

Predicting the British General Election Result and the next few years

by rpinto_anglodeutsch - Wednesday, May 06, 2015

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A humorous but apt Danish proverb is that “*Prediction is difficult, especially when dealing with the future.*” As the politicians finally stop pushing the merits of their policies and the British voters reflect on which way to cast their vote on 07 May 2015 general election, I will hazard some predictions about the likely general election result, as well as the political priorities that are likely to be pursued in the next few years in Britain. Most if not all of the predictions will probably come back to haunt me, but here goes nothing...

And the winner is...

My main prediction is that the Conservatives will win more seats than any other political party, even if the polls suggest that the election might be a close call. I also predict that the Conservatives will gain an overall majority, rather than a hung parliament. The main reasons for this prediction are all to do with Labour, rather than the Conservatives or their policy initiatives:

- Labour is going to be decimated in Scotland and the other political parties will have almost no influence there. The clear winner is going to be the Scottish National Party (SNP) and with this development, the dynamics of Westminster-based politics will change dramatically, especially for the Labour Party.
- The British public, including many traditional Labour voters, remain extremely sceptical about the final Blair / Brown years, which they blame a lot of the issues confronting society, not least being drawn into recent wars, immigration trends and the state of the economy. Many voters will switch to the SNP in Scotland and the Conservatives and/or UKIP in England.
- Large segments of the general public neither relate to nor trust either Ed Miliband or any of the current crop of Labour leaders. In this respect, I cannot help but experience a sense of déjà vu in respect to the Michael Foot / Neil Kinnock era which bodes ill for the Labour Party.

The Conservatives will profit from the above and will form the next government. This is particularly the case because the UKIP vote, though significantly understated in the opinion polls, nevertheless does not seem to be as much of a threat to the Conservatives as previously anticipated. This is as much to do with the current electoral system as UKIP's almost wilful self-destruction through incompetence combined with persistent gaffes by its candidates that undermine the message that it is neither anti-immigration nor racist. Despite it all, UKIP retains strong support in parts of England.

My other two predictions concern the issue of austerity and its implications on British society, as well as the future of Britain in the European Union.

EU Referendum: plus ça change...

Regarding the in-out EU referendum scheduled for 2017, the Conservative Party will finally have to break cover and clarify whether it belongs to the yes or no camp. If the Conservatives are able to form a majority Government, as the traditional party of business, it will ultimately side with remaining in the EU, whatever the pressures of UKIP or the antics of its noisy Eurosceptic wing. After all, the Conservative policy of offering an EU referendum in 2017 was a strategic move calculated to defang UKIP and yet placate the more rabid anti-EU Tories; it was not a decision to leave the EU per se.

Their shambolic position on the EU reflects the fact that David Cameron and other senior members of the Conservative Party, on balance, favour remaining in the EU. The political price to be paid for campaigning to remain in the EU is that this will prove to be the second and final term of office for David Cameron as the Prime Minister and possibly as an MP. The SNP, LibDems and Labour will campaign in favour of remaining in the EU. Moreover, the business sector will make its views in an increasingly vocal and forcible manner and the wider pro-EU voice will be more pronounced than has been the case hitherto. [Unlike the present time where few speak up](#), others, such as art, culture and sport personalities will do likewise as a means of counteracting what will remain, in the main, a strongly anti-EU media.

Should a coalition Government arise, the LibDems would have to perform much better than anticipated to have a chance of running the country. The other possible coalition partner to the Conservatives, despite protestations to the contrary, is UKIP. If the latter coalition government were to emerge, the political price to be paid to UKIP will be a Conservatives campaign to leave the EU and to hold the in/out referendum in 2016, rather than 2017. A combination of the Conservatives and UKIP running to leave the EU would be a disaster for Britain (as well as the remaining EU countries already battered by the travails of Greece and holding the Eurozone together), which would be very hard to counteract, especially with the majority of the British media supporting their position. Britain would come to regret the likely outcome in the medium to long-term.

Under any scenario involving a referendum, the EU will have to show flexibility and do whatever it takes in to facilitate the UK remaining in the EU. As I have previously argued, [there will not be fundamental EU treaty amendments for the sake of keeping Britain in the EU boat](#), such as a reform of the freedom of movement or the other three fundamental freedoms of movement, namely of capital, services (which is extremely underdeveloped) and goods. However, the EC and the EU will be more flexible in areas such as benefit entitlement in the EU area, which in any case is almost entirely determined by nation states, rather than EU directives and regulations.

If the referendum were to be held today, I believe the outcome would be an outright rejection of the EU. The great majority of British media is extremely anti-EU and anti-immigration and would contribute to a no vote. However, there could be up to two years for business, society and voters to reflect on the not insignificant advantages of being part of the EU, as well as the potential consequences of Britain going it alone in an increasingly globalised world. A re-orientation towards the old and new Commonwealth and North America is no longer adequate to guarantee current, let alone future prosperity. An emphasis on trade at the exclusion of everything else that the EU brings simply does not cut the mustard in the modern era, where problems such as environmental issues and tax agreements require regional or global responses, rather than national ones. Turning our back on 27 other next door neighbours around us in Europe is simply not sustainable in an economic, social, political or any other sense.

I retain great faith in the capacity of the British public to eventually do the right thing. The following

Winston Churchill quotation springs readily to mind: *“The Americans will always do the right thing... after they’ve exhausted all the alternatives.”* Substitute “Brits” for “Americans” and you get the gist of what I mean. The outcome of the EU referendum will be a narrow “yes” majority to remain in the EU. The alternative does not bear thinking about.

Austerity ad nauseam

The last prediction is that the squeeze on the public sector is set to continue for the next few years and it will further transform Britain and its welfare state, resulting in a more divided and fragmented society. There will be a repeat of the pattern set in the previous Parliament, namely a dramatic public expenditure squeeze in the first two years, followed by a gradual let-up as the term of office peters out and politicians look to be re-elected.

The Conservative Party does not deny that further cuts in the order of GBP 12 billion in social expenditure are in the pipeline, even if it is rather coy about how exactly this will be achieved. If the last Parliament was anything to go by, the brunt of the cuts will continue to be borne by the more vulnerable members of society, while corporations and the wealthy are spared.

There will continue to be a lot of talk about benefit scroungers (British and EU) to justify the cuts which will fall disproportionately on the working poor and non-working segments of British society. The austerity agenda continues to offer handy political cover for a significant reduction in the size of the state and the social and welfare infrastructure, including local government. This is set to continue, spreading more deeply to areas such as police, judiciary, military, etc. since the other options have been largely exhausted. The alternative would be to put the squeeze (e.g. means testing benefits of various sorts, higher taxes, etc.) on the middle classes, the retired and the wealthy; this will not happen if the Conservatives hope to be re-elected thereafter.

In the meantime, some of the things that Britons are most concerned about such a shelter (sufficient, affordable and good quality housing), health (NHS, access and quality) and education (primary, secondary and tertiary) will continue to experience gradual deterioration. These are simply not great priorities for the Conservatives. Their traditional supporters are capable of by-passing any current or future shortcomings in state provision and directly accessing the highest quality services that money can provide, though the phenomenon of the “squeezed middle” will ensure that political capital and financial resources will still be devoted to these fundamental themes.

Instead, the (EU and non-EU) migrants will continue to act as the lightning rod for people’s frustration with a slowly crumbling system, while those that have been running these very systems for decades or generations are largely spared the British citizens' ire. After all, if housing is unaffordable and private renting is insecure, the normal response in a modern wealthy country would be to stimulate significant additional supply and/or ensure that appropriate protections are enacted. [This will not happen](#). If there are not enough school places or hospital beds, then public investment should deliver greater supply while still maintaining standards. This is highly unlikely to happen either. Yet it is Westminster that is responsible for recognising, responding to and securing these changes over the medium term, not individual citizens looking to access these services, regardless of their nationality, race or creed.

We shall know the result of the general election soon enough. I sincerely hope that most of the above

predictions prove to be wrong, in which case I will gladly eat my hat.

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