties	0	0	0	18
Greens	1	0	0	0

Source: BBC, n. 11.

According to these figures, the Conservatives attracted some two million more votes than Labour, gaining only an extra 0.8 per cent of votes but 24 seats. Labour, in fact, made gains of 1.5 per cent, but lost 26 seats. The Lib Dems lost 15.2 per cent of votes and 49 seats; UKIP gained 9.5 per cent in votes, but could only secure one seat. Finally, the SNP only gained an extra 3.1 per cent in votes, but secured an additional 50 seats.

These figures demonstrate once again the distortions the British first-past-the-post system produces, as the party that was clearly the third strongest in terms of votes (UKIP) received only one seat and the SNP with just under five per cent secured as many as 56 seats, becoming the third strongest parliamentary group and gaining considerable influence in the new parliament.

Once again, there were clear winners and losers:

The election winners included Prime Minister David Cameron and his Conservatives, who ultimately achieved a clear election victory against all expectation (even within the party). It was particularly satisfying for Cameron to have overcome his failure in the 2010 election (when he was not able to secure an absolute majority) and to show all his critics (above all those in his own party) that he was able to achieve a “proper” election victory. But the Tory MPs themselves, many of whom had to fear for their seats in the marginal constituencies, also performed unexpectedly strongly and even boosted the size of the parliamentary group by 24 seats.<sup>12</sup> Lynton Crosby, the Australian election campaign manager, must also be counted among the election winners on the Conservative side; his strategy of concentrating on economic competence and, during the final stages, on the threatening Labour/SNP alliance obviously paid off.

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The second clear election winner is the SNP and its leader and First Minister Nicola Sturgeon. Not only did she succeed in transforming the defeat in the referendum in September 2014 into an almost 100 per cent election victory in Scotland through a highly energetic and committed election campaign, she also managed to boost SNP membership numbers exponentially and turn into the

12 | Even in Scotland, the Tories were able to fend off the mighty SNP and hold on to their only constituency of Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale.

true “shooting star” of the election campaign. Particularly towards the end of the election campaign, the advances she made to Miliband with respect to a potential coalition illustrated the influence the SNP intended to exert in Westminster (there in the person of former First Minister Alex Salmond as combative leader of the SNP group) in the event of the party providing active or passive support to a minority Labour government, a factor that has no doubt hindered rather than helped Labour’s election campaign.



Many were surprised by the unambiguous election results, among them the infamous Yellow Press. | Source: Clipp2nd, flickr ©119.

Despite its good election results, the SNP has one regret: its hope that it would either be able to gain a hold over a Labour government as “kingmaker” or at least bring down a minority Conservative government in cooperation with Labour did not materialise. While the Scottish lion now roars in Westminster, as Alex Salmond put it, that is all it can do for now.

In various interviews she gave on the morning following polling day, Nicola Sturgeon also made clear how her party intended to proceed with respect to the issue of Scottish independence. In connection with the 2016 elections to the Scottish parliament, the SNP will once again promote the cause of Scottish independence. Should the SNP regain an absolute majority (which is to be expected as things stand), and particularly if the EU referendum in the UK were to end in a vote for leaving the EU, she would no doubt seek another independence referendum in the not too distant future.

Labour and the Lib Dems in particular are on the losing side, but so is UKIP to some extent. The Lib Dems have paid a high price for their role as junior coalition partner as well as for a lack of clarity about what the party stands for. A mere eight MPs remained from the 56 from the 2010 election. Prominent “victims” include the former minister Vince Cable as well as Danny Alexander (Chief Secretary of the Treasury), who lost their seats. One consequence of the poor result was the resignation of party leader Nick Clegg, who did, in fact, retain his seat, but drew the party-political consequences from the defeat.



Ed Miliband: As the unambiguous loser in the elections, the Labour top candidate resigned from the office of party leader after the elections. | Source: © Lewis Whyld, picture alliance/empics/PA Wire.

The second clear losers were Labour and Ed Miliband. Losing virtually all seats in Scotland (bar one) and losing numerous seats in England to competing Conservative candidates sealed a final result that, with 26 fewer seats, was considerably worse than even the 2010 result. Considering the widespread expectation of being able to move into No.10 Downing Street in some sort of an alliance with the SNP, this was particularly painful. Individual defeats, such as those of Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls (losing to the young Conservative candidate Andrea Jenkyns) and of Shadow Foreign Secretary and Labour’s election campaign manager Douglas Alexander (he lost his Scottish seat to his SNP opponent Mhairi Black by a large margin),<sup>13</sup> illustrate how serious a blow this defeat must be. Top candidate and party leader Ed Miliband too

13 | The politics student, who is only 20 years old, has thereby become the youngest MP since 1667.

immediately drew the consequences and declared his resignation as party leader the day the results were announced, foregoing the role of opposition leader in the House of Commons.

Finally, the election losers also include UKIP – judged by its own expectations. After riding high in the elections to the European Parliament in May 2014 (in which it emerged the winner with 27 per cent of the votes), the party experienced a slight but steady decline in the polls, interrupted only by two by-elections in 2014, where it succeeded in having two defectors from the Conservative Party elected to Parliament as UKIP candidates (Mark Reckless and Douglas Carswell). While UKIP ranked in third place in terms of total numbers with 12.6 per cent of the votes and came second in many English constituencies, the party did not succeed in achieving the hoped-for election victories in Thurrock, Rochester and Strood, and Thanet South. Only Douglas Carswell was able to repeat his by-election success and will return to Parliament

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as UKIP's only MP. Mark Reckless lost his seat, which went back to his Conservative opponent. The most spectacular defeat was that of UKIP's party leader and MEP Nigel Farage, who lagged some 2,800 votes behind his Conservative opponent. Prior to the election, he had loudly promised he would resign in that eventuality. Immediately after the election, he declared he would take a break and that he would review the situation at the next UKIP leadership election in the autumn. However, he withdrew his resignation two days later (according to Farage due to massive pressure from numerous party members), which prompted something of a leadership crisis in UKIP. That said, one should not ignore the fact the UKIP was able to attract almost four million votes and was undoubtedly disadvantaged by the electoral system. One needs to bear these votes in mind when contemplating the prospects for the upcoming EU referendum.

## **THE NEW GOVERNMENT LINE-UP AND INITIAL MEASURES**

Freed from the need of having to conduct lengthy coalition negotiations, Cameron presented his new cabinet, the line-up of which had not changed greatly. The ministers who were confirmed in their posts as expected were George Osborne (Chancellor of the Exchequer), Philipp Hammond (Foreign Secretary), Michael Fallon (Defence Secretary) and Theresa May (Home Secretary). Also retained in their old posts were Iain Duncan Smith (Work

and Pensions Secretary), Jeremy Hunt (Health Secretary) and Justine Greening (International Development Secretary). Michael Gove returned to the cabinet in the new role of Justice Secretary. Noteworthy promotions to the cabinet include Sajid Javid (Business, Innovation and Skills Secretary), Nicky Morgan (Education Secretary), Amber Rudd (Energy and Climate Change Secretary) as well as Liz Truss (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Secretary). With Chris Grayling as Leader of the House of Commons and Mark Harper as Chief Whip, Cameron also brought some Eurosceptic hardliners to the cabinet table (thereby subjecting them to a certain level of cabinet discipline). Further appointments of significance to the EU debate are those of David Lidington as Minister of State for Europe at the Foreign Office and of James Brokenshire as Minister of State for Immigration at the Home Office.<sup>14</sup> Another noteworthy development is that newly elected MP and incumbent Mayor of London Boris Johnson has received an invitation from the Prime Minister to attend the political cabinet, albeit without a ministerial remit. This can be seen as a significant gesture by Cameron to one of his potential successors, particularly as there is speculation that Johnson may well take on a formal ministerial post in government once his term as mayor has come to an end (May 2016).

**With Chris Grayling as Leader of the House of Commons and Mark Harper as Chief Whip, Cameron also brought some Eurosceptic hardliners to the cabinet table.**

The next step was the traditional government policy statement at the Opening of Parliament. This highly compressed outline of the most important government plans is read out by the Head of State, Queen Elizabeth II, with great pomp and circumstance in front of both Houses of Parliament. This "Queen's Speech" delivered on 27 May included an announcement of the EU referendum "by the end of 2017", as expected, as well as plans to make improvements to the NHS and to increase state support for childcare and the construction of new homes. Furthermore, some taxes are to be cut or at least not increased, and further cuts are to be made to social benefits. The government intends to press ahead with devolution and subsidiarity, which will involve greater autonomy in planning and budgetary matters being given not only to the parliaments in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland but also to the major cities

14 | For a complete list of the most important government posts see: Prime Minister's Office, "Election 2015: Prime Minister and ministerial appointments", 8 May 2015, <http://gov.uk/government/news/election-2015-prime-minister-and-ministerial-appointments> (accessed 17 Jul 2015).



in Northern England (including Manchester and Liverpool), which are to be transformed into a “northern powerhouse” to act as a counterbalance to the magnet London represents.

Further key areas included immigration legislation and security measures as well as a clear vote in favour of a visible role for the UK on the international stage (Russia/Ukraine, Syria, Libya, Islamist terrorism).

However, the issue Cameron tackled first of all was Europe, or more precisely EU membership. His first whistle-stop tour abroad directly after returning to office took him first to the Netherlands, then to France, Poland and Germany, where he sounded out the respective leadership on where he could expect resistance or cooperation with respect to his reforming ideas on European policies. Two further visits drew a great deal of attention. The first of these involved Jean-Claude Juncker, whom Cameron received at Chequers, his rural retreat, before his own trip as a significant conciliatory gesture after previously having vigorously opposed his election to the post of President of the European Commission. The second involved Manfred Weber, Chairman of the EPP Group in the European Parliament, who was also received by Cameron.

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All this demonstrated that the Cameron government was prepared to make greater efforts to engage in dialogue,<sup>15</sup> starting by listening to its European partners, although the response in Poland and France was rather cool, while Chancellor Merkel was once more conciliatory in her statements, reiterating her belief that “where there’s a will, there’s a way”.

Soon afterwards, the G7 summit at Schloss Elmau gave Cameron another opportunity to discuss his concerns with leading heads of state and government. The most noteworthy statement from this event came from U.S. President Obama, who made it very clear that he thought that staying a part of the EU was the right thing for the UK to do.

15 | For a representative article (in German) by Thomas Gutschker, “Prinz Charming auf Europa-Tournee”, *Frankfurter Allgemeinen Sonntagszeitung*, 31 May 2015.

However, this rather new and promising approach to the British EU negotiations did not remain without a backlash in Cameron's own camp. 50 notorious EU sceptics (among the backbenchers) formed a new grouping within the parliamentary group ("Conservatives for Britain") and threatened, as they had done in the past (with the usual support from large parts of the press), to mobilise against any EU reforms they considered too timid. They did so in the knowledge of the power they hold; the parliamentary majority is slim and this group could break it at any time. There were early indications of this potential dissent during the discussions on the EU referendum bill in connection with issues of voter eligibility (age, nationality) and the government's neutrality during the referendum. The Eurosceptic backbenchers are insisting that voting should ultimately be based on the general election franchise (over 18s, no EU citizens) and that the government should not fund campaign activities during the last few weeks. After Cameron announced that he wanted to force cabinet members to toe the government line in the referendum, he backtracked within hours under pressure from massive protests from the backbenches.



Group picture from the G7 summit in Elmau: Cameron (second from right) likes to present himself as a politician with an international profile but does not flatly preclude the so-called Brexit. | Source: blu-news.org, flickr ©111.

## OUTLOOK

Now that the general election is over, the UK is obviously facing considerable challenges, the outcome of which is anything but certain.

For one, it has become clear that "it is not just Parliament's buildings that require extensive renovation", as Oxford professor Timothy Garton Ash rightly remarked.<sup>16</sup> The election results also demonstrate that the first-past-the-post principle is untenable, as there is a glaring discrepancy between the final distribution of seats and the actual distribution of votes across the individual parties. But a comprehensive review of the voting system would require a substantial parliamentary majority and, no doubt, also approval among the population, both of which are less than certain (see the 2011 Referendum on the UK Parliamentary Voting System), which makes it unlikely that the matter will be given immediate priority.

**In the Labour party, a heated debate has broken out about the party's orientation and its leadership, which will not be laid to rest until after the summer break.**

While the Conservative party leadership is not in question for now thanks to the clear election victory, there are difficult and controversial decisions ahead for Labour and the

Lib Dems in the run-up to the party conferences in the autumn. In the Labour party, a heated debate has broken out about the party's orientation and its leadership, which will not be laid to rest until after the summer break. Four candidates are contesting the leadership election: Andy Burnham, Yvette Cooper, Liz Kendall and Jeremy Corbyn.

Secondly, there is the question of the UK's unity. An article in the Financial Times quotes Professor Vernon Bogdanor of King's College London as talking of this development leading to "a growing divergence between the constitutional and political forms of an earlier age and the social and economic realities of today", and states his opinion that what is required to prevent the UK breaking apart is a new constitutional settlement involving a redistribution of power between the four nations of the country. During his time at Oxford, Cameron was one of Professor Bogdanor's students.<sup>17</sup>

16 | Cf. Timothy Garton Ash, "It is not just parliament's buildings that require extensive renovation", *The Guardian*, 27 Mar 2015, <http://gu.com/p/473fb/stw> (accessed 17 Jul 2015).

17 | Philip Stephens, "The End of the British Establishment", *Financial Times*, 24 Feb 15, <http://on.ft.com/1WGiiUj> [17.07.2015].

And this same David Cameron made it clear during his first statements on the morning following the election that this was a high-priority issue; the powerful SNP will be a hard and uncompromising opponent, putting the British government under considerable pressure with extensive financial and political demands. It is likely that the promised concessions regarding fiscal autonomy will be granted, albeit linked to greater responsibilities in the area of spending policy and taxation. The territorial order of the UK and the question of how to deal with the burgeoning self-confidence and desire for autonomy or even independence both politically and socially will represent a central, complex and anything but simple task. A further election victory by the SNP during the 2016 Scottish regional elections will only exacerbate the situation.

Thirdly, there is the area of economic and welfare policy. There will probably be few surprises in this area. It is likely that the measures set out in the manifesto will at

**The budget consolidation will likely remain the top priority, which is undoubtedly right and important in view of the enormous deficit.**

least provide the guidelines for upcoming decisions. This would mean that budget consolidation would remain the top priority, which is undoubtedly right and important in view of the enormous deficit.<sup>18</sup> The biggest unanswered question concerned the twelve billion budget cuts referred to in vague terms during the budget campaign, which Chancellor of the Exchequer Osborne then spelt out in greater detail in the budget he delivered to the House of Commons on 8 July. The Tory “stamp” on the budget was unmistakable insofar as the proposals included not only tax concessions and tax cuts for both businesses and employees but also significant benefit cuts. The underlying thrust: less welfare state, greater individual responsibility and self-determination.

Fourth and last, the UK must also realign its foreign policy. Political observers are commenting with increasing bluntness that the UK is in danger of manoeuvring itself onto the side-lines. Flirting with and threatening the UK’s exit from the EU, the minor role the UK is playing in connection with the political confrontation involving Russia and Ukraine, as well as the fact that the ties between the UK and the USA are weakening are clear indications of the UK’s diminishing importance.

18 | Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne confirmed this during his traditional Mansion House speech on 10 Jun 2015. “Mansion House 2015: Speech by the Chancellor of Exchequer”, <https://gov.uk/government/speeches/mansion-house-2015-speech-by-the-chancellor-of-the-exchequer> (accessed 17 Jul 2015).

EU policy will represent a key element in the area of foreign affairs. The UK at the heart of Europe, as John Major recently advocated once again in the election campaign, would be essential for both Europe and the UK. How and to what extent the Cameron government will retain this stance and conviction during its second term remains to be seen. But there is cause for cautious optimism.



Nigel Farage: Calls for Great Britain to exit the European Union will continue to keep the kingdom busy. | Source: © Jonathan Brady, picture alliance/empics/PA Wire.

As the clear winner, David Cameron emerged from the election in a stronger position, enjoying a level of authority the partial victory in 2010 had denied him. Presumably, this will not secure him 100 per cent support from his own parliamentary group, nor will it prevent his notorious backbenchers from keeping the pressure up as became clear soon after the election. But he is initially in a significantly stronger position and does not need to rely on tactical manoeuvres as was the case in the past because he did not command an absolute majority. However, he will have to take greater account of his party and the parliamentary group than previously. By making Mark Harper Chief Whip and by meeting with the 1922 Committee (many of whose members are Euro-sceptic) immediately after the election, he set clear signals of his intention to engage more with the party. At this early stage, there is a greater willingness to follow his lead, and he can and should take advantage of this to set out the objectives of his EU policy more clearly and more realistically, particularly within his party.

While it may not be an entirely straightforward matter for this invigorated party leader and Prime Minister to deal with the EU membership issue and guarantee a positive outcome, it is more promising than would have been the case with a weak Labour Prime Minister Ed Miliband acting under the influence of the SNP.

Contrary to all predictions, the UK election produced a clear and unequivocal result (thanks to the first-past-the-post system), the unpopular coalition option is off the table for now, and Cameron's government has a clear mandate. As he had made clear during the election campaign that he will not stand again in the 2020 election, he will be keen to prove over the next five years that he is not only able to win elections unexpectedly but can also "finish the job", as he kept promising during the election campaign.

The EU Referendum on the question "Should the UK remain a member of the EU?" will represent an important milestone. The date has not yet been fixed, but there are many indications that it could take place as early as the autumn of 2016. For those who advocate remaining in the EU, the wording of the question has the psychological advantage that they will be able to conduct a positive YES campaign. Both sides will now attempt to secure support for their cause from emblematic leadership figures. Most representatives from the UK's business and finance sectors have already positioned themselves clearly in favour of retaining membership. It remains to be seen what further actions the government will take and how it can square the circle by putting forward practicable demands (i.e. demands that do not require immediate treaty amendments and will be supported by a substantial majority of EU members) in Brussels and in the European capitals on the one hand and then trying to sell the reforms as sufficiently substantive within the UK on the other so that it can retain its credibility when recommending continued EU membership. This issue will place a strain on the Conservative Party and very probably cause a rift. Whether this will cause it to break apart is as uncertain as the outcome of the referendum itself. But even in the event of a positive outcome, i.e. a vote for continued membership, the discussion will not be over. The lessons learnt from the Scottish referendum make this clear. The losing side can also draw strength and momentum from a substantive vote. This may give UKIP an opportunity to set itself up as the only political proponent for the NO vote, comparable to the SNP in Scotland. One should not underestimate the potential that close to four million votes from 7 May represent in this context.

Despite these warnings and concerns, the outlook is ultimately positive. The clear election victory of the Conservatives and Cameron has produced the necessary political conditions for redefining the UK's role at home, within Europe and within the wider world through its domestic and foreign policies.

Buoyed by his impressive election victory and assuming he will manage his negotiations in Brussels and the other European capitals with sufficient prudence, Cameron may well be able to restrain his Eurosceptic backbenchers and thereby not only save the UK from a "Brexit" but also cement its unity, as it would then be at least less likely that Scotland would leave the UK.

Despite all the reasons to be cautious, it is therefore reasonable to conclude that the outcome of the election of 7 May was a good one for the UK and may therefore also turn out to be a good outcome for Europe.