

Britain's tipping-point election

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In the aftermath of the British general election of 5 May 2005, something quite unexpected is happening. Everyone knows that Tony Blair's "New" Labour Party won. But it's becoming clearer that something else won too – not a set of candidates or policy ideas, but something arguably more significant than anything people directly voted for. Beneath the familiar showtime of Westminster politics, a tipping-point [1] may have been reached. And if that's the case, everything will soon be changed.

Also on Britain's 2005 election in openDemocracy – the campaign and the consequences – articles [1] by Naima Bouteldja, Tom Burgis, Dominic Hilton, John Humphreys and Dan Plesch.

Plus: Anthony Barnett's blog [2] and Tom Nairn's incisive argument about language and politics, "Don't vote for Bullshit [2]"

There has been a deep shift of attitude within the British electorate. Commentators recognise it, but most dismiss it as a transient mood or fashion. Now, however, stronger evidence for its seriousness is emerging — and indeed, showing itself inside the victorious party itself. Far from revelling in complacency, a growing number of New Labour representatives and party workers are joining frustrated voters and the less party-biased commentators in a troubled surmise. Just how and why *did* they win on 5 May? Can such a farce ever be repeated? For sound reasons, people are worried about whether such a system can continue at all without serious reforms.

Tony Blair's party won [3] a solid, 63-seat majority in a House of Commons of 646 members, on the basis of 35.3% of the votes cast on a turnout of 61.3% – little over 20% of the registered British electorate. New Labour was delivered five more years of near-absolute power by an even smaller percentage of votes than at the previous election in 2001. If this trend continues, 2009 or 2010 could witness a third triumph of what has become the dominant force in British politics, the non-voting party (39.7% in this election), and a government resting upon less than a fifth of the public's support.

Moreover – and this is what really worries the more alert Blairites, and those older disciples of the ideology who recall what happened to Margaret Thatcher [4]'s Conservative régime after eighteen years in office – that government will not necessarily be New Labour. On 1 May 1997 [5], a resentful public unceremoniously cast what had been the dominant governing party for over a century – Britain's era of global hegemony – into the dustbin of history. 5 May 2005 showed that (even with help from Australian political strategist guru Lynton Crosby [6]) the Conservatives still haven't climbed out of it. But ... could a similar fate await New Labour in turn? Whether or not Tony Blair follows Thatcher, in the sense of being personally dumped by his party, couldn't the New Labour tendency itself fall victim to another such tide of popular nausea and rejection?

It is this dread that's turning responsible establishment chaps to thoughts of fairness and proportional representation (PR), and even to an elected senate replacing the House of Dead Lordship. Their last such flirtation, in the mid-1990s, came at a time when they still feared permanent marginalisation. New Labour briefly [7] took out insurance with the reformers: even PR seemed better than oblivion. Then they won big in 1997, and it all went from the backburner to the icebox. Now, it's being quietly brought out again, just in case ...

There are cold reasons of political logic. The party that made the most significant progress on 5 May was the one which had made constitutional reform its main priority, Charles Kennedy's Liberal Democrats [8]. They gained 62 seats, eleven more than in 2001, with 22.1% of votes (as Kennedy bitterly remarked, one of the minor miracles of first-past-the-post voting is that it took 96,378 votes to elect a LibDem MP, and merely 26,877 to instal a Labourite).

Even more important, the devolved Welsh and Scottish parliaments created since 1998 have used PR, and coalition governments of New Labour and Lib Dems have been working quite well there. Fairness there did not prove fatal; Scots and Welsh voters are not hankering for the good old days. More astonishing still, in Scotland the fair-share system is about to be extended to local and regional government as well, so that by 2007 the entire northern electoral system will be far more democratic than the southern one.

It can happen here

All this reflects the altered context around United Kingdom state politics. The Iraq war also played its part in the change. Popular anti-war feeling and fear of the continuing consequences were bound to feed the non-voting party, amplified by doubts about such blatant subjection to United States power. Then, four weeks after the May vote, European events administered another electric shock. The British political class saw the electorates of France and the Netherlands in outright rebellion against their political élites. The message it transmitted could no longer be: "Thank God *we're* so different". Yes, it *could* happen here – as Blair immediately acknowledged, by abandoning his own plans for a British referendum, in an attempt to shore up the dyke against the incoming tide.

He may be too late. The election showed that a deep-level shift [9] is already well underway. Scotland's leading political correspondent, Iain Macwhirter [10] of the (Glasgow) *Sunday Herald*, wrote on 8 May:

"This was the most grotesquely unfair election in British history. Labour won a lower share of the vote than any government in history ... How long can we continue with this profoundly undemocratic system? It is assumed that Labour will reject calls for reform because it has won another clear majority. But that may not be so certain ..."

Macwhirter has been proved right. In the weeks after the election, a vigorous campaign has sprung up for electoral and (more broadly) constitutional reform. This movement [11] is championed and led by the *Independent* newspaper, the long-established reform group Charter 88, and the Electoral Reform Society, in association with the Liberal Democrats, the Green Party and the nationalist parties in Wales and Scotland. It has already forced the formation of a new all-party group to discuss reform of the House of Commons itself. Labour MP Austin Mitchell [12] comments that:

"electoral reform has come back from the dead with this election ... I think the whole issue will revive. Each party has its own electoral reform group and we're looking for a consensus."

Britain's early-modern version of democracy has lasted since 1688. It is, surely, one of globalisation [12]'s lesser surprises that big changes are overdue. If the new course proceeds past the 2005 tipping-point, one thing – it's banal to point out – is certain to lead to another. No British politician can hope to reform just one part of such a creaking palace; each opened door will shed light on neglected areas in need of air, modernisation, or demolition.

Reform, taken seriously, is bound to acquire its own logic and impetus – and this is unlikely to cease until some new overall constitution is in place. An extensive survey of public opinion by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust in 2004 showed in its review [13] of *The State of British Democracy* that (contrary to received wisdom) *more than 80%* of people were either mildly or quite strongly in favour of a written constitution spelling out both citizens' rights and the limits of the powerful.

It will impact there

Such a development would reverberate far beyond Britain itself. It would transform relations with the rest of the European Union, and have a profound impact on Australia. It is no longer inconceivable that, for the first time since the founding of the 1901 Australian Commonwealth, democratic reforms of the "homeland" may outpace those of its "offspring".

The Australian system has always prided itself on representing what was worthwhile from Old Albion, but with democratic improvements. If a New Albion shows up, more modern and democratic than the "federation rules [14]" of the late 19th century, it would frontally challenge the position of Australian loyalists like John Howard [15], reliant as they are upon doses of comfort from the monarchy and other unchanging symbols of origin.

How long might this all take? Well, I'd guess two more London elections and three Canberra ones — around ten years. But with globalisation at its present pace, it may come even sooner.

Further Links:

Tom Nairn

<http://www.tom-nairn.com/> [16]

Democratic Audit

<http://www.democraticaudit.com/index.php> [17]

Campaign for Democracy

<http://news.independent.co.uk/uk/politics/> [18]

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-ukelection/point_2631.jsp

Links:

[1] <http://www.gladwell.com/tippingpoint/index.html> target=_blank

[2] http://opendemocracy.typepad.com/wsf/blairs_bust_uk_election/index.html target=_blank

[3] <http://www.electionworld.org/unitedkingdom.htm> target=_blank

[4] <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page126.asp> target=_blank

[5] <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page4.asp> target=_blank

[6] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4000439.stm target=_blank

- [7] <http://www.pearsoned.co.uk/Bookshop/detail.asp?item=100000000014216> target=_blank
- [8] <http://www.libdems.org.uk/campaigns/campaign.html?id=6595&navPage=campaigns.html> target=_blank
- [9] http://www.granta.com/shop/product?usca_p=t&product_id=298 target=_blank
- [10] <http://www.sundayherald.com/49600> target=_blank
- [11] <http://news.independent.co.uk/uk/politics/story.jsp?story=637826> target=_blank
- [12] http://news.independent.co.uk/low_res/story.jsp?story=643683&host=3&dir=62 target=_blank
- [13] <http://www.jrrt.org.uk/SoNSummary.pdf> target=_blank
- [14] http://www.dfat.gov.au/facts/cent_fed.html target=_blank
- [15] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Howard target=_blank
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