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Britain

General election result could trigger a governmental crisis

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There seems to be only one certainty in the British General election which will take place on May 7 - that is that Labour is going to get hammered in Scotland by the Scottish National Party (SNP). In fact they are facing possible wipeout.

According to a TNS poll published on Monday (April 27th), Scottish Labour has slumped to just 22% of the vote (from 42% in 2010) and could be left with just one MP on May 8th (Glasgow North East) with the SNP taking 57 seats. The only other non-SNP seats left in Scotland would be the Lib Dems in Orkney and Shetland.

The poll has the SNP on 54% the Tories on 13%, the Lib Dems on 6%, and the Greens and UKIP both on 2%. This means that Scottish Labour leader Jim Murphy would lose his own seat as would Douglas Alexander, the shadow foreign secretary and so would former Lib Dem cabinet minister Danny Alexander.

It might not be quite as dramatic. Other polls point to outcomes slightly less catastrophic for Labour. What is clear, however, is that the SNP is on course for a thumping victory and Labour a thumping defeat, and in their traditional political heartlands—the cradle of the party.

It is clear from this that the profound political change (and politicisation) that took place in Scotland during the referendum campaign is not only alive and well but it is still developing both in terms of anti-austerity politics and Scottish independence.

Meanwhile in many parts of the England there are local elections (at the same time as the general election) with the prospect of some remarkable and reactionary results. According to local government election experts there could be significant ‘cross-voting’ with UKIP gaining up to 400 council seats and even control of several councils—Thurrock, Basildon, Great Yarmouth and Boston are mentioned as possibilities. This would be deeply problematic situation and a big setback for the left.

The Greens are also likely to grow in local government, yet be denied their fair representation in parliament.

UK-wide the election is still too close to call. Labour and the Tories remain locked in the polls at around 33-35% each. The UKIP vote is holding up (just about) at around 13% and the SNP is surging to new heights in Scotland. The Lib Dems remain in trouble and likely to lose at least half their seats. The Greens in England and Wales are holding their vote at around 5 or 6 percent and probably hope for better given their high media profile for a change. They have, however, been instrumental in bringing the environment and climate change into an election campaign where its profile has otherwise been dire.

The fact is that neither major party has a big enough level of support any longer to ensure a majority unless they can reach beyond that base. The two-party system, that has dominated British politics since 1945, is breaking up. In the 1950s, Labour and the Tories between them could command over 90% of the vote, and could boast a combined membership of 3 million. Today they are down to around 65% of the vote and a combined membership of 350,000.

The Tory campaign has stalled and as it has done so they have thrown everything at Labour that they can lay their hands on to retrieve a few votes. They have dredged completely new levels of craven hypocrisy. First they accused Ed Miliband of stabbing his brother in the back by standing in an election against him and when that backfired they began spraying uncosted bribes around as if there was no tomorrow, and this after years of berating Labour over

uncosted promises!

They pledged to raise the inheritance tax threshold to a million pounds, to sell off housing association houses to tenants at cut-rate prices and to find new uncosted billions for the NHS that didn't previously exist.

When this failed they set about demonising the SNP and raising the spectre of a minority Labour government kept in office by a left-wing SNP determined to break up the country in the shortest possible time. If the Tories had wanted to promote the cause of independence in Scotland they could hardly have played their cards better. This no doubt helped to push the SNP further up the polls.

Just to show their total contempt for Scottish voters they went on to question the constitutional legitimacy of a minority Labour government kept in office by SNP MPs. Having won the referendum in Scotland by a narrow majority, and kept Scotland within the union, they now claim that Scottish MPs are second class MPs in Westminster with no right to influence the government.

The Tories followed this up by increasingly focusing on English nationalism in a competition with UKIP and even produced a proposed 'English constitution'. Their latest wheeze is a pledge that if they get a majority they will bring in a law to stop themselves from putting up taxes!

Despite all this the election is still Labour's to lose. They face a Tory Party that has failed in all its targets including its much-vaunted objective to abolish the deficit by the end of this Parliament. Instead the public debt is still rising by £100m a year and personal debt has reached a staggering two trillion pounds.

We have a debt-fuelled so-called recovery that benefits only the rich. The average family is set to be at least £1,600 a year worse off than they were before the start of the Parliament. The gap between rich and poor has widened. Low wages are now endemic and the standard of living continues to fall, despite government spin to the contrary. Zero hours contracts are multiplying, as is self-employment.

Young people are trapped between an impossible housing situation, poverty wages, tuition fees and precarious employment. Women have been particularly hard hit and disabled people have been brutally targeted. Labour have some good policies like ending the bedroom tax, repealing the Health and Social Care Act, and ending non dom tax status, but at the end of the day they have a cuts' agenda of their own and they are fully committed to it.

Labour has conducted a cautious and sanitised campaign in which they have not been prepared to make the radical proposals that would be required to cut through the deadlock and win them support beyond their core vote. This would mean ending austerity, relieving low pay, lifting people out of poverty, tackling the housing crisis, defending young people, abolishing tuition fees, controlling rents, re-establishing workplace rights, defending the NHS. Such a programme would stand a good chance of producing an overall Labour majority.

Miliband's main concern, however, has been to weather the Tory onslaught and not make any big mistakes that can be exploited by a hostile media the bulk of which is campaigning for the Tories. He broke from this a bit with his interview by Russell Brand but then goes back to ultra caution.

If no party wins an overall majority, which seems to be the case at the moment, Labour would no doubt be very happy to do a deal with a much-diminished Lib Dem group in Parliament fresh from keeping the Tories in office for 5 years—but it is looking highly unlikely that the Lib Dems will have enough MPs to make this a viable option.

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At the same time Labour is digging itself into a deep hole by ruling out any kind of deal with the SNP – which is likely to be the third biggest party by far. Labour's long and deep commitment to unionism, however, and their visceral hostility to Scottish independence, makes this a very difficult thing to do even if it was the only way to form a government.

Such a refusal could create a crisis for the Labour Party after the result is announced, or even an on-going governmental crisis. The reality is that in the event of neither Labour or the Tories winning an overall majority the key question will not be which of them is the biggest party in Parliament but which one can command the most votes along with their potential allies: i.e. Labour with the SNP, the Greens, Plaid, and the SDLP; or the Tories with UKIP and the DUP.

If Labour along with the SNP MPs are in a position to command a majority in parliament for a Queen's speech, what is Labour going to do? Refuse to accept the votes of the SNP and demand that the Tories form a minority government with UKIP and the DUP? As Nicola Sturgeon said yesterday, if that happens Labour will have to 'smell the coffee'.

Another aspect of the demise of the old two-party system has been the role of the smaller parties – who have had, because it was unavoidable, more exposure in this election than at any previous election.

On the left this has allowed the emergence of the anti-austerity alliance between the SNP, Plaid Cymru, and the Greens that has been a breath of fresh air in the campaign. It helped that they were three women but it would have been a factor irrespective of the gender of the leaders. Dominant in this was Nicola Sturgeon who not only made a big impact in England and Wales but strengthened her own base in Scotland in the process.

This anti-austerity position at least partly reflects some of the elements of the rise of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain which has raised the banner of anti-austerity at the European level. The lasting image from the campaign of this alliance is the embrace of the three women leaders at the end of the opposition party leaders' debate.

On the right we have seen the emergence of UKIP which has made this the most racist election campaign for a long time and ensured that the race to the bottom on immigration between UKIP and the two main parties has continued. UKIP may not get many seats but every one they get is dangerous, particularly when seen in the context of the likely gains they could make in local government – as mentioned above.

At the same time the breakup of the two-party system is opening up the situation and creating new opportunities for socialist (left of the Greens) candidates. The Left Unity election campaigns are preparing for this situation. By standing candidates, Left Unity is putting down a political marker for the future and using the campaigns for developing the party for the long term and at the same time looking for new opportunities for uniting the left in future elections.

Left Unity candidates have had some modest successes in getting across their message. In Exeter, 22 year-old Ed Potts gained 83 votes to former Labour Minister Ben Bradshaw's 37 in a straw poll after a local husting organised by the local newspaper the Exeter Express and Echo. In Ellesmere Port and Neston, Left Unity's principal speaker Felicity Dowling has made the fight to save Liverpool Women's hospital central to her election campaign, while in Vauxhall, supporters of Simon Hardy's candidacy have been deeply involved in fighting against library closures and part of the Reclaim: Brixton movement against gentrification.

It is difficult for such grass roots activism to get space in the national media, though Left Unity's manifesto launch with Ken Loach didn't do badly - but local media coverage has been better. And Left Unity will be there on May 8 and afterwards continuing to organise around these issues up and down Britain.

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One thing that has been raised to a completely new level by the breakup of the two-party system has been the problem of Britain's ultra-undemocratic first-past-the-post electoral system. The practical upshot in this election is that we now have effectively at least a six-party system, but the new parties, unless they make a spectacular break-through like the SNP in Scotland, will not end up with anything like a corresponding representation in Parliament.

This is the same for both right and left, particularly for parties standing across the bulk of the UK. UKIP is likely to get around 12 or 13% of the vote and only one or possibly two MPs. The Greens in England and Wales are likely to get around 5 or 6% and again one or possibly two MPs. Both of these parties would have substantial groups of MPs in Parliament if the votes they received was reflected in the number MPs. Even when they slumped to a few points in polls during the 1940s and 1950s, the then third party, the Liberals, were able to win upwards of ten seats.

The last thing the left wants of course is a large group of UKIP MPs in Parliament but they have to be challenged and defeated politically and not by an undemocratic electoral system.

The whole of the left needs to take up this issue seriously after the election – which will mean a serious rethink by those sections of the left that are not in favour of a proportional system. We have effectively a constitutional crisis – at least one of democratic legitimacy – in which the votes for multiple parties are not remotely reflected in the proportion of seats in parliament. The left should fight for democratic rights and a proportional parliament so that this travesty is not repeated.

The current system has in any case long been an impediment to a united left challenge in general UK wide elections – although of course this is far from the only problem of such a challenge.

As things stand there might not be a stable government emerging from this election. Based on current opinion poll evidence, most combinations of coalition parties seem unlikely to produce a stable government majority. The Fixed Term Parliament Act, passed in 2011 with the support of all the major parties, requires several votes of no confidence at least two weeks apart before parliament can be dissolved in advance of the end of its five-year term of office.

This means that any minority government would face an uncertain future, unable to get its legislation through and unable to call another general election. If no majority coalition can be formed, there is likely to be a significant governmental crisis. There could even have to be another election to resolve that crisis before the end of the year. The task of the left is to prepare for these eventualities and take every opportunity to fight back against any continuation of austerity while campaigning hard for a democratic voting system and for a more democratic constitutional settlement.