

# British general election: From a three-party to a five or six party system

Sunday 19 April 2015, by [THORNETT Alan](#) (Date first published: 30 March 2015).

The next British general election will take place on 7 May. It takes place in the context of 4 years of a coalition government between the Conservative Party and Liberal Democrats committed to severe austerity policies. But the context is also marked by the effects of the referendum campaign in Scotland in 2014 and the massive strengthening of the Scottish Nationalist Party and other pro-independence forces and a certain strengthening of the Green Party [\[1\]](#) both of which are seen at national level as being anti-austerity. There is also the rise of the rightwing anti-immigration and anti-EU party UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party). This article, written on the eve of the opening of the official five-week election campaign, considers the possible results of the election, and the stance of Socialist Resistance. [International Viewpoint]

As parliament is dissolved at midnight tonight and the official campaign is poised to be launched, Labour and the Tories remain more or less neck and neck in the polls. It's still too close to call.

All three main establishment parties are in trouble. Labour and the Tories are stuck at around 33% in the polls and the Lib Dems face wipe out, or near wipe out. Labour has had a 4 point boost in the polls as a result of the first TV debate, but that would still only make them the largest party, and there is no guarantee that this will hold up.

With the polarisation of politics that has taken place under the impact of austerity—the rise of UKIP on the one hand and the Green and SNP surge on the other— their base of support continues to decline.

The result is a breakdown of the old three-party system into a five or six party system—which makes the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system even more outrageously undemocratic. The number of voters in marginal constituencies where their votes would actually count if they voted for the party they support is minuscule. This has also opened up more space for the smaller socialist left parties to get established. Such parties are hard hit hard by FPTP, of course, though much of the left remains in denial over electoral reform.

The fact is that this is an election that Labour should have won hands down, and still could win—and win outright—if they were prepared to advance a real alternative in the shape of a radical anti-austerity programme aimed at improving the lives of the majority.

They are facing a Tory Party that has failed in all its targets including its principal, much-vaunted objective, which was to abolish the debt 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. Household debt is now 140% of income, higher than either in the Eurozone or the USA.

We have a debt-fuelled 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.

Welfare is being slashed. The NHS is in crisis.

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 are facing a Tory Party that are not only saying vote for us and we will give you more of the same misery, but that they will cut twice as deep in the next Parliament as they did in the last.

Under such conditions Labour should be way ahead in the polls and heading for a substantial majority. Instead they face the prospect of being the largest party at best and with a real danger of losing.

Unfortunately it is not difficult to see why this has come about. Instead of presenting a radical anti-austerity alternative Labour has spent the last 5 years tail-ending the Tories. Their position in the polls has been shaped more by what the Tories have done than anything Labour has done itself.

They collapsed from the outset into the Tory mantra that cuts were inevitable in order to pay off the debt and they have been trapped by this ever since.

As a result of this Ed Balls has repeatedly pledged to continue with austerity if Labour forms a Government. Labour cuts, he argues, would be slower and shallower than the Tories—but they would be cuts just the same. This handed the Tory propaganda machine (which has been vastly superior to Labour's throughout) all they wanted. Every time Labour has challenged them on anything they have been able to say: 'but you would introduce cuts as well'. They backed this up by relentless personal denigration of Miliband himself.

Nor has it been just on cuts that Labour has tail-ended the Tories. They have done so on immigration as well. They collapsed into the Tory anti-immigration agenda and competed with the Tories in a race to the xenophobic bottom.

Labour then compounded all this by self-destructing in Scotland. After standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the Tories in the referendum campaign, banging the unionist drum, they are facing near wipe out on May 7. The SNP now have 100,000 members and are heading towards up to 40 seats. Just to make matters worse Labour elected the right wing arch collaborator with the Tories during the referendum, Jim Murphy, as Labour leader in Scotland.

While there is talk among some on the left of Labour, including within some big affiliated unions such as Unite, of building an alternative after the election such talk is very isolated and lacking in credibility.

Labour also faces a challenge from the Greens. Membership and support for the Green Parties across Britain—the Green Party of England and Wales (GPEW) and the Scottish Green Party (SGP)—has surged dramatically, particularly in the past year. Membership of the GPEW has doubled in the past year and currently stands at 54,500, making it the fourth largest party in Britain—bigger than both the Lib Dems and UKIP. It has also been rising in the opinion polls, topping 10% at one point in advance of the Lib Dems. The rise of the SNP means the SGP have had less room for manoeuvre but the polls indicate that the Party will do very well in the next PR elections for the Scottish Parliament in 2016.

The Greens will also gather a lot of support that we hoped would have gone to Left Unity—people that would be its natural constituency. Although Left Unity is a new party with a very low media profile it is a far more democratic party (i.e. a far better model on which to build). It is also far more

consistently anti-cuts and anti-neoliberal and more consistent in its politics and its practice.

Not that this increased support the Greens will be reflected fairly in the general election results, of course. The Greens might out-poll the Lib Dems in total votes but only get a fraction of the seats (even though the Lib Dems will be greatly reduced). Under a democratic voting system GPEW would have had a substantial group in Parliament for some years. A particularly critical issue is to support the re-election of Caroline Lucas, who has been one of the best left MPs in this parliament.

Labour is facing all this when it has been clear from the outset that bold radical programme—aimed at 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—would ensure a Labour victory. People are crying out for such a programme.

Labour are doing some things to distinguish themselves from the Tories, of course. They are pledged to raise the minimum wage to £8.00 by 2020, to repeal the Health and Social Care Act, to raise £2.5bn for the NHS from a mansion tax, to repeal the bedroom tax, to freeze energy prices and a ban on zero hour contracts that restrict alternative employment and restore the 50% top tax rate. They also pledged to build 200,000 new houses and do something about climate change.

The problem is that this is far from a radical anti-austerity programme. Most of these proposals are half measures at best. The minimum wage would be £7.50 anyway by 2020 and £2.5bn is a fraction of what is needed to stabilise the NHS after 5 years of frozen spending under Tory rule. It is good that they have pledged to build 200,000 new houses and tackle climate change. However explanations as to how this is going to happen are largely absent. It is unclear, for example, how many of these houses will be affordable and for private sale.

Labour's policy to reduce student tuition fees to £6,000 is a step forward though it is a long way from the return to free education demanded by the left. It does, however, help Labour to relate to young people under conditions where the coalition treats them with complete contempt. Hopefully the Labour manifesto will contain a pledge to lower the voting age to 16.

Fortunately for Labour the Tories have serious problems as well. Osborne's budget on March 18, his last big chance before the election, failed to bring about any shift in the poll, in fact the polls moved marginally in Labour's favour. Lynton Crosby's conviction that the polls will break towards the Tories as the election approached, is proving as elusive as ever.

The Tory flagship strategy of scapegoating immigrants and whipping up xenophobia has run into problems with the spectacular failure of their pledge to reduce immigration to 'tens of thousands'. Instead net migration last year rose from 210,000 to 298,000—three times higher than the Tory target. Suddenly, after months of raising immigration at every opportunity in order to compete with UKIP the Tories have nothing to say on it they are trying to remove it from the agenda—not that UKIP will allow them to do so.

The Tories argue that the reason for increased migration is because growth in the economy is sucking in migrant labour. Ironically the Office of Budget Responsibility (OBR) has a very different view (in fact the opposite one) on this. They say that to the extent that there is any growth in the economy it is due to the number of immigrants that have come into the country—more than any other single factor. Certainly more than anything Osborne has done. The Tories also have a serious problem in terms of the women's vote and an even bigger problem amongst ethnic minorities. They are also polling worse in the key marginals than in the country as a whole. They are also saddled with Cameron's blunder in announcing that he would not stand for a third term—which will keep coming up and leaves him open to the charge of being a lame duck.

On top of all this there is UKIP. The UKIP vote has stalled but it has not collapsed—and could well gain more traction as the official campaign gets off the ground.

UKIP is at root a split in the centre-right, reflecting long-standing divisions in the Tory Party itself. The Tory rightwing always resented Cameron's (now abandoned) Tory Party reform agenda from gay marriage to 'green-wash' and to what they have seen as his weak and vacillating Euroscepticism.

The Tory right resented the removal of the climate denier (and arch Eurosceptic) Owen Patterson as environment secretary in the summer reshuffle. They are strongly attracted by UKIP's core racist, anti-immigration, and anti-EU message. And Cameron has no answer to this. Each time he panders to the racist agenda he is outflanked by UKIP—and Labour is no better.

UKIP's rise has been made possible by a significant shift to the right in the whole political spectrum in the last five years and also by a compliant media—which has endlessly done their bidding and has given Farage the status of a mainstream politician. UKIP has been allowed to make racism appear respectable.

How many seats UKIP will win in Parliament, however, given FPTP, is another matter. They will be lucky to get five or six. This does not mean, however, that they won't become an important player in the event of the Tories being the biggest single party but short of an overall majority. A Tory/UKIP coalition, maybe with the DUP, is the nightmare prospect of the election—and the Tories have refused to rule it out. The DUP have said they would support a Tory government for a billion pounds into the North of Ireland economy.

The other side of this—as the Tories complain about at every opportunity having fought for Scotland to stay in the union—is that the SNP are set to be a major player in the new Parliament and could well be in a strong position either to keep a minority Labour government or indeed (as Alec Salmond has indicated) destabilise or bring down a minority Tory government. The SNP has been talking in terms of a "progressive alliance" in parliament with the Greens in England and with Plaid Cymru in Wales.

A Labour government reliant for its survival on the SNP is the nightmare for the right as well as for Labour. The SNP is well to the left of Labour even though it is an establishment party. It is talking of anti-austerity and demanding an end to the Trident programme. This is a prospect that the left in Britain should relish since it would open up politics in England and create new opportunities. It might even bring into politics in England some of the radicalism and enthusiasm that was so inspiring in the referendum campaign.

As far as Socialist Resistance is concerned our most important task in the general election and the council elections in May is to support and promote Left Unity candidates, including those who are joint with the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), wherever this is possible. Given that such candidates will be limited in number at this stage, however, we will decide our voting priorities constituency by constituency.

Our aim will be to maximise the left vote, particularly around candidates who oppose the cuts, the war, privatisation and other anti-working class measures. We will therefore vote for credible socialist, left green, radical left, anti-cuts/defend the NHS particularly National Health Action Party (NHAP) candidates and for particular left Labour candidates. We will vote for credible TUSC and/or Respect candidates unless there is a better placed/politically superior left/ left green alternative candidate available. Unfortunately, the attempt by TUSC and others to stand without regard to a realistic assessment of forces on the ground means that some left candidates will lack credibility.

Where there is no opportunity to support a credible left candidate as described above, Socialist

Resistance will call for a critical vote for Labour in order to oppose the Tories and UKIP and stand with the millions of working class people wanting to stop them. In Scotland our first preference will be the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) where they are standing and in Wales we will generally vote Plaid Cymru against New Labour candidates.

A hung parliament where no party holds overall control is still a highly likely outcome. Left Unity needs to build on its currently modest efforts to support resistance against the austerity assault of whatever government or coalition emerges, and prepare for battles ahead, including the forthcoming elections in 2016 and the possibility of any further general election in the near future.

One of the reasons why Syriza in Greece was able to grow from less than 4% to over 35% of the polls in just over 5 years was because as well as building struggles on the ground it also focused on the need for a solution to the political and economic crisis at governmental level. The British left would be wise to learn from that lesson.

**Alan Thornett**, 30 March 2015

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\* "An election Labour should win hands down".

<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3979>

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## Footnotes

[1] See Socialist Resistance "[Document: The rise of the Green parties in Britain](#)", ESSF (article 34771).