Conclusion: An Election that Satisfied Few and Solved Little

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Rarely can a partial election victory have felt so akin to a defeat for a party. As the Conservatives scrambled in the aftermath to clinch an expensive deal with their only friends at Westminster, the Democratic Unionist Party, they ruefully reflected on how their majority had been mislaid. A Prime Minister who had called an unnecessary election had witnessed her party's apparently unassailable position at the outset of the contest eroded. The Conservatives' lead over Labour diminished almost daily; ditto her lead as best Prime Minister. An election without reason, an awful campaign and an uninspiring manifesto combined to provide the hollowest of partial victories.

Britain Votes 2015 had concluded by arguing that the sunlit uplands apparently offered by the surprise Conservative overall majority were cloudier than might be immediately apparent. It highlighted the dangers of the Brexit referendum as an exercise in internal party management and the continuing problems for the Conservative party – short on members, youth votes and ideas. The 2015 election was won primarily on economic competence; an election which strayed beyond that territory could be more problematic. The 2017 election was not a contest in which fiscal prudence and responsibility dominated to the extent of 2015. By 2017, the Conservatives had abandoned the deficit elimination targets trumpeted in 2015 and the Labour Party could reasonably gamble that another election fought on austerity terms might bore the voters. The 2017 outcome demonstrated that a cautious take on the Conservatives' 2015 victory was justified. That said, a remotely competent Conservative campaign in 2017 would surely have delivered a reasonable parliamentary majority, given the evidence of council election results only one month earlier. Instead, May's campaign was beset by difficulties. As Bale and Webb have charted, disagreements over the wisdom of calling the election, a lack of

trust between Conservative HQ and grassroots activists, an overly presidential campaign (only a good idea if the president has something to say); an underestimation of Corbyn the campaigner (perhaps his main asset) and a sharp drop in levels of activism were all evident.

Whatever the campaigning inadequacies, the Brexit context of the election ought to have helped deliver a Conservative victory. The British Election Study shows that the Conservatives netted 60% of the Leave vote and indicates that more than half of UKIP's 2015 voters who voted again in 2017 switched to the Conservatives, with only 18% supporting Labour. That this did not get the Conservatives over the line owed much to Labour's solid position as the party of Remain, irrespective of party policy. Labour won the majority of the Remain vote, compared to only one-quarter backing the Conservatives and a mere 15% for the party of Remain, the Liberal Democrats (Fieldhouse and Prosser 2017). According to the Ashcroft polls, nearly half of the under-50 Conservative supporters in 2015 who had backed Remain in 2016 did not back the Conservatives in 2017 (Ashcroft 2017: xi). There were other plusses for Labour, illuminated in the British Election Study. The party won a majority of vote switchers from 2015 and a majority of those undecided who to vote for at the start of the campaign, contributing to the rapid erosion of a 14% Conservative lead at the commencement of the contest (Fieldhouse and Prosser 2017). Labour's increase in vote share was above 12% in three types of constituencies: where turnout rose by more than 5%; where 18-24 year olds comprised over 10% of electors and where the proportion of students was above 9% (The Observer 2017).

As Eunice Goes has shown, Labour provided grassroots mobilisation whilst the leadership provided generous retail offers. Some were outright giveaways, the free university education pledge being one example. A more energetic and focused Conservative campaign might have concentrated more forensically upon affordability and whether Labour's 'fully costed' manifesto was a 'properly costed' one. Huge increases in NHS funding were likely to

be universally popular (the Conservatives were also pledging significant extra cash) but other pledges were more targeted. The university tuition fee pledge attracted considerable interest, whilst costing £10 billion annually. There would also be a 'National Transformation Fund' that would 'invest £250 billion over ten years in upgrading our economy' (Labour Party 2017: 11). Yet Labour's insistence that only the top 5% of earners, those with incomes of more than £80,000 per year, would pay more in tax was not seriously challenged. Nor was Labour's absence of a figure for the proposed rise in corporation tax in an extensive, 128-page manifesto.

The Conservatives were obliged to defend (or even adjust, mid-campaign) their own policies such as the so-called 'dementia tax'. The retention of the party's huge lead among older voters suggests perhaps that little damage was wrought by that policy. Moreover, the manifesto listing of an 'ageing society' as one of the Conservatives' five great challenges and the determination to tackle some of its financial implications was reasonable (Conservative Party 2017: 6). The plan to raise the mean-test threshold to £100,000 would provide some protection for those with modest assets. However, the Conservative leadership appeared nervous and uncertain when challenged on the details. The inclusion of a person's property as an asset meant that many in need of social care might have to sell their home to pay for prolonged care, yet the Conservatives struggled to admit that this was indeed the case.

The problems afflicting the Conservatives should not be exaggerated. This was the fifth consecutive election at which the party increased its vote share, which reached its highest since 1983. An important point made by David Denver is that the change in vote share coefficient for the Conservative and Labour parties is modest. Changes in vote shares at a constituency level for the 'big two' were not closely related. Both increased their vote shares and this was not an election of large-scale switching between either party (the level was akin to the two previous elections), but more about the bolstering of two-party politics. Conservatives were never going to desert their party for a Corbyn-led Labour Party. Moreover, this was something

of a patchwork quilt of an election result, with swings to the Conservatives in north-east England and Scotland, hardly any swing at all in the Midlands and a huge swing to Labour in pro-EU London.

Perhaps the primary issue for the Conservative Party is its life-cycle reliance upon voters becoming conservative – small and large c – as they grow older. If this does not happen, the Conservatives need the turnout of younger voters to be low. Based on the 2017 result, life-cycle effects in terms of producing majority Conservative support are not occurring until voters are reaching their late forties. The Conservatives have not won a handsome majority at an election for three decades. The Party strengthened its position among the working-class but lost ground in the larger middle-class. The traditional class model of voting is now perhaps mere embellishment and detail, 'turned completely upside down in 2017' (Ford 2017: 28), as the Conservatives saw big gains (13%) among the skilled working class but lost middle-class voters to Labour. Worryingly for the Conservatives, there was (unusually for British politics) evidence of a gender voting gap, as discussed earlier by Emily Harmer and Rosalynd Southern, with a modest lead for Labour of 3.6% among women. A woman leader did not hide another gender gap – that of few women Conservative MPs, at 21% comfortably the lowest percentage of the sizeable British parties at Westminster.

This inability to reach sufficient groups of voters has led the Conservatives to rely upon two very different parliamentary partners – the Liberal Democrats and the DUP – to nudge them over the finishing line in recent years. The price for the DUP's support was predictably high, no doubt ongoing and undermining of a Conservative case based upon fiscal prudence, regardless of whether the term inducement or bribe is deployed. These criticisms cannot be fully allayed by the Prime Minister's restatement of her party as Conservative and Unionist, portraying the hitherto largely ignored DUP as natural allies (although they clearly are on

Brexit). It was, palpably, a case of needs must and, for all the understandable hostility and sanctimony, any other governing party would have acted similarly to remain in office.

Labour's buoyancy as a rejuvenated party is juxtaposed with the reality of a third consecutive substantial election defeat, a lack of clarity on what its leadership requires from Brexit, continuing scepticism from many electors over its economic competence and a parliamentary party still sufficiently far from convinced by the leader; at best, Corbyn-lite rather than Corbynite. The party's unexpected headway in June 2017, however, bolstered confidence to the point where the party leader could claim, less than four months later at Labour's annual conference, that the party's ideas, such as free university education and the nationalisation of energy, rail and mail, were mainstream, part of a new political centre ground. Moreover, Labour does not have to take the hard decisions on Brexit; as such the party can position itself around whatever ideas offered the greatest immediate electoral advantage until Brexit is enacted. The next election will be fought on Labour's manifesto policies rather than Corbyn's past. As such, coherence and competence will be required to an extent beyond that demanded in 2017.

So where can Labour progress to make the seat gains necessary to enter government? Scotland potentially offers fertile ground, notwithstanding the disarray of Scottish Labour over the last decade. Notwithstanding the effectiveness of Ruth Davidson as Scottish Conservative leader, Ailsa Henderson and James Mitchell have shown that it is Labour which is best placed, electorally, with lots of close constituency second places, and politically, if Scotland's national conversation does move away from nationalism versus unionism. The SNP's electoral fortunes may now rest more upon the quality of its governance rather than its referendum pledges on the national question. Meanwhile, Wales remains solidly Labour and modest further gains are possible.

The one UK-wide party of opposition to Brexit, the Liberal Democrats, flopped. As Cutts and Russell have demonstrated, the Liberal Democrats still rely on votes that are lent rather than owned, bereft of a clear political identity and programme to enthuse support. 2017 represented a clear opportunity for the party to attract a substantial proportion of the 48% Remain vote in the previous year's referendum, yet a combination of a lack of a distinctive programme beyond Brexit opposition, the legacy of coalition with the Conservatives deterring potential Labour deserters and the inability of Tim Farron, as party leader, to shape the campaign, all contributed to a very modest performance in potentially favourable circumstances.

What of UKIP and the Greens? While they are very different parties, James Dennison has shown that there are several parallel explanations for the decline of UKIP and the Green between 2015 and 2017. In both cases, these parties lost their respective places in the UK party system, media interest in them declined, while membership levels and financial donations also fell. The root causes were different, although they were in many ways mirror images. UKIP's position was undermined by Theresa May's decision to position the Conservatives as the party of Brexit after the 2016 referendum vote. The Greens, by contrast, faced the challenge of Jeremy Corbyn repositioning the Labour Party on the same part of the political spectrum which the Greens had been almost the sole occupants of since the early 2000s. As the title of Dennison's chapter aptly puts it, UKIP and the Green found that the rug had been pulled from under them. A continuation of the current political circumstances could challenge their very survival. While the existential threat facing UKIP is arguably much greater, the uncertainties and controversies surrounding the nature of the UK's withdrawal from the EU may yet create the conditions for UKIP's revival, particularly if Nigel Farage returns to lead the party.

Faced with a dual squeeze on their respective positions in the party system and on their respective resource bases, both parties fielded fewer candidates in 2017 than 2015. The Greens attempted to forge a 'progressive alliance' with Labour and the Liberal Democrats, involving electoral pacts in key constituencies, but the party was ultimately reduced to standing its own candidates down to help Labour or the Liberal Democrats without reciprocal arrangements. Only 11% of the electorate reported having been contacted in the last few weeks of the campaign by UKIP and 12% by the Greens, compared to 40% and 22% respectively in 2015. With voters realigning around the main two parties in 2017, the fate of UKIP and the Greens was sealed.

Despite these commonalities, Dennison underlines that UKIP and the Greens experienced very different patterns of change in their respective voter bases from 2015 to 2017. The 594,000 voters who opted for UKIP in 2017 were, by and large, UKIP loyalists. Moreover, 2017 UKIP voters were virtually identical to their 2015 counterparts in their socio-demographic profiles and political attitudes. By contrast, the Greens experienced a remarkable turnover in their electoral base. Only 25% of Green voters in 2017 had also cast ballots for the party in 2015. Any change in the Green Party's fortunes is therefore likely to depend on Labour moving back towards the centre ground – a scenario which would appear unlikely in the coming years.

For all parties, the 2017 election campaign might be considered exceptional, its calling a surprise (not least to most of the government's own MPs), its punctuations, due to terrorism, stark and its conduct often novel, in terms of the tactics used. In terms of the usual financial asymmetry of resources, Justin Fisher has shown how Labour enjoyed healthy finances prior to the election, thanks to its massive increase in party membership. Whilst the Conservatives proved as adept as ever in raising finance quickly during the campaign, their financial advantage was somewhat offset to a degree by the sudden calling of the election. Given some

controversial claims and cases following the 2015 contest, parties were careful to dissociate national from local/constituency campaign spending.

As the contribution by Fisher, plus that from Dommett and Temple indicate, although print still dominates, 2017 saw an increase in digital campaigning, partly to offset the lack of time to prepare more long-term campaigning. Digital campaigning is changing the way parties engage with the public. Facebook campaigns were of considerable utility to the Conservatives in 2015. In 2017, Labour upped its social media game. Labour may benefit particularly (but far from exclusively) from 'satellite campaigns', which are not led by the actual parties but by other groups. These may not be under the same restrictions and rules (particularly financial stringencies) that shape traditional party campaigning. This raises important questions about the future of campaigning, namely in terms of party control and activist organisation.

In terms of modern campaigning activity, the 2017 election showed levels of mobilisation by young people not seen before. The high turnout among 18-24 year olds, a category mainly voting-averse for the previous quarter-of-a century, was a major contributor to Labour's advance. In the six weeks following the calling of the election, 3 million people applied to join the electoral registers, with more than a third of those applying aged under 25. On the final day of registration, more than two-thirds of the 622,000 who made applications to join the registers were aged under 35. Even accounting for the fact that a potentially sizeable portion of these were 'duplicate' applications from electors already registered and not net additions to the register, the surge in younger voters joining the registers was evident. Yet it was still far from apparent that youth voter turnout would rise in the way that transpired. Social media provided an ideal forum for oppositional campaigning and protest against the status quo, although Eunice Goes' analysis of Labour's effort also highlighted the capacity for Labour, with its high membership, to deploy activists on more traditional doorstep campaigns and to provide favourable media visual coverage for Labour via the large public election rallies for

the leader. Momentum's website, My Nearest Marginal, helped facilitate the arrival of thousands of activists to key Labour targets, defensive or offensive. More than 70,000 activists used the site to help organise rallies, street canvassing, and text messaging. With a high rate of opening, texting is more effective in conveying messages than easily deleted emails.

New techniques were accompanied by new voters. As Sarah Harrison's contribution has illuminated, young people used their vote to reclaim their electoral weight within the polity, their ability to shape their future restated after many were affronted by the Brexit referendum result. The 2017 election allowed expression of a desire for change amid significant levels of democratic frustration. Despite the importance of new campaigning techniques and new voters, however, the 2017 election saw an interplay of old and new campaign features. As has been demonstrated in Wring and Ward's consideration of the media's coverage of the contest, traditional broadcast media, especially television, remains very important as an information source, notwithstanding the growth of social media, which can still act as an echo chamber rather than a game-changer. And contrary to expectations and to the role played by social media, this was in many ways a traditional type of election, being highly presidentialised and focused on the two main parties.

The increased participation of young voters has been welcomed and may feed into the continuing debate over whether the voting age should be lowered. Of the Westminster parties, only the Conservatives and the DUP are opposed, although there is no evidence of a groundswell of support for change among the broader adult population. The context of the election, held so soon after the EU referendum, was clearly important. A young person's narrative could emphasise the generation gap, a feeling of 18-24 year olds being marginalised from national policy priorities. Although not opposed to Brexit, Labour's own EU withdrawal

policy was ambiguous or contradictory. Labour could, however, entice young voters in other areas, particularly housing, where the party promised to restore housing benefit for young people, in addition to the abolition of university fees. Youth mobilisation created a new pool of voters for a Labour party unlikely to win many converts directly from its main rival.

Since Labour did not win the election, the viability of its 2017 manifesto will never be tested. While opinion polling underlined the popularity of its signature policies, serious questions remain about whether a Labour-led government would have been able to deliver them. Importantly, Matthew Flinders has demonstrated that there are risks associated with populist policies, regardless of their party origin. While populism offers mainstream political parties a means to achieve greater political 'bandwidth', it offers few, if any, viable solutions to the complex problems that are giving rise to anti-political sentiment. As Flinders stresses, there is mounting evidence of a growing gap between those who govern and those who are governed, of which the rise of populism is a direct symptom. Yet, as he also underlines, the challenge which populism fails to address, for a party seeking to govern, is that of offering a political programme that can command an electoral majority by bridging the new social divides, while also recognising the constraints under which contemporary governments operate.

Of course, the main current challenge of populism may lie in anti-EU sentiment to which many young people remain impervious. Overwhelmingly Brexit provided the context of the election, impacting upon main party choice even though the apparent 'choice' was Brexit (Conservative) or Brexit (Labour). For hardcore Brexiteers, the UK's decision to leave the EU would hopefully precipitate a domino effect in other EU countries. Yet rather than the emergence of populist anti-EU contagion, Sara Hagemann has demonstrated that the more significant effect of Brexit for the EU will be that it changes the internal dynamics of EU institutions at a time when the EU faces a series of challenges that go far beyond Brexit. Her

analysis of patterns of voting and decision-making within the Council of the EU and the European Parliament underlines the extent to which some other member states have seen the UK as a counter-weight to France and Germany. In particular, the UK's departure will weaken the position of those countries outside the Eurozone and those which have tended to follow the UK's lead in resisting greater social regulation and intervention. The spread of populist, anti-EU sentiment appears to have been contained. The clear defeat in the French presidential election of the anti-EU Front National presidential candidate Marine Le Pen by the pro-EU centrist Emmanuel Macron, and the success of Macron's new party, En Marche!, in the legislative elections was of particular significance. Indeed, despite an unexpectedly strong showing for the radical right AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) in Germany, Hagemann argues that the events of 2017 have, on balance, strengthened unity between member states and created the context for further integration. As such, the UK government has not only been weakened by the UK election result, but now faces negotiations with a more united and more confident EU which has largely seen off the populist threat. While the UK general election will not strengthen the UK's negotiating position in the way that Theresa May had intended, the longer-term consequences of Brexit for the EU remain far from clear.

Finally, how well did our electoral system perform? As John Curtice has indicated, narrow or non-existent parliamentary majorities might become the norm not the exception. The current system should operate to strongly discourage votes or seats going to third or other parties (a tendency captured by Duverger's Law) and, relatedly, function so that it rewards the largest party with a 'winner's bonus' (a pattern consistent with the so-called Cube Law). In turn, such outcomes depend on there being sufficient numbers of marginal seats so that a clear swing of the pendulum in electoral support causes a majority for one of the two major parties to be replaced by a majority for the other. Yet, despite an unexpected resurgence in the two-party vote and the Conservatives securing the largest share of the vote achieved by any party

since Labour's 1997 landslide victory, Duverger's Law and the Cube Law did not apply in 2017. A total of 70 MPs were elected from parties other than the Conservatives or Labour, ten times the number in 1959. And despite an increase in vote share from 36.8% to 42.4% as the winning party, the Conservatives lost their majority.

Curtice has highlighted the significance of long-term shifts in the geography of party support in explaining the growing apparent failure of the electoral system to produce majority governments. In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, the electoral system readily converts geographical concentrations of electoral support for parties other than the Conservative and Labour into parliamentary seats. Of the 70 seats won by third parties in 2017, 35 went to the SNP, 10 to the DUP, 7 to Sinn Fein and 4 to Plaid Cymru. At the same time, there has been a long-term trend towards the geographical concentration of support for the two main parties, with Labour becoming increasingly dominant in densely-populated metropolitan areas and the Conservatives almost equally so in smaller towns and rural areas, particularly in the south. As a consequence of both trends, there are now about half the number of Conservative-Labour marginals than there were in the 1950s or 1960s, making it increasingly difficult for either party to secure an overall majority.

Changes to constituency boundaries will not alter this position. Since the 1950s, there has been a tendency for the electoral system to exhibit greater bias against the Conservatives as time elapses since the last set of revisions to constituency boundaries. However, despite ongoing delays to current boundary change proposals, the disadvantage experienced by the Conservatives on the existing boundaries all but disappeared in 2017. Indeed, on some measures, the electoral system operated in the Conservatives' favour. Noting this 'dramatic and unprecedented change' in electoral bias, Curtice locates the reasons in the higher than average increase in turnout in Labour-held seats and the related tendency for the Conservatives' vote share to increase more sharply in constituencies with smaller electorates.

Ironically, for an election at which the electoral system clearly failed to operate as intended, the 2017 result was the most proportional outcome since 1970. Clearly, proponents of the existing system make no claims for its capacity to deliver relatively proportional outcomes. Yet, during its 'golden age' in the 1950s and 1960s, elections tended to deliver single-party majority governments without producing substantial deviations from proportionality. There are therefore strong grounds to revisit the debate about the merits of the electoral system – but of course this will not happen. The post-2017 parliament will be busy enough.

The 2017 election left no Westminster party, except the DUP, very happy. The Conservatives foolishly mislaid a majority; Labour completed a hat-trick of defeats; the Liberal Democrats flopped; the SNP lost ground; UKIP collapsed and the Greens and Plaid Cymru stayed static. The taut parliamentary arithmetic at least ensures that all parties remain very much in the game.

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