

**ELECTION BRIEFING No.53
EUROPE AND THE UK GENERAL ELECTION OF 6 MAY 2010**

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Key Points:

- The centre-right Conservative Party, under David Cameron, returned to office after thirteen years of Labour government ushered in by Tony Blair's landslide victory of 1997. This was only made possible, however, by the party signing a deal with the Liberal Democrats – a party widely thought of as remarkably pro-European and on the centre-left of the political spectrum. The agreement created the UK's first peace-time coalition since 1939.
- The Conservatives 'won' the election on a swing from Labour of five percentage points but, because the electoral system continues to work against them, this was insufficient to provide them with an overall majority.
- The party to which the Conservatives turned in order to secure a majority, the Liberal Democrats, surprised many of its members and voters by agreeing to a coalition in the wake of an electoral performance that – particularly after the high hopes generated by an apparent surge in support during the campaign – was deeply disappointing: a marginal increase in vote share to 23 per cent actually netted the party five fewer seats than it started with.
- The Labour Party under its unpopular leader, Prime Minister Gordon Brown, lost over 90 seats. Its vote share declined by just over six percentage points and dropped under 30 per cent for the first time since the 1980s. The electoral system, however, meant that Labour continued to hold nearly 40 per cent of seats in the British House of Commons, the all-important lower house of parliament.
- The regionalist and nationalist parties in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland experienced little change. Radical right-wing populist parties, such as the fiercely Eurosceptic United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the far-right British National Party (BNP), increased their small share of the vote slightly but failed to win a single seat.
- The biggest breakthrough was for the Greens, who became one of the only parties of their ilk in the world to win a seat in a legislature elected using a plurality first past the post system.

- The 2010 was the first UK election to feature live, televised debates featuring the party leaders – a development that arguably dominated the campaign.
- ‘Europe’, the European Union, and one European country in particular (Greece) did feature in the campaign even if they were not seen as the most important issues by voters, journalists, and, indeed, most politicians.

British voters went to the polls on 6 May 2010 after Prime Minister Gordon Brown left it as long as he possibly could before calling a general election. Most British governments with a chance of winning tend to go to the country after four years in office. Those which look likely to lose, however, hang on for the maximum five years, hoping that something will turn up to change their fortunes or that they can at least lock in their legacy and make things more difficult for their successors. Despite the fact that polling in Britain continues to take place on a Thursday (an ordinary working day for most voters), there were high hopes that turnout in 2010 might increase: polls were predicting a close race – so close in fact that they were also pointing to a ‘hung parliament’, namely one which would fail to deliver the single party majority government that had become the post-war norm in the UK.

Those forecasts were confirmed as soon as the results came in from the country’s 650 constituencies. Turnout rose from 61.3 to 65.1 per cent, even if this was not as big an increase as some had hoped for. And the country’s plurality electoral system did, indeed, fail to deliver the overall majority to a single party that is perhaps the main justification for its continuation in the face of charges that it is inherently unfair to smaller parties. The Conservatives – steadfast in their defence of first past the post yet disadvantaged by the pro-Labour ‘bias’ that has crept into the system – were unable to achieve the double-digit lead in vote share that they required in order to win enough seats to govern alone. Not only that, but Labour and the third-placed Liberal Democrats (the party which suffers most at the hands of an electoral system that gives them under ten per cent of seats in return for nearly a quarter of the votes) were unable, even together, to form a majority administration. The solution to this dilemma – a two-party majority coalition between the Conservatives and the Lib Dems – actually emerged within less than a week. In relative terms, this was no time at all. To the British, who had not experienced such goings on since February 1974, it seemed to take forever, especially after an election campaign that seemed to have been going on for months, if not years.

Background

Britain is known around the world as a ‘Westminster’, majoritarian, and adversarial two-party system – a reputation that disguises the fact that the House of Commons contains a number of smaller regionalist and nationalist parties from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, all of which now also have devolved parliaments and assemblies. That reputation can also lead outside observers to ignore the strong showing in recent years by the ‘third’ party, the Liberal Democrats – a party formed after a merger between a social democratic party that broke away from Labour in the 1980s and the Liberal Party. The latter had governed Britain in the nineteenth and early twentieth century before the coming of class politics saw it squeezed almost out of existence by the more right-wing Conservatives, supported by big business and an increasing proportion of middle-class voters, and the more left-wing Labour Party,

financed by the trade unions with its base in the industrial working class. From that time onwards, the dominant dimension of political conflict in the UK has been left-right, with those favouring state action and redistribution at one end and those wanting freer markets and lower taxation and spending at the other, while the majority of the electorate are clearly somewhere in the middle (although leaning slightly towards the left). A second, authoritarian-libertarian dimension also exists, with the bulk of voters – on both left and right – favouring, for example, harsh penalties for crime and a restrictive approach to immigration. Research suggests that these attitudes influence people's votes, as does identification with a particular party. But it also suggests that their impact, along with that of class, is probably less important now than more contingent judgements about the competence and credibility of the alternatives on offer – judgements that are themselves affected by impressions of the parties' leaders.

Post-war politics began with a Labour government which set up the welfare state and brought many utilities and monopolies into public ownership. The boom years of the 1950s, however, were presided over by the Conservatives, who did their best to limit taxation, spending, and government regulation but also sought to avoid any return to the slow growth, unemployment, and regional disparities of the 1930s. Labour dominated the 1960s, during which it, like its Conservative predecessor, came round to the idea not only of the mixed economy but also membership of what was then known as the EEC or 'Common Market'. Membership was eventually achieved by a Conservative government under Edward Heath in the early 1970s. That government, however, soon ran into trouble on almost every other front – in particular on industrial relations and on the economy, which was plagued by both unemployment and inflation. Labour fared no better when it took over, and in 1979, after five years in which the government struggled to maintain a parliamentary majority let alone control of the country, the Conservatives were returned to power under Margaret Thatcher.

In the 1980s, the Thatcher government allowed unemployment to let rip for the first time in the post-war period. Industrial subsidies were removed and substantial public assets sold off to the private sector. Inequality exploded and growth was erratic, while inflation remained a problem. On the plus side, the economy was allowed to restructure itself and over-mighty trade unions were tamed. 'Europe' also became a divisive political issue, not only between but within the two main parties. Having campaigned to keep the UK in the EEC in the 1975 referendum and signing up to the Single European Act in 1986, Thatcher and many of her Conservative supporters became increasingly disillusioned with what became the EC and then, eventually, the EU. Their alienation was complete when, under John Major, Thatcher's successor, the national currency was first imprisoned within and then unceremoniously withdrawn from the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) that for many other member states was seen as the prelude to a single currency that most Conservatives now swore never to join – something they had been able to prevent happening as a result of opt-outs negotiated by Major at Maastricht in 1991. After seven largely unhappy years as Prime Minister, Major saw his Conservative Party swept out of Downing Street by Tony Blair's 'New Labour', which went on (although without adopting the euro) to repair relations with the EU and to preside over uninterrupted economic growth that led it to two more election victories on the trot – one in 2001 and the other in 2005.

Blair, whose reputation was badly damaged by the Iraq war, was succeeded by his finance minister (and long-term rival) Gordon Brown in 2007. For a few short months it looked as if Labour might win an early election against a Conservative Party that had barely begun its self-proclaimed journey back to the centre ground and into the twenty-first century. However, Brown's hesitancy, and some fancy footwork by the Conservatives' new young leader, David Cameron, meant that the election was never called. After that, almost everything began to go wrong for the government, especially when it came to what for so long had been Labour's trump card, the economy. Although Brown was widely credited for preventing a complete collapse of Britain's banking system, and although, the Labour government took the necessary measures to prevent recession turning into a depression, many voters had clearly made up their mind that it was time for a change. Polling clearly indicated, however, that the electorate was not as ready as it might have been to see the Conservatives take over. In spite of David Cameron's attempts to 'decontaminate' the party's 'brand', many working and lower middle class people, as well as professionals working in the public sector, retained a residual suspicion that ultimately 'the Tories' were keen to cut state services simply in order to reduce taxes for the few rather than the many. These fears were only reinforced when the Conservatives – possibly made complacent by the poll lead they had built up by 2009 and clearly keen to try to prepare the public for the tough decisions they intended to take once elected – began to talk about 'an age of austerity'. Meanwhile both government and opposition were damaged by a long-running scandal over MPs' expenses. Widespread anger over parliamentarians apparently lining their pockets with public money, plus a combination of disillusion with Labour and distrust of the Conservatives, not only set the scene for the campaign to come but helped determine its result.

Although the global slowdown was important, the run-up to the election wasn't, however, simply about 'the economy, stupid'. Other issues also preoccupied the British people, most notably, perhaps, immigration. Despite its tough rhetoric, it was obvious that the Labour government had allowed large numbers of foreign workers into Britain to meet the demand for labour occasioned by a burgeoning economy that might otherwise have produced high inflation. For most of the post-war period the immigration issue was bound up with race – unsurprisingly, since the most visible immigrants into the country were from the UK's former colonies in South Asia and the West Indies. The terrorist attacks of 2001 in New York and Washington, 2004 in Madrid, and 2005 in London, meant that those immigrant communities dominated by Muslims continued to be subject to discrimination and disquiet. However, after a number of states from Eastern and Central Europe joined the EU in 2004, anxiety began to be voiced, too, about other groups coming in, irrespective of their race, creed or colour. Polish nationals, the biggest single group to arrive in the wake of the British government's decision not to join other member states in imposing labour market restrictions on the accession countries, were probably at the sharp end of most of the criticism. They, and other Central and Eastern Europeans, seemed to be damned whatever they did. If they worked (which the vast majority of them did) they were accused of 'stealing jobs'. If they didn't – and, indeed sometimes when they did – they were supposedly 'benefit tourists'. They were also widely blamed for extra pressure on public services, notably health (apparently crowding out doctors' surgeries), education (supposedly slowing down every one else's education because

their children couldn't speak English), and housing (allegedly jumping queues for local authority provision or causing rents to rise).¹

These concerns almost certainly fed into the domestic debate, such as it was, over the EU Constitutional and Lisbon Treaties. The Conservative Party opposed both and campaigned for referendums on them. The Labour government argued, rather disingenuously perhaps, that the defeat of the former at the hands of Dutch and the French voters meant that they were no longer obliged to hold the referendum they had promised on it. They ratified the latter in parliament only – a decision which outraged not only the Conservatives but the largely Eurosceptic (and by now Conservative-supporting) press. In the end, however, David Cameron decided against promising to hold a referendum even after the Treaty, having been ratified by all the member states, had come into force. Although this caused considerable disquiet within his own ranks, it was generally recognised as realistic, and was anyway counterbalanced by promises that a Cameron-led government would make sure nothing like that could ever happen again. This would be done by passing legislation to ensure (as in Ireland) that any proposed passage of power to 'Brussels' would automatically trigger a nation-wide referendum. Meanwhile, a Conservative government would aim to try to 'repatriate' powers ceded to the EU, particularly in the area of employment. There was also talk of a 'Sovereignty Bill' which would apparently assert the right of parliament ultimately to override European law. At the same time, the Conservatives also looked forward to passing a 'British Bill of Rights' which would apparently limit the apparently incessant interference in ordinary people's lives of the European Convention on Human Rights, entrenched in domestic law by the Labour government. The ECHR, of course, has nothing to do with the EU, although whether most British voters would have known that is highly doubtful.

By the same token, only the most interested observers of politics and European matters in the UK paid much attention to another potentially significant development in the long run-up to the election, namely David Cameron finally honouring his pledge (made during his leadership campaign in 2005) to pull Conservative MEPs out of the European People Party-European Democrats (EPP-ED) group in the European Parliament. Following the EP elections of 2009, they formed a new group, called the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), along with, among others, the Czech Civic Democrats (ODS) and Poland's Law and Justice (PiS). This earned Cameron some much-needed credit with zealous anti-Europeans who were beginning to doubt his *bona fides*, although, given how thoroughlygoingly Eurosceptic the British Conservative Party has now become, it is difficult to imagine how any Conservative leader – at least in opposition – would dare to risk the accusation that he had somehow 'gone soft' on Brussels. That said, Cameron's decision attracted a considerable amount of criticism outside his own party. This was both practical (it would diminish Conservative Party influence in the EP) and political, with Labour

¹ During the election campaign itself, one columnist, after warning readers that all three main parties supported the accession of Turkey and were therefore effectively signing up to millions more immigrants coming to the UK, added the following PS to her article: 'Last week I wrote that the arrival of the Poles was a boon. My cousin said sourly: "You don't have to live next to them." The young Poles next door had kept her up until five that morning, partying. Meanwhile, Polish families down the road from my mother have turned two respectable gardens into something like a travellers' encampment. Right, can I qualify my comments? Some Poles, in the right place and the right circumstances, can be an asset. OK?' Melanie McDonagh, 'Notebook', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 April 2010.

and the Liberal Democrats lining up to accuse the Tory leader of aligning himself with assorted homophobes, antisemites, and climate-change deniers – a charge which further investigation suggests is, at the very least, wide of the mark.²

The Campaign

The 2009 electoral campaign was historic. It began fairly predictably, with Labour insisting that the Conservatives could not be trusted with the economy and public services, and the Conservatives insisting that they could but that Labour was not proposing sufficiently strong action on Britain's ballooning budget deficit – something they promised to provide by ending unpopular projects and rooting out waste. The Conservatives probably had the best of these early exchanges, with a slick manifesto launch and a widely-approved attack on Labour's plans to raise national insurance contributions – a plan labelled as a 'tax on jobs' by compliant businessmen and journalists. But then the campaign was totally transformed. This was the first election during which the leaders of the main parties had agreed to debate with each other live on television. Three debates – each a week apart – were held between David Cameron, Gordon Brown and Nick Clegg. The first of them was clearly 'won' by the Liberal Democrat leader, who was able to capitalise on antagonism towards the two 'old parties' and present his party (which had been less obviously tainted by the expenses scandal) as a fresh alternative that many voters suddenly appeared to find awfully attractive. Clegg's performance led to a surge in support for his party that saw it, in some polls, exceed 30 per cent and push Labour back into third place. Just as importantly, it diluted the Conservatives' claim to be the only option for the many voters who wanted 'change'. It also meant that the days between the debates were filled not so much with the familiar exchanges on policies but with speculation on how each of the leaders had done in the previous one and what they were going to do in the next 'head-to-head'. Paradoxically, then, the debates energised the campaign but at the same time sucked the oxygen out of it.

Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg performed reasonably well in debates two and three, although he never quite recaptured the magic and the novelty-value of his first outing. David Cameron, it was generally acknowledged, got the hang of things by the second debate and outperformed both his rivals in the third. Gordon Brown was, by common consent, the loser across all three. He was clearly uncomfortable and clearly tired. He also had to use his opening address in the final debate to apologise for an incident during which he had called a former Labour supporter who had the temerity to bring up the immigration issue during a constituency visit a 'bigoted woman' – a remark caught on a media microphone that Mr Brown had forgotten to remove from his jacket as he got into his car after the encounter. 'Bigotgate' (as it was inevitably dubbed) provided a heaven-sent opportunity for the Conservatives, putting immigration and asylum – an issue on which they were far more trusted than Labour – at the top of the news agenda without them having to court accusations that they themselves were bringing it up and thereby 'playing the race card'.

² Tim Bale, Seán Hanley, and Aleks Szczerbiak, "'May Contain Nuts'? The reality behind the rhetoric surrounding the British Conservatives' new group in the European Parliament', *Political Quarterly*, 81 (1), 2010, pp. 85-99.

Few other issues beyond the economy, the deficit, and immigration got much attention. Beyond the Conservative and Lib Dem promise not to go ahead with the third runway at Heathrow, there was little talk of the environment, suggesting that the Greens' eventual breakthrough in the Brighton Pavilion constituency had more to do with local factors and its highly capable candidate, Caroline Lucas, the party leader and a (relatively!) high-profile MEP. Education got some airtime because of the Conservatives' promise to emulate Sweden's 'free schools', but health hardly featured – largely because the Conservatives had promised not to cut spending on the ever-popular NHS (National Health Service). 'Europe', however, did actually play some part in the campaign.

Just before the campaign proper kicked off, William Hague, the party's former leader and its foreign affairs spokesman, reminded the press that it would, once in government, oppose plans for a European Public Prosecutor able to issue European arrest warrants without asking permission from the government or the UK's Director of Public Prosecutions. And it would immediately scrap any residual government preparations – assuming there were any still going on – for entering the euro. More importantly, he also made it clear that a Conservative government would not only proceed with plans for a 'referendum lock' on the passage of further powers to Brussels but would resist any extension of QMV (qualified majority voting). On the other hand, just after the campaign opened, Hague also made it clear that the Conservatives were not seeking an early confrontation with the EU – words which did not, however, reassure either Labour or the Lib Dems, whose foreign affairs spokesman, suggested that the Conservatives (over a third of whose candidates in their top target seats, surveys revealed, wanted 'a fundamental renegotiation' of Britain's membership) were 'potentially quite a threat to this country'.³ The minority of newspapers which were hostile to the Conservatives also continued to remind their readers of the supposedly unsavoury attitudes of their partners in the EP and revelled in the bold prediction by Antonio López-Istúriz, Secretary General of the EPP, that the Conservatives would eventually have to rejoin their old parliamentary group once they realised how isolated they were outside it.⁴

The same papers also noted that the line between the Conservatives and UKIP was a blurred one, notwithstanding the fact that David Cameron had once famously referred to the latter as a bunch of 'fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists' and the fact that one of UKIP's election posters featured a picture of Mr Cameron, alongside Messrs Brown and Clegg, with the populist tag-line 'Sod the Lot'.⁵ UKIP, incidentally, fielded well over 550 candidates, although its leader, Lord Pearson of Rannoch, tried to ensure none stood against six particularly Eurosceptic Conservatives – Philip Davies (Shipley), Douglas Carswell (Clacton), Philip Hollobone (Kettering), Janice Small (Batley and Spen), Alex Story (Wakefield) and the marvellously named Mark Reckless (Rochester and Stroud). On the other hand, Pearson's party did not limit

³ Quoted in Timothy Garton Ash, 'The Tories hope to muzzle election talk of Europe. But it won't go away', *Guardian*, 8 April 2010.

⁴ Toby Helm, 'Conservatives ignored secret report on extremist Polish allies', *Observer*, 11 April 2010 and Vanessa Mock and John Lichfield, 'Cameron victory 'will marginalise Britain in Europe'', *Independent*, 13 April 2010.

⁵ Toby Helm, 'Conservatives ignored secret report on extremist Polish allies', and Jamie Doward, 'Publicity-shy Conservative donor revealed as paymaster of anti-European activists', *Observer*, 11 April 2010.

itself to Europe, promising ‘an end to uncontrolled mass immigration’, a ban on the burqa in public buildings, a Royal Commission that would ‘allow scientists to reach a conclusion about the facts and economic implications of global warming’, and the introduction of a flat tax that would apparently forestall the need for spending cuts and allow a doubling of prison places and a massive increase in defence spending.

Europe did feature in the leader’s debates, especially in the second, which was primarily devoted to ‘foreign affairs’, suggesting once again that the British still haven’t quite realised that EU membership means that matters European can no longer be so easily separated from domestic concerns. In the days running up to the debate, Cameron, speaking ‘on the campaign trail’ – from his ‘battlebus’, no less – reassured Eurosceptic voters by claiming he would ‘take on the other leaders because when it comes to Europe there’s a cosy Lib-Lab consensus saying: “Let’s say yes to everything that comes out of Brussels.”’ He went on to say that ‘We do not want to join the euro. We want to keep the pound as our currency. What the British people want is Britain in Europe but not run by Europe. They do not want a state called Europe.’ Meanwhile, his foreign affairs spokesman, William Hague led the charge against Nick Clegg (who, the Conservative-supporting press never tired of reminding readers, was a former EU official and MEP), suggesting that he was ready to ‘sign up for anything that has ever been on offer or proposed from the European Union.’ Clegg responded by reminding people that the Lib Dems were the only party happy to hold a referendum on whether the UK should stay in or withdraw from the EU and asked rhetorically ‘Do we really think that we can pull up the drawbridge, and ranting and raving at Europe from the sidelines is really going to help us be stronger or safer? The weather doesn’t stop at the cliffs of Dover....I think we are stronger together and weaker apart.’

Speaking a day before the second debate, which was held on 22 April, Cameron rowed back slightly and insisted, not for the first time, that ‘We don’t want to have some immediate Euro bust-up’, while at the same time announcing that he would be sending a senior (gay) frontbencher, Nick Herbert, to attend a gay rights march in Warsaw in July, primarily in response to media concerns about the Conservatives’ partners in the ECR. ‘Our point is that it is good to have a new group that is against a federal Europe, that wants free trade, co-operation and progress in Europe’, he noted. ‘And yes’, he continued, ‘some countries, particularly some of the Catholic countries, do have very conservative social views. They are on a journey in respect of that and it is a journey we can help them with.’ This possibly patronising formulation did not, however, prevent Clegg from suggesting, in the debate itself, that Cameron had ‘joined a bunch of nutters, anti-Semites, people who deny climate change exists, homophobes.’

In the debate Cameron was perfectly happy to showcase a stance that he knew resonated with the views of the majority of voters, claiming ‘We are part of Europe, we want to co-operate and work with our allies in Europe to get things done. But we have let too many powers go from Westminster to Brussels, we have passed too much power over and we should take some back.’ He even repeated (once again) the formulation first developed back when Hague had been leader, namely that the Conservatives wanted the UK to ‘be in Europe, not run by Europe’. ‘What you are hearing from the other two’, he claimed, ‘is don’t trust the people, don’t ask them when you pass powers from Westminster to Brussels, just give in to everything that

comes out of Brussels and don't stand up for your country.' And beyond the generalities, he noted, 'I don't want us to join the euro, I want us to keep the pound as our currency. I don't want us to give up the British rebate, I want to make sure that we get value for money. I want to cut some of the bureaucracy, some of the rules, some of the regulations that I think drive business so mad. To those that say somehow this would be isolation, I say nonsense.' Brown, characteristically, was even more specific, trying, like most Labour politicians to make the pragmatic rather than the idealist case, for the country's EU membership:

There are three million reasons why we need to be part of the European Union and they are called jobs. Three million jobs depend on our membership of the European Union, half our trade is with the European Union, 750,000 businesses trade with Europe. The idea that we should again be isolated, on the margins and not in the mainstream of Europe, would be a terrible mistake.

Europe also featured briefly in the third televised debate, which was held as the scale of the economic and financial crisis in Greece was becoming ever more apparent – a development seized on by the Conservatives both as a reason for tackling the deficit early and as a stick with which to beat the Lib Dems. 'People', Cameron noted, need to know that the Liberal Democrats in their manifesto are still in favour of joining the euro. If we were in the euro now, your taxes and your National Insurance wouldn't be going to schools and hospitals and police officers, they would be going to bail out Greece.'

The Greek meltdown also provided the Conservatives with yet more ammunition for their concerted campaign in the final week to alarm voters about the consequences of a 'hung parliament'. Such a result, Cameron suggested (neglecting to mention of course that Greece is one of the few European countries outside the UK in which single party majority government is the norm) would produce weak and divided government at a time when, 'we need to get on and take decisions, not haggle and bicker' – a message reinforced by one of the Conservatives' more hysterical supporters in the media, which on polling day itself used its editorial to note that Greece's 'corrupt government – are British voters listening? – is the result of Proportional Representation.'⁶

The Results

Those British voters woke up on 7 May to discover that, just as PR can (as in Greece) produce single party majority government, first past the post is capable of producing a result that makes it impossible. As Table 1 shows, Labour, which never once looked likely to recover, had indeed lost significant support, although the consequences were to some extent mitigated by an electoral system which continues to operate in its favour. The reverse logic meant that the Conservatives – as expected – came close, but not close enough. Although they performed strongly in England overall, many

⁶ 'Vote to save us from the fate of Greece', *Daily Mail*, 6 May 2010. At least the choice of country made for a change. Previously when looking abroad for cases that might scare readers off PR, the Mail had, like most journalists, turned to a more familiar example, asking 'Do we want the constant turmoil which afflicts EU countries such as Italy which -- thanks to the PR voting system held so dear by Mr Clegg -- remains in a near-permanent state of upheaval, with corruption rife, and immoral chancers like Silvio Berlusconi in charge?'. See, 'It's time for voters to wake up and get real', *Daily Mail*, 21 April, 2010.

urban areas, especially in the north, remained in Labour's hands, while the progress the party made in Wales was not matched in Scotland, which once again returned only one Tory MP. But if the Conservatives were disappointed, so too were the Liberal Democrats: their campaign surge had turned into a soufflé which, after looking pretty impressive for a while, proceeded to collapse just before polling day. This was probably due partly to a late swing back to Labour and the Conservatives on the part of voters who had temporarily been caught up in the media hype but then taken fright at some of the policies the party was advocating – not least an amnesty for illegal immigrants. But it may also have reflected the Liberal Democrats increased popularity was always most evident among young voters who, as research shows, are less likely than their elders to actually go out and cast a ballot.

Table 1: The May 2010 election results in the UK (turnout 65.1%)

Party	Seats fought	Seats won	Net change	% seats	% votes	Votes	% change
Conservative	631	306	+97	47.1	36.1	10,703,754	+3.7
Labour	631	258	-91	39.7	29.0	8,609,527	-6.2
Liberal Democrat	631	57	-5	8.8	23.0	6,836,824	+1.0
Democratic Unionist (NI)	16	8	-1	1.2	0.6	168,216	-0.3
Scottish Nationalist	59	6	0	0.9	1.7	491,386	+0.1
Sinn Féin (NI)	17	5	0	0.8	0.6	171,942	-0.1
Plaid Cymru (Wales)	40	3	+1	0.5	0.6	165,394	-0.1
SDLP (NI)	18	3	0	0.5	0.4	110,970	-0.1
Green	310	1	+1	0.2	1.0	285,616	-0.1
Alliance (NI)	18	1	+1	0.2	0.1	42,762	0.0
Commons Speaker*	1	1	0	0.2	0.1	22,860	0.0
Ind. candidate (NI)	1	1	+1	0.2	0.1	21,181	n/a
UKIP	572	0	0	0	3.1	920,334	+0.9
BNP	338	0	0	0	1.9	563,743	+1.2

*The Commons speaker is a Conservative but, as per tradition, neither of the other two main parties contested his seat, nor does he vote with his party in parliament.

Source: adapted from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/election2010/results/> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Kingdom_general_election,_2010.

The resulting parliamentary arithmetic left what many assumed was the more likely coalition – one between Labour and the Liberal Democrats – unable to command more than half the seats in the House of Commons, meaning that, if it did form, it would have to turn to smaller parties for support. There was, too, the question of the Prime Minister: if there was one clear signal emerging from the election (and the

opinion polls) it was that voters wanted Gordon Brown out of Downing Street. Without that happening – and it was not initially clear that it would – the Liberal Democrats were understandably unenthusiastic about a deal with Labour that, while it might guarantee them a limited measure of electoral reform, did not look like delivering the strong, stable government the country was supposedly crying out for. Moreover, and to an extent not really appreciated by many seasoned observers, there were a number of key players within the Lib Dem leadership (including Nick Clegg himself) who were clearly intent on repositioning the party some way to the right of where the average party member (and many of the party's voters) stood. As a result, it quickly became apparent that Clegg's insistence that it would be best to begin negotiations with the Conservatives derived from more than simply the sense that they should be given first refusal as the biggest party. When those negotiations appeared to run into trouble, and parallel talks began with Labour, it became transparently obvious that the latter were little more than a) an attempt to show the public that the Lib Dems really were considering all of the options and b) a way of getting the Conservatives to commit to a referendum on the replacing the current voting system with the (non-proportional) Alternative Vote system – something they did then concede. Within a day or two Brown had resigned, Cameron had moved into Downing Street and a coalition agreement had been signed between the Conservative leader and Clegg, the new Deputy Prime Minister

Future Prospects

Labour announced soon after the election that it would be holding a leadership contest, the result of which would not be known until the early autumn. The eventual winner looked likely to have to wait quite some time before getting the chance to lead his party into another election: 'the new coalition – 'ConDem' or 'LibCon', as its opponents like to call it – is apparently built to last a full five year term. Whether it can do so, however, is very much a moot point, notwithstanding plans to make it essentially impossible to dissolve parliament before the end of its term without the support of 55 per cent of all MPs. Not only will the Liberal Democrats, after years of defending public services, have to acquiesce in huge cuts in state spending, they may also have to swallow a stance on Europe that some (though not all) of them may find sticks in their throat. Like most of the coalition agreement – and the fact that the Liberal Democrats were awarded not a single one of the most important ministerial jobs – the document's words on Europe reflect the fact that the party has in the main had to accommodate Conservative preferences rather than the other way around. For the record, the section entitled 'Relations with the EU' reads as follows:

We agree that the British Government will be a positive participant in the European Union, playing a strong and positive role with our partners, with the goal of ensuring that all the nations of Europe are equipped to face the challenges of the 21st century: global competitiveness, global warming and global poverty.

We agree that there should be no further transfer of sovereignty or powers over the course of the next Parliament. We will examine the balance of the EU's existing competences and will, in particular, work to limit the application of the Working Time Directive in the United Kingdom.

We agree that we will amend the 1972 European Communities Act so that any proposed future Treaty that transferred areas of power, or competences, would be subject to a

referendum on that Treaty – a ‘referendum lock’. We will amend the 1972 European Communities Act so that the use of any passerelle would require primary legislation.

We will examine the case for a United Kingdom Sovereignty Bill to make it clear that ultimate authority remains with Parliament.

We agree that Britain will not join or prepare to join the Euro in this Parliament.

We agree that we will strongly defend the UK’s national interests in the forthcoming EU budget negotiations and that the EU budget should only focus on those areas where the EU can add value.

We agree that we will press for the European Parliament only to have one seat, in Brussels.

We agree that we will approach forthcoming legislation in the area of criminal justice on a case by case basis, with a view to maximising our country’s security, protecting Britain’s civil liberties and preserving the integrity of our criminal justice system. Britain will not participate in the establishment of any European Public Prosecutor.

Before the election, a number of respected commentators pointed to the concern about a Cameron government being expressed both publicly and privately by European governments, many of them ostensibly on the same side of the political fence as the Conservatives.⁷ Not everyone, of course, is quite so pessimistic. Speaking to a British journalist during the election campaign, Nicole Ameline, a French MP representing Nicolas Sarkozy’s UMP party and co-president of the Anglo-French parliamentary friendship association, proclaimed her ‘confidence in British pragmatism’. ‘I dare to hope’, she said, ‘that, once in power, a Conservative government would recognise the seriousness of the present economic crisis and would accept the need for creative and cooperative responses at European level.’⁸ Those who hope to avoid a repeat of the arguments with Europe that occurred last time the Conservatives were elected to office must ‘dare to hope’ that she is right.

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⁷ See, for example, ‘Not playing their games’, *Economist*, 3 April 2010.

⁸ John Lichfield, ‘Fear of Tory win spooks Europe’, *Independent*, 16 April, 2010.