

Political instability follows inconclusive British elections

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Britain is entering a period of profound instability in the aftermath of the May 6 general election that goes far beyond the problem of forming a minority or coalition government.

The ballot saw Labour lose votes heavily, with its share declining to 29.1 percent—a post-war low. Its seat loss would have been higher had not sections of workers in the major urban centres held their noses to cast a vote against the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. The latter had already indicated their preference for a coalition with the Tories (Conservatives).

Hostility to Prime Minister Gordon Brown, especially under conditions of the worst economic crisis since the 1930s, was not enough to ensure the Conservatives a working majority, however.

With 36.1 percent of the vote, the Conservatives made the most gains, but the 5 percent swing did not give them the 326 seats required for a majority. The increased Tory vote is largely the result of the party's ability to mobilise its traditional supporters, including those who deserted the party to New Labour in 1997.

The Liberal Democrats also failed to capitalise on alienation from Labour and the Tories. After a media campaign to proclaim that the Liberal Democrats could win the largest share of the popular vote, they instead came in third with just 23 percent and even lost seats.

National turnout was up from 61.4 percent in 2005 to 64.6 percent. Even so, this is a significant decline on the 71.4 percent turnout in 1997 when New Labour first came to power.

The result has been described as the outcome of a “none of the above” sentiment. Not only is the UK bereft of any party that can claim significant popular support, the country is more divided than ever before—along geographic lines that are ultimately rooted in social divisions.

This found distorted and only partial expression in the regionally skewed vote received by Labour and the Conservatives.

In Scotland, Labour won 41 out of 59 seats with over 42 percent of the vote. The Conservatives just managed to

retain their single seat north of the border, while the Liberal Democrat vote fell to 18.6 percent. The Scottish National Party saw a slight increase in its vote share, but lost Glasgow East to Labour.

In Wales, Labour's 32.6 percent vote was marginally higher than the national average but was still the party's lowest share since 1918. This was enough to give it a majority of 26 out of 40 Welsh seats.

In Northern Ireland, the Ulster Unionist Party was wiped out—leaving the Conservatives in the very difficult position of having to seek an agreement with the now dominant Democratic Unionist Party. Conservative leader David Cameron had earlier boasted that he would form a government with just the support of the UUP.

A key factor in these results is the overwhelming dependence of the economies in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and large parts of the north of England, on the public sector. To some effect, Labour claimed that Cameron's pledge to immediately take the axe to public spending would “endanger the recovery” and lead to mass layoffs and wage cuts. This also enabled Labour to hold off a potential challenge to its position in inner-city London.

Results for local authority elections in England indicate a similar pattern, with Labour making gains and the Tories and Liberal Democrats losing seats. The Liberal Democrats even lost control of Sheffield City Council, where party leader Nick Clegg's Hallam constituency is located.

The unexpected increase in turnout saw thousands of people prevented from voting in Newcastle, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield and parts of the capital due to the lack of staff and/or ballot papers. There were angry scenes outside polling stations and even sit-ins as police were called to tell people that had queued for hours they would not be able to cast their ballot. Legal challenges are expected.

In reality, all the official parties have concealed plans for major cuts that have been drawn up behind the scenes by civil servants. The *Independent* reported Friday that “Senior Whitehall civil servants have been working on secret options

for cuts going far beyond those disclosed by the three main party leaders before the voters went to the polls—despite a backlash from public sector workers.”

Discussions on the formation of a new government are entirely determined by the interests of the banks and major corporations. In an unprecedented move, the bond markets were opened at 1 a.m. to allow global financial concerns to register their “verdict” on the election result. Bond prices initially rose on expectations of a Tory victory, but then fell sharply.

In defiance of constitutional norms that allow for the sitting prime minister to attempt to form a government in case of a hung parliament, Cameron declared he would head a minority administration.

Speaking in the early hours of the morning, Clegg had cautioned that time should be taken to decide on the best course of action. But when the pound opened sharply down to a one-year low against the dollar just a few hours later, he made a public declaration in favour of Cameron’s “first right” to try and form a government.

Later that day, Cameron gave a speech offering to “work together” with the Liberal Democrats, hinting at a possible coalition. For his part, Brown appeared to concede this was the likely outcome, stating that he respected “completely” Clegg’s position while holding out potential negotiations should this fail.

Notwithstanding their disagreements, all three party leaders share the same overriding concern.

There is a desire to avoid having to call a second general election, as was last made necessary in 1974 when Harold Wilson’s minority Labour government, elected in February, was forced to seek a fresh mandate just eight months later.

Another, perhaps more relevant analogy has been drawn to the hung parliament of May 30, 1929, when Labour’s Ramsay MacDonald failed to gain a majority. Against the backdrop of the Wall Street crash and the start of the Great Depression it paved the way for the formation of a government of national unity in 1931.

But more is at stake than mere parliamentary arithmetic. As Brown indicated, “What all of us should be mindful of is the imperative of strong stable government and for that to be formed with the authority to tackle the challenges ahead and one that can command support in parliament. It is with this in mind that all of us should be facing the times ahead.”

The “strength” and “stability” he invokes is required in order to face off the opposition that must inevitably emerge to the savage austerity measures being demanded in ruling circles.

Such manoeuvres will resolve nothing. The present political instability is rooted in a pronounced class

polarisation that is destabilising the whole of Europe and which can only sharpen over the next period.

As Britain went to the polls, the Greek parliament met behind ranks of riot police to agree a draconian austerity package that had brought tens of thousands of protesters onto the streets.

Fears of a “Greek contagion”—even threatening the survival of the Eurozone—were a major factor in the turmoil on Wall Street Thursday that saw the Dow Jones suffer its largest ever drop.

The May 6 edition of the *Daily Mail* carried the headline: “Burning issue for Britain: With our deficit about to become worse than Greece’s, anarchy and murder erupt on the streets of Athens”. And Moody’s Investors Service warned that the banking systems of Portugal, Italy, Spain, Ireland and the UK were at risk, with British banks particularly exposed.

The Socialist Equality Party received a small vote for the two candidates it stood—Robert Skelton for Manchester Central (54 votes) and David O’Sullivan in Oxford East (116 votes). But this is not the only, or even the best measure of the political importance of the campaign the party waged.

The SEP advanced a socialist and internationalist programme based upon an analysis of the political situation, which has proved to be entirely correct.

We were the only party that did not join in the stampede behind Labour that characterised all of the petty bourgeois ex-left tendencies, such as the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition. Rather, we insisted that the crucial task was the “preparation of an independent political movement of the working class against austerity, militarism and war” through the building of a new socialist party for working people.

This stand on political principles will prove decisive, under conditions in which a major political realignment to the left within the working class in Britain and internationally must follow.



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