

JONATHAN TONGE AND ANDREW GEDDES*

Conclusions: Economic Narratives and Party Leaders

The immediate aftermath of the election saw the construction of much teleological argument based on the inevitability of the Conservatives' win. Much of this assertion appeared starkly at odds with the verities of a 'neck-and-neck' race we were supposedly witnessing throughout the campaign. The failure of the vast majority of journalists, pollsters and academics to predict a Conservative overall majority was perhaps understandable.¹ Even the imported strategists assisting the Conservatives, Lynton Crosby and Jim Messina, were privately predicting the Conservatives would fall just short of a majority, believing that a 312–319 range was probable.² What was less excusable was the belief of many academics and pollsters that Labour would win more seats than the Conservatives, given the importance of economic competence and leadership in contemporary elections.³

*Jonathan Tonge, Department of Politics, University of Liverpool, j.tonge@liv.ac.uk; Andrew Geddes, Department of Politics, University of Sheffield, a.geddes@sheffield.ac.uk

¹There was the occasional notable exception. The commentator Matthew Parris, for example, declared that 'The Tories are going to win—and win well', *The Times*, 21 March 2015. Even he retreated from this bold position during the campaign, however, and by its conclusion was talking of the Conservatives only winning circa 290 seats.

²*The Times*, 'Tories knew they would win three weeks before the vote', 13 May 2015.

³The mean seat prediction of political scientists (not the two editors...) in the Political Studies Association's survey was for the Conservatives to win only 277.3, compared with 282.3 for Labour. Pollsters predicted 283.7–284.6, respectively, while journalists at least had the Conservatives as the largest party, at 285.7 to seats to Labour's 281.5. See https://twitter.com/PolStudiesAssoc/status/596599887208292352?utm_source=fb&fb_ref=Default&utm_content=596599887208292352&utm_campaign=PolStudiesAssoc&utm_medium=fb.

1. Why did the Conservatives win?

There is no need to over-complicate explanations. The Conservative election victory in 2015, the first case since 1955 of a government increasing its vote share after more than two years in office, was due to two principal factors; greater economic trust invested in the party compared with Labour and, in David Cameron, possession of a leader seen as far more Prime Ministerial than his Labour counterpart. Given that no party has ever overcome rating deficits (and they were large ones) on *both* these issues to form a government, the result ought to have been less of a surprise than the (embarrassingly off-beam) polls suggested. Many commentators did expect the Conservatives to at least be the largest party, a triumph abetted (but not created) by the SNP's demolition of Labour.

The Conservative campaign focus stuck resolutely to its core messages of 'economic competence and strong leadership'.⁴ The clue was, after all, in the title of the party manifesto: *Strong Leadership; A Clear Economic Plan; A Brighter, More Secure Future*.⁵ There was none of the vagueness of 'invitations to join the government of Britain' that lay in the hazy 'Big Society' civic responsibility appeals of 2010. The Conservatives' 2015 economic message was relatively simple, but had been effectively and endlessly repeated over the previous five years with the Liberal Democrats in chorus. 'The 'other lot' messed up the economy, 'failed to fix the roof while the sun was shining' and the Conservatives 'have fixed it for you. Let us continue the job'. Labour was required to make the argument that it was 'time for change' and failed to do so. In vainly attempting to counter the economic narrative, Labour could highlight the regularity of George Osborne's missed deficit reduction targets. The Chancellor's own forecast suggested only a modest reduction of debt (high under successive governments of different political hues, but lower than the G7 average when Labour left office in 2010) from 80 to 70% of GDP, over the next Parliament. Interest payments would remain huge. Yet, as Andrew Gamble has indicated, perceptions are often more important than reality. Many electors were indeed unconvinced that the previous Labour Government was responsible for the crash—but polls suggested that the largest single category of electors *did* blame the 'debts Labour racked up'.⁶

The leadership message was equally uncomplicated, presenting David Cameron as the only credible Prime Minister. Amid the focus on the economy and the rival

⁴<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/general-election-2015/11608589/Lynton-Crosby-the-so-called-experts-have-lost-touch-with-ordinary-people.html>, 15 May 2015.

⁵Conservative Party (2015) *Strong Leadership: A Clear Economic Plan: A Brighter, More Secure Future*, Election manifesto 2015, accessed at <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/manifesto2015/ConservativeManifesto2015.pdf>.

⁶See, for example, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2011/nov/21/gloomy-britons-blame-labour-poll>, 21 November 2011.

leaders, other Conservative policies, such as 500 more 'free schools', 30 hours of free childcare and the sale of social housing, were not discussed to anything like the extent of the economy. The same could be said of several Labour policies. While the 'mansion tax' was sometimes dissected, other offerings, such the party's own (25 hours) free childcare promise; a lowering of the voting age to 16; abolition of the 'bedroom tax' and a reduction in university tuition fees, did not perhaps receive the critical analysis they merited.

The rise of the SNP presented the Conservatives with a chance to reinforce core themes. The campaign was marked by inexorable pleas to electors to avoid the 'coalition of chaos' of a weak Labour Prime Minister reliant upon a needy, profligate SNP. No matter that the dire leftist threat posed by Sturgeon and Salmond to *Sun* readers in England was presented positively as Scotland's opportunity by the same paper north of the border. Both portrayals were of course functional for the Conservatives. David Cameron spent the final few days of the campaign attempting to convince voters that a Conservative majority was necessary and *attainable* to avoid this scenario. In bullish performances buoyed by internal polling, Cameron stressed that his party was 'just a few seats short', while steadfastly refusing to answer questions on what a majority Conservative Government might do to the welfare budget in order to satisfy the identified £12 billion of savings required from public expenditure.⁷

The Conservative targeting of Liberal Democrat seats was ruthlessly effective, whilst John Curtice has shown how well the Conservatives defended narrow majorities over Labour. In this respect, as Justin Fisher has demonstrated, the Conservatives had a considerable financial advantage in campaign expenditure. This spending was used fruitfully to mount a combination of nationally promoted messages and sophisticated local operations, including the deployment of 100 paid campaign organisers in target seats and the effective use of social media. The consequences were dramatic as the Liberal Democrats performed far worse than even most of the (already dire) forecasts had indicated.

As the contributions from Tim Bale and Paul Webb and by David Cutts and Andrew Russell have highlighted, the 'black widow effect' of the Conservatives, having lured the (acquiescent) Liberal Democrats into government, was all too apparent, as erstwhile coalition partners were largely destroyed. Guilty of naivety in entering government in 2010 without securing at least a university tuition fees freeze to justify the manifesto grandstanding, the Liberal Democrat leader largely

⁷Perhaps, the clearest example of this bullish approach was Cameron's appearance on BBC Breakfast on 2 May. He repeatedly insisted that a Conservative majority was attainable and, apart from rejecting cuts to child benefit, refused to answer any questions from the interviewer, Charlie Steyt, about where cuts would fall. On exiting the studio, Cameron confirmed the deliberateness of this strategy.

ignored his senior Commons team in negotiations with the Conservatives.⁸ Cameron needed Clegg far more than Clegg needed Cameron in 2010 and a better bargain was possible. That Clegg was subject to so little internal challenge was surprising, a botched attempted coup in 2014 soon petering out. Liberal Democrat achievements in office—much of the thrust for the raising of tax thresholds for the low-paid came from that direction—were ignored by an electorate which remembered only the broken tuition fees promise and, possibly, the folly of the Alternative Vote referendum. In 2015, the Liberal Democrats' capacity for gullibility stretched to new levels in their belief that a modest incumbency effect could halt a tidal wave.

2. Labour's failings

It is tempting to compare Labour's loss with that in the 1992 election, when the party had significant hopes of office, but lost as a consequence of a lack of economic trust in the party⁹ and an unelectable leader. As in 1992, the party led on the 'altruistic' issues, notably the NHS, but trailed on the economy—and there is a clear issue hierarchy. Ed Miliband's alleged threat, prior to the 2015 election, to 'weaponise' the NHS, was always unlikely to shape the outcome, given Labour always leads on the subject. It was also one of the few areas largely protected from expenditure cuts by the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition and, amid a brief phase of political cross-dressing, received an (uncosted) extra funding campaign pledge of £8 billion extra per year from the Conservatives.

What Labour had to do instead was 'de-weaponise' the economy as an issue, yet pleading, however objectively valid, that the recovery was not 'one for all' was not tantamount to a clear and sustainable alternative economic strategy. The third big policy issue of the election, accompanying the economy and the NHS, was immigration, but this was, as James Dennison and Matthew Goodwin have shown, infertile territory for both of the main parties, neither of whom the electorate trusted on the subject. UKIP's 3.9 million votes provide ample testimony to the salience of immigration as an issue and demonstrated contempt for the main parties in their handling of the subject. The Conservatives and Labour talked tough on immigration in full knowledge of their lack of control over EU arrivals under current law and a significant section of the electorate remained unimpressed. UKIP harmed the Conservatives and Labour, but it is credible to contend that Labour was hurt more.¹⁰

⁸See David Steel, 'Six ways Nick Clegg steered the Lib Democrats to disaster', *The Guardian*, accessed at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/11/nick-clegg-liberal-democrats-disaster-coalition>, on 12 May 2015.

⁹Sanders, D. (1993) 'Forecasting the 1992 British General Election outcome: The performance of an 'economic' model, *British Elections and Parties Yearbook*, 3,1, 110–115.

¹⁰For the most authoritative arguments on the basis of UKIP support, see the debate in *Parliamentary Affairs*, online, 17 April 2015, Evans, G. and Mellon, J. 'Working Class Votes and Conservative Losses:

As David Denver's review of the polling evidence indicates, Ed Miliband *never* appeared a wise choice of leader, trailing Cameron on 'best Prime Minister' by a very wide margin from the moment he became Labour leader and never threatening to overcome the deficit. The plea in mitigation was that the 2010 leadership contest may not have contained anyone capable of delivering a Labour victory, but that is necessarily speculative.¹¹ The prospects for Labour ought to have been brighter in 2015 than 1992, when the party struggled to overcome the legacy of its hugely unpopular set of 1980s policies. Labour had at least been popular in office for a decade from 1997; it was not inevitable that the final grim years would eclipse fonder memories of Labour in office.

Yet as Steven Fielding has charted, Miliband's Labour thrashed around, launching three-month wonder ideas: 'pre-distribution'; 'squeezed middle'; 'one nation Britain'; 'predators versus producers' and short-term retail offers, such as a freeze on energy prices. The sum of the parts was never a coherent strategy, although the party was always going to struggle once economic recovery began. Astonishingly, Miliband forgot to mention the deficit at his party's final annual conference before the election, let alone deal with the issue. Labour's 83-page election manifesto was launched with a solemn emphasis upon the need for fiscal responsibility. Yet Miliband issued a flat denial when asked, at the final television showpiece event of the campaign, the BBC's Question Time, whether the previous Labour Government had overspent. Other answers were available: either agreement that Labour was not prudent 'in some areas', or, if feeling obliged to defend the record, the obvious retort was to turn the question to ask the interrogator which Sure Start centre or NHS wards he would like to nominate for closure, given the premise of the question? The importance of Miliband's unsatisfactory response can be overstated: viewing figures were modest. Nonetheless, his responses represented another example of incoherence.

Not that having a different leader in Scotland helped Labour. Ironically, Labour had enjoyed a good 2010 election here, with a swing to Gordon Brown's party. James Mitchell has indicated that the party's choice of Jim Murphy as Scottish Labour leader allowed the SNP to outflank Labour to the left and present itself as the anti-austerity party. The SNP would stand up for Scotland against the 'Red Tories' of Labour. A different choice of Scottish leader might have helped at the margins and it was a mistake to assume that Murphy's high-visibility referendum campaign

Solving the UKIP Puzzle'; Ford, R. and Goodwin, M. J. 'Different Class? UKIP's Social Base and Political Impact: A Reply to Evans and Mellon'; 'Class, Electoral Geography and the Future of UKIP: Labour's Secret Weapon?'

¹¹For a convincing rebuttal (from a non-left-wing perspective) of the idea that David Miliband represented a 'prince across the water', see Jenni Russell in *The Times*, 'Labour mustn't fall for the myth of David', 11 June 2015.

successes would transfer into a very different form of contest. Yet, the Scottish Labour talent pool did not appear exceptionally deep. An organisational restructuring of Scottish Labour, allowing it much greater autonomy to offer a tailored Scottish message under a federal system, would have taken place much too close to the election to convince and the Scottish party would still have needed a distinctive leader.

3. Onwards to 2020

John Curtice has indicated how winning a majority in our fragmented party system is much more difficult than in previous eras. Without recapturing Scotland—and none of the (English) Labour candidates for the party leadership offered immediate ideas as to how this could be done, seemingly hoping mainly for Scots to tire of the SNP—it is difficult to envisage a Labour majority government. Yet, it is Labour's desperate position in the south of England (London excepted) and abject failure to make any gains in the Midlands in 2015 that provide its biggest problems. Even if Labour had held all its Scottish seats, the party would have won only one more seat than Neil Kinnock managed in 1992.¹²

The election aftermath provoked a measure of introspection and a considerable amount of condemnation of the campaign within Labour ranks. Much of the criticism was concentrated on the party's inability to speak to the majority, instead having focused on small disadvantaged minorities (e.g. the 2% of workers on zero-hour contracts, many of whom indicate they are not dissatisfied with the arrangement)¹³ and the lack of association with 'aspiration'. As the former Home Secretary, Alan Johnson, put it, Miliband, 'talked about the squeezed middle but the middle got squeezed out. There was a lot for the very poor and a lot about the very rich not paying their whack but what about all those people in between?'¹⁴ A better leader will broaden appeal and the reputation for economic competence might be restored. A move to the centre, nonetheless, has its own risks. The electorate might spot the existence of an avowedly fiscally responsible, low tax, aspirational, socially liberal, pro-EU, pro-Union party. It is called the Conservative Party. The current move to the Left, however, lacks electoral logic.

Even amid ideological and political incoherence, however, there are significant opportunities for Labour to exploit. Amid the introspection and the 'Must Labour lose?'¹⁵ theses common after a run of election defeats, it is worth remembering that

¹²Philip Collins (2015, 22 May), 'Labour's strategy is unfathomably stupid', *The Times*.

¹³<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-25098984>, 26 November 2013.

¹⁴*The Times* (2015, 10 June) 'Labour doomed from the start'.

¹⁵Such ideas date back many decades. See Abrams, M. and Rose, R. (1960) *Must Labour Lose?* Harmondsworth, Penguin, for perhaps the most famous example.

the Conservatives have only won one more election in the post-war era, the score standing at 10-9. Before the next contest, the referendum on EU membership may have produced significant intra-Conservative friction, which possibly might not heal by 2020. Jostling for position to replace David Cameron as leader is likely to exacerbate internal divisions. There was a significant UKIP 2015 vote from electors who were politically engaged but nonetheless disillusioned. These voters could conceivably return to Labour ranks after the EU referendum. Labour might also interest at least sufficient of that one-third of electors who abstained in 2015, in what Matt Flinders termed the 'general rejection' of politics (although that will require far more than a gimmicky visit seeking Russell Brand's blessing, as undertaken by Ed Miliband). Blaming Labour after 2015 for the economic difficulties of 2007–2010 will not be an adequate election strategy for the Conservatives in 2020, by which time the agenda may be the quality of public services, territory which helped shape the Labour victories of 1997, 2001 and 2005. Moderately regulated neo-liberalism, further cuts in services and rises in, for example, university tuition fees, could wear the patience of the electorate. In 2013, almost two-thirds of the electorate claimed not to have noticed reductions in local council services, but this figure could rise.¹⁶ In 2015, the belief that the Conservatives could be relied upon more than Labour to generate economic growth was not accompanied by much confidence over rises in living standards.

The Conservative victory in 2015 should not disguise the party's continuing structural problems. Swathes of the graduate middle-class (a growing portion of society); black and ethnic minorities and much of northern England, site of the largest public expenditure cuts in local government, eschew the party, while Scotland has been barren territory for years. For all the modernisation of the party's image and outlook under Cameron, exemplified by his social liberalism on same-sex marriage, the party's elected representatives remain overwhelmingly male and, at governmental level, usually the products of an elite private education way beyond the means of most of the electorate they represent. Distaste for Miliband's Labour cannot be conflated with deep affection for the Conservatives. Cameron was discomfited during the campaign when pressed on issues such as zero-hour contracts, food banks and the living wage.¹⁷ That the Conservatives could win an overall majority from a position where approximately two-thirds of electors felt that they 'care more about the rich than ordinary people' and 'are

¹⁶ Accessed at <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3123/Public-concerned-about-cuts-to-council-services-but-councils-arent-necessarily-to-blame.aspx>, on 30 January 2013.

¹⁷ See d'Ancona, M. 'The Trials of David Cameron', *The Guardian*, accessed at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/may/05/the-trials-of-david-cameron>, on 5 May 2015.

too close to big business and the banks¹⁸ spoke volumes of Labour's inadequacies, but also highlights a continuing need for Conservative change.

Finally, in our second election volume, entitled *Labour's Second Landslide*,¹⁹ so it really does seem a long time ago, we, as editors, used our conclusion to question the concentration upon opinion polls during the campaign, highlighting how they had consistently over-estimated Labour's vote share (even then). Opinion polling and the wider market research industry provide valuable services, data and information, but the conduct of pre-election polling does require close attention and is currently the subject of a review by the British Polling Council (BPC). The BPC review will focus mainly on methodology and ask how the techniques informing the polls could get the result so wrong. Our point is rather different and relates to the impact of opinion polling on the representation of the election and the more substantive content of debate about policy and leadership. In countries, such as France, India, Italy and Spain, there is a brief period during which opinion polls are banned.

Not all contributors to this volume will share our concerns over pre-election polling and its reporting, but, following the 2015 election, we revisit some of the issues we raised in 2001. As Stephen Ward and Dominic Wring have highlighted, much—too much, at nearly half of overall campaign broadcasting—election coverage is of the 'horserace', that is who is winning, at the expense of policy dissection. That imbalance is not the pollsters' fault, but it raises serious questions of the broadcasters. Would they broadcast any other daily 'news' item about which they were unsure of the veracity? Yet they did this nightly in respect of opinion polls which, while far from worthless (they called it right in Scotland and offered clear indications of party leads on key issues and leadership), were incorrect in terms of the 'big race'. An outright ban on opinion polls might justifiably be seen as illiberal and, in an internet age, impractical. We oppose politicians trying to control when and how survey questions are asked of electors, or determine how findings are reported.²⁰ However, the emphasis upon incorrect polls distorted the election campaign. There ought to have been an inquiry into the reporting of the polls in the 2015 campaign by the broadcasters, to match the inquiry into the seemingly flawed polling methodology undertaken by the pollsters. Ultimately, the overarching contribution of the pre-election polls was merely to make more startling a Conservative triumph, which, although far from inevitable, would otherwise have been seen as a more likely prospect.

¹⁸ Accessed at <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2012/09/03/big-parties-big-problems/>, on 3 September 2012.

¹⁹ Geddes, A. and Tonge, J. (eds) (2002) *Labour's Second Landslide: the British General Election 2001*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.

²⁰ For these reasons, we regarded the post-election bill of Lord Foulkes, attempting to ban opinion polls, as wrong. Our concern is with the coverage afforded to opinion polls.