

# Five more years of this: Introduction to a post election symposium



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Alongside conventional academic journal articles, Tor will also feature written work in a range of other formats. These may be less scholarly in style, but no less scholarly in content. They may be shorter in length, but just as long on ideas. The journal particularly encourages current affairs opinion and commentary. The traditional gestation period of a thesis or a paper prevents timely response to moving issues. But Tor represents an excellent opportunity for scholars to apply their expertise to contemporary talking points as they happen.

For this inaugural edition, the journal invited comment-style submissions addressing the most significant of recent events: the 2015 General Election. The resulting symposium of short reflections ruminates on the lay of the land post-election. The contributions each address a different aspect of the election and its aftermath. Some consider the performance of political parties. Others assess specific policy issues. Others still consider the global context of the next parliament. What unites them is that they prime the reader on what to expect in this most unexpected of new parliaments. Contributors include academics and graduate students from the three institutions of the South West Doctoral Training Centre: the University of Exeter, the University of Bath, and the University of Bristol. True to the interdisciplinary spirit of the DTC, contributors focus on areas relevant to their research interests. They bring subject-specific expertise to issues often elided or overlooked in the churn of the political news cycle. Not every aspect is covered. Of many big stories, the rise of the SNP and the success of the Conservatives receive no specific commentary. But the pieces discuss an array of issues, some well-covered since the election, and some that need further attention. To the well-covered, they add new scholarly perspectives. To the rest, they induct the reader into some crucial upcoming policy challenges.

In this introduction, I will give a taster of what is to follow. I will draw links between the entries by waging some additional observations and speculations about the election and the next five years. I will place specific focus on prospects for the UK left,

where, in my opinion, interesting things could happen over the course of the next parliament. To a certain extent, my reflections will be limited to England. English politics is in flux, in a way that Scotland's are not, for instance. Scotland has made a break with the political order. England might yet do the same. The situation, of course, is distinct in Wales and Northern Ireland.

We open with three pieces reflecting on the performance and present prospects of three UK political parties: Labour, UKIP and the Liberal Democrats. In the first of these pieces, **Lewis Coyne** assays Labour's loss and the options available to them as they seek to recover. Coyne casts a critical eye over the internal debate accompanying the post-Miliband leadership election. Party soul-searchers typically bemoan a failure to connect with one or another group of voters. For the left, the working class, lost to abstention in England and the SNP in Scotland. For the right, the middle, lost to the Tories in England. But, for Coyne, this conceals the need for Labour to recast itself as a movement dependent on no single base of support.

Most accounts of Labour's defeat emphasise voters rather than non-voters. One popular narrative is that Labour lost middle-class votes by appealing too little to 'aspiration'. Another is that votes leaked to the Tories because of a perceived lack of economic 'credibility'. But one of the more persuasive arguments concerns those who did not vote rather than those who did. This has become known as the 'lazy Labour' explanation (Holehouse 2015). It not only explains Labour's defeat, but the wildly inaccurate polling in the run up to the election. Polling overestimated Labour support because their historical, latent voter base told pollsters they would turn out on the day but ended up staying at home. Labour's failure to connect with these voters lost them the election. This, we hear, is Ed Miliband's preferred interpretation of his defeat (Eaton 2015).

This resonates with the analysis given by Jon Trickett (2015). Trickett's data suggests that Labour not only retained but improved their middle-class support. It was actually among working-class voters that Labour

leaked support. This gives the lie to the familiar argument that Labour was too left-wing and did not do enough to secure the votes of middle-class voters. Instead, Trickett's data suggests, Labour insufficiently enthused poorer, working-class voters. They did not do enough to differentiate themselves from the other parties to represent a viable option for those in lowest economic bands. In England, these people did not turn out to vote. In Scotland, they turned out to vote for a party occupying a position on the populist left: the SNP.

The next contribution communicates the importance of looking at non-voters as much as those who did vote. Voter turnout features prominently in **Aurelien Mondon's** analysis of UKIP as an electoral phenomenon. Against the fulsome coverage presented in the UK media, Mondon paints a bleak picture for UKIP's figurehead Nigel Farage. His party's performance may seem significant percentage-wise. But when considered against overall voter turnout, it looks far less impressive. As Mondon notes, 33.9 per cent of registered voters abstained from voting on the day, not to mention those who did not register in the first place. This means that UKIP managed to secure fewer than one in ten of the available votes. This is despite optimum press coverage. Political debate skewed onto Farage's favoured terrain whenever the UKIP leader appeared on television or radio. But support for UKIP's 'nativist', 'neo-racist' right-wing populism, Mondon suggests, is strikingly meagre. UKIP's significance instead pertains to the effect wielded on political discourse through the media. Mondon contends that the party is a 'decoy' for politicians of other stripes to use as a means to shift political debate elsewhere.

Mondon ends by recommending that the bubbling debate about the limits of political representation focus less on how well UKIP or any other party did or should have done. Rather, it should focus more on 'the vast majority of the population who votes or does not vote'. Indeed, I would suggest that a focus on the latter could also help Labour understand the scale of their loss. It owes, perhaps, not to a failure to engage already-enfranchised middle-class voters. Instead, it may owe to an inability to offer a convincing political reflection of reality for the disconnected, overworked and underemployed. In Scotland, a party managed to do this to a much greater extent, annihilating Labour in the process. But what happened North of the border does not tell the whole story. Labour lost in England, too.

In the third contribution, **Rebecca Tidy** gives an insight into Liberal Democrat election strategy. She considers where it erred, and how the party recovers. Tidy emphasises the Lib Dems' previous success running candidates with strong records of local campaigning. She recommends that selection procedures return to sourcing candidates with established constituency backgrounds. This, she contends, will get the Lib Dems back on track.

But can the Lib Dems recover through a local strategy votes lost through national complicity in a coalition abhorred by many of their potential supporters? Tidy

suggests that, by playing to their traditional localised strengths, the party can recover. But one feels their best bet may be to wait for a future realignment of the centre-left in the event of Labour's implosion. Some, such as Jon Cruddas, suggest that Labour may not exist within a year, rendered extinct by a Spain-style surge of the radical left (Holehouse and Knapton 2015). Others contend that Labour has 'outlived its usefulness' (Todd 2015). Belonging to another time, it may be 'Pasokified' (Doran 2015), just as the social democrats were in Greece. Its end may unfold in any number of ways. The fragile balance of its internal contradictions may be lost if either left or right exert too great a pull after the leadership election. If Liz Kendall heads up a Blairite resurgence, the unions could finally take their substantial heft elsewhere to forge a new political party of the left. If, by some miracle, the non-aligned left join Labour en masse and vote Jeremy Corbyn in as leader, the Progress faction will leave and form a new SDP. One could plausibly imagine the Lib Dems assimilating into the latter post-Labour rump.

But there may be a role for the Lib Dems in an altogether rosier outcome. Pressure group Compass propose a 'progressive' electoral pact motivated by the pursuit of proportional representation (2015). The pact, supporters suggest, would witness a cessation of hostilities between Labour, the Greens and the Lib Dems in England for the next election. It would even extend to giving SNP candidates a free run in Scotland, and, presumably, Plaid Cymru in Wales. They would campaign on a platform of PR, from which all would benefit, and upon which Labour may depend for its survival (Bastani 2015, Hind 2015).

The trouble with such putative pacts is the pitch. They are phrased in terms of 'progressiveness'. But 'progressive' is a largely meaningless term imported from the different political context of the United States. For many, progress is less of a selling point than standstill. Some want to roll things back, not push them forwards. Why propel the world further and faster on its present trajectory, when we can stop it and get off? On both the left and the right, Green and UKIP, voters are circumspect about hurtling forwards into a false gleaming future. For the first, environmental collapse awaits. For the latter, untrammelled immigration and the European super-state. Any 'progressive' political pact must contend with these conservative realities. And this is not only about the right. A left conservatism is something considered, albeit in a foreshortened way, by the 'Blue Labour' faction of Cruddas, Maurice Glasman et al (Mardell 2015). The left will spend a lot of time defending things under attack from the forces of capital in the next five years. Further 'progress' along the lines implied in the epithet 'progressive' will be the last thing on their minds. We have lived with capitalist 'progress' for some time now, sadly. And some, unsurprisingly, want to escape.

The aforementioned eventualities may sound unlikely- splits, new parties, pacts. But the only thing predictable about the next five years is their unpredictability. The EU referendum and the attendant

prospect of second Scottish Indyref in the event of Brexit add a layer of overarching political uncertainty. Cameron faces trouble keeping unruly ministers loyal to whichever party line the PM takes on Europe (Watt and Wintour 2015). Complicating matters further, Cameron plans to step down ahead of the next election. But more unpredictable still is how people react to another five years of cuts to welfare, reforms to employee protections and attacks on working conditions. There are plenty of big stories to come in the formal sphere of parliamentary politics. But the politics of the street, the staffroom and the picket line promise to be as significant. The Tory party and its traditional class constituency are emboldened by the promise of shredded red tape and restrictions on union freedoms. On the other side, the first two weeks of the new government provoked renewed street protests. These will only intensify as the new government picks fights over where the axe falls next. Resistance may coalesce around an identifiable electoral project. This would be in line with the 'electoral turn' witnessed elsewhere on the European left (Milburn 2015). The decision of some on the radical left to throw their lot in with the Green Party (Ollie V, 2015) could be a harbinger of things to come.

Could Labour's rightward shift catalyse a divorce within its ranks (Chessum 2015)? Might we see a new party funded by trade unions and composed initially of what is now the parliamentary Labour left? The numbers of the latter swelled with the 2015 intake, which is far more leftist than the last. Moreover, the flux in which Labour finds itself makes such possibilities perfectly discernible.

Scotland has a successful and populist left electoral force, in the shape of the SNP. It also has a grassroots social movement sprung from the energy of the Radical Independence Campaign. In the absence of any formal electoral movement of the left in England, the next five years may witness the building of grassroots alternatives. These may politicise social relations (Bonefeld 2014) rather than enter politics directly. They could circulate around food, housing, culture and relationships, and find ways to meet the need for them outside capitalist social forms. The rise of Syriza in Greece relied in part on the development of an alternative solidarity economy of foodbanks, for instance (Mason 2015a). Extended to our different, less desperate context, such innovations would not only respond to poverty and the retreat of the welfare state. They would also support new ways of living and relating to each other. Instead of addressing themselves to the seizure of state power, they would build an existence outside the nexus of commodities, money and labour. The next parliament will push a renewed programme of austerity and cuts. Those subject are presently deprived, in England at least, of an authentic party-political representation of the desire for any alternative to the present state of things. It will be interesting to see whether prefigurative projects will spring up over the next few years that address both the material and political impasse.

Government support is receding ever further. Projects like, say, 'communist foodbanks', may step in. They would turn, in an unsanctioned way, the government's own abandoned big society against them. The next contribution to the symposium concerns the role of foodbanks in the 'new welfare settlement' of Tory rule. In it, **Rana Jawad** suggests that cuts in welfare provision demand new approaches to poverty alleviation. The work of faith and charitable groups in setting up and running foodbanks has provided a much-needed source of support to those left behind by a lopsided labour market. Foodbanks may be auspiciously an 'emergency measure' forged in the aftermath of the economic crisis. But Jawad suggests that they are 'the best kept secret of British Social Policy'.

Jawad suggests that, in the UK, as many as one million people use foodbanks. Thus far, foodbanks have taken a strictly faith-based or charitable complexion in the UK. But, reading Jawad's piece prompts thoughts of new agendas. What further developments in this area might accompany the continued retrenchment of the welfare state under the new government? Could resistance to austerity come to resemble to some politicisation of everyday life attempted by Syriza in the far more acute Greek scenario? Bristol, home of the SWDTC, possesses many examples of an alternative economic infrastructure: food co-ops, a local currency, freeshops and shareshops, community supported agriculture and cafes serving free meals sourced from supermarket food waste. What new dimensions might all this assume in the next five years? Bristol witnessed a huge Green surge at the election. In Bristol one sees a possible basis for a politics unrestricted by the formal political realm of rhetoric, electioneering and policymaking. Rather, its purchase is on the ground. The strength of the Green Party suggests that Bristol's projects and movements may have found at least some existing electoral expression. Indeed, in London, Sian Berry, a Green candidate for the mayoral nomination, has promised 'bring the energy' of campaigns and movements 'into City Hall' (2015). Her role would be to channel in the formal political sphere the extra-parliamentary demands of movements embedded in everyday life. This indicates a potential combination of street politics, practical alternatives of cooperation and mutual aid, and a left 'electoral turn'. This potent mix will be worth a keenly kept eye in years to come.

The Green election campaign, exemplified in Bristol, held sway best as an expression of local sentiment rather than as a national programme for change. This perhaps owes to the poor performance of the party's leader, Natalie Bennett, on the national stage. The Greens performed well in Bristol, and achieved their best result in a UK election. But, nationally, the party acted as a vector of concerns quite apart from its founding purpose. Instead of the environment, the terrain upon which it fought concerned economic injustice and immigration. Indeed, the environment hardly featured in the electoral campaigns of any major party, the Greens included. The short-termist outlook of UK politics suggests that the environment will continue to be one of several elephants in the room.

Post-election, Cameron assigned the environment brief to a rare Tory climate change 'believer', Amber Rudd (see Carrington 2015). Meanwhile, he is beholden by virtue of his small majority to the sceptical right of his party. This suggests that green issues are by no means beyond political contention in this parliament. In the next contribution, **Nick Kirsop-Taylor** surveys the future of biodiversity offsetting. It illustrates how Cameron's pledge to be the 'greenest government ever' has collided with the reality of cuts to the Defra budget. Biodiversity offsetting is a mechanism whereby the environmental costs of building and development are repaid through new green initiatives elsewhere. Theoretically, when one tree falls, another is planted somewhere else. But, Kirsop-Taylor suggests, this policy is unlikely to survive the next parliament other than as a seldom-seen clause buried in planning rules.

Whatever comes of it, biodiversity offsetting is revealing of at least one government foible of both the last five years and the next. To tally up the cost of what is lost and how much is needed to replace it, the natural world must be measured and given a value. What should rightly escape the sphere of economic calculation is made subservient to it. As a 2014 Financial Times article on the topic attests (Wilson 2014), it is not always easy to establish a clear measure of value for flora and fauna, birds and bees. With difficulty, the violence of quantitative abstraction is wrought upon the wilderness. It acquires a monetary value, and becomes commensurate with other things in the world of commodities. It can then be traded, bought and sold. It is no accident that these policy proposals have coincided with recent, unsuccessful attempts to sell off Britain's forests (BBC 2013).

This same process occurs elsewhere in Tory reforms commenced in 2010. This is especially the case where they pertain to that which was formerly public shifting into private hands. Nowhere more so is this dialectic of measurement, privatisation and commodification in evidence than in education. In the next contribution, **Anna Edwards** assesses the ongoing 'quasi-marketisation' of secondary education. The transferring of public assets into private hands via academisation depends upon systems of measurement. They are akin to that practiced in the process of biodiversity offsetting. As Edwards notes, 'a market-based approach to the delivery of education [...] rests upon the assumption that we can accurately measure and compare school performance and educational standards'. Edwards suggests neither the Conservatives or Labour question the 'philosophical' viability of this measurement. It falls, then, to others to question the measures and valuations made.

On the one hand, the main political parties appeal to the good of the economy as an abstract, external force for which we are compelled to do our best. But, on the other hand, evidence of contestation is everywhere, when one looks for it. 'Value struggles' (Frenzel and Beverungen 2014) contest governmental or capitalist understandings of what something is 'worth'. They are surprisingly commonplace in the UK, despite being

rarely thought of as such. These struggles typically concern a few recurring themes. A resource facing cuts or privatization. The imposition of something lucrative to its owners but of little use to anyone else. The eradication or exploitation of heritage or green space. Many examples spring to mind. Grassroots campaigns to save local NHS services. Anti-fracking movements. Local groups fighting chain stores, supermarkets and big-name coffee shops dominating their high streets. These all pitch different visions of worth that undermine blind subservience to the 'economy'. They challenge the narrow quantitative understanding of value that the 'economy' implies. As the new Tory majority pursues an agenda of privatisation and marketization, expect these value struggles to intensify. Higher education may be a flashpoint, with staff and students foremost in fighting these struggles (Morgan 2015). There are few sectors with as much at stake from measurement, monitoring, commercialisation and privatisation.

In the next contribution, **Donna Clutterbuck** discusses the new government's approach to domestic violence. Clutterbuck highlights the contradictions of Tory policy. These contradictions are between not only words and actions, but within individual pieces of legislation. For instance, domestic violence legislation now makes provision for instances of coercive control. But this legislation does not specifically address gender. This absence is stark in light of statistical evidence showing that women are overwhelmingly more likely to be victims of domestic violence of all kinds. Further, funding cuts have severely inhibited the ability of support services to cope with demand. What is more, cuts to legal aid prevent women subject to domestic violence from seeking and gaining justice. Promised cuts to public spending, Clutterbuck writes, will further undermine Cameron's professed commitment to tackle violence against women.

The final two contributions turn to events outside the UK. In the penultimate piece, **Bruce Morley** highlights how the fortunes of the UK economy may have less to do with government policy than with the health and survival of the Euro. Morley begins by giving an overview of the history and present predicament of the Eurozone. He suggests that the UK could benefit from a fall in the strength of the pound 'in sympathy with the Euro'. This would increase exports and thus GDP. But, should the serious problems faced by the Euro explore, the UK will be badly burnt.

In that event, it will be interesting to see to whom Cameron and Osborne apportion blame for any decline in the British economy. They were elected in 2010 by holding Labour personally culpable for a global economic crash. They were re-elected in 2015 by claiming personal responsibility for the recovery. So far, so consistent. But if they endure either European or global instability at some time in the next parliament, personal responsibility will be a hot potato they will be loath to keep hold of. On one side of the green benches at least, the explanatory burden is sure to fall anywhere but upon the budgetary red box.

In the final contribution to the symposium, **Biao Zhang** considers the future prospects for the UK's relationship with China. Zhang describes how, in the last parliament, Cameron moved the UK much closer to China. Interestingly, Zhang situates this move in the context of Britain's 'special relationship' with the United States. The UK is a minor partner in relations with both the US and China, and will, Zhang suggests, choose between the two big powers in shifting ways that address specific needs: economic, political, military. One gets the impression of the UK as a silent, supine second-rater desperate to court others but always waiting on a call.

This brings to light a feature of this election and likely many more hence. The two main parties do not wish to discuss the big challenges and issues of the next decades (see Mason 2015b for an example). One is the growing irrelevance of the UK as a global player, forced to negotiate in the gaps between the tectonic plates of world power in East and West. A second relates also to the rise of China as an economic powerhouse, and it is with this aspect that I will end. The world of employment has changed in the UK. As manufacturing has gone East, so have the jobs associated with it and the lifestyles they implied. In a flexibilised low-skill service economy, unemployment and underemployment are permanent. They are unsolvable short of a restructuring and redistribution of working hours- a prospect far-fetched in the present system. Automation is a major possibility given nary a mention by any leading politician. It promises to make redundant the remaining few in possession of a full-time secure job (Frey and Osborne 2013, Lanchester 2015). In a society ill-prepared to countenance, let alone support, life without work, this represents an impending social disaster. Politicians compete with one another to penalise those who do not work or cannot find one of the few jobs available to the many forced to need them. Life is made intolerable without employment in a society that does not afford employment for all in the first place. More welfare cuts are to come. The imposition of workfare continues. Thus, the material conditions to be safe, secure, happy and fed will depend upon one's capacity to work for the foreseeable future. But the basis for this is rapidly eroding, and no politician will publicly note it. Sold on the lie that the system is here to stay, those subject to a society of work on the wane will only suffer. The next five years may not witness any confession or acknowledgement of it. But a social crisis is unfolding that will define the development of new political projects over the course of the next parliament. We have five years more of this- of further austerity, cuts to welfare and worsening precariousness. The party that best plugs into this prospectus stands to profit. Whether that party currently exists remains to be seen. An English Podemos may yet appear. Five more years may be a long time indeed.

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## Labour's "Triple-Bind": Why they lost and must change to survive



Lewis Coyne

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Labour's defeat on the 7th of May was remarkable in its scale and speed. The widespread incredulity which greeted the 10pm exit poll swiftly gave way to resignation as it transpired that not only had Labour been all but wiped out – as expected – by the SNP in Scotland, but they had made almost no headway against the Conservatives in England and Wales. Although in the history of the party there have technically been greater defeats (in 1931 and 1983), Labour has arguably never been in a more perilous situation. Worse, few Labour politicians or sympathetic commentators appear to recognise this, and consequently their strategic prescriptions merely risk compounding the problem. Essential to Labour's defeat is the opinion polling debacle. In 2012 Labour appeared to open a sizable lead in the polls. This was attributed to three factors: the conversion of 2010 Liberal Democrat voters to Labour, the rise of UKIP initially at the expense of the Conservatives, and the standard 'swing voters' moving between the Tories and Labour. This formed the basis of a strategy to secure a mere 35% of the vote, proven to be sufficient for a majority government by the 2005 victory. Labour's lead gradually fell over the course of three years to an election-day tie with the Conservatives at 34%, apparently leaving Labour with every chance of forming the next government. The flaw in the plan, however, was that the polls were systematically overstating Labour support, and thus the strategy was built on sand.

The cause of this consistent inaccuracy is currently the subject of an enquiry by the British Polling Council, but post-election research provides sufficient evidence for an analysis of the final result. According to some, the reason Labour lost is that they were too left-wing: as a result of their narrow strategy, Labour failed to occupy the political centre ground and speak to the aspirations of middle England. Within the party, Tony Blair and Peter Mandelson, amongst others, point to Labour's loss of key marginal seats in England as proof that the country defaulted to the Conservatives for the above reasons.

Others, such as Owen Jones and Len McCluskey, have noted in response note that Labour's wholesale collapse in Scotland to a party that positioned itself to Labour's left is at odds with the Blair-Mandelson analysis. It is argued that in the eyes of the Scottish electorate Labour was too right-wing, and this was the decisive factor. All agree, however, that instrumental in Labour's defeat was the public perception of economic incompetence, a result of the leadership's failure to rebut the colossal falsehood that the 2007 global financial crisis was caused by Gordon Brown spending money on schools and hospitals.

Both assessments are partially correct insofar as they identify an aspect of the defeat. However, both miss the fact that Labour's loss was actually three-fold. Firstly, Labour lost left-wing voters and all but one seat in Scotland to the SNP. Secondly, Labour lost moderate voters in England and Wales to the Conservatives, losing the marginal seats. And finally, Labour lost working-class voters to UKIP across the country, but particularly