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The 2015 General Election in the United Kingdom

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Abstract :

The 2015 UK general election has been unlike any other since 1945. At first sight it has featured a return to a two-party system and a clear victory for the Conservative Party. Yet this election was actually a further step in the long-term evolution of the two-party political system. The questions it raises are two-fold – that of the country as a united kingdom, because of the success of the Scottish nationalists, and the future of the United Kingdom in the European Union, because of the risky promise made by David Cameron to organise an in/out referendum by the end of 2017.

QUESTIONING THE SYSTEM

The British political system is undergoing deep change. The traditional order was based on the alternation of power of the two main parties (Conservative and Labour since the end of the Second World War), which was sustained by the first-past-the-post electoral system whereby the winning candidate in each constituency is the candidate with the largest number of votes. Although other parties have existed in this system, the Liberal Democrats or the Green Party nationally and regional parties in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, their representation in Parliament, and therefore their political influence, has been limited. Although sometimes unfair in terms of representation and questionable for checks and balances, the system however enabled the formation of stable governments and kept extremist parties, both on the left and the right of the political spectrum, out of power.

The system has been under pressure since the 1970's, which witnessed the resurgence of the Liberal Party and the first rise of the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales. But it was during the election of 2010 especially that its drawbacks became obvious since no clear majority emerged from the ballot, forcing the Conservative Party that came out ahead to form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, with whom they governed the country for five years. The legitimacy of the electoral system and especially its efficacy were already challenged. Then the period between 2010 and

2015 witnessed the growing success, both in the polls and by-elections and local elections, of several smaller parties, notably the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), a populist, anti-European, anti-immigration party that took the lead in the European elections of May 2014, the Scottish National Party (SNP), a Scottish, pro-independence party that was boosted by the referendum on independence on 18th September 2014 and, to a lesser degree, the Greens.

The clear, unexpected win by the Conservatives in the general election on 7th May, which with 331 seats won the absolute majority of the 650 at stake, marked the end of the coalition and the return of a majority, single party government. Supported by business, most of the press and with financial resources far greater than that of the other parties, they succeeded in convincing enough voters of their economic success and of Labour's incompetence in this regard.

The big losers in the election were firstly Ed Miliband's Labour, which hoped to the very last, given the polls, that it would win, but with 234 seats lost a further 24 compared with 2010, which was already a significant defeat. With a leader lacking charisma, Labour did not manage to convince the middle class to support it as it had done with Tony Blair, whilst some of their traditional working-class voters had already turned their backs on the party since the 2000s. The Liberal Democrats, collapsed, losing 49 of the 57 seats that they had held since 2010. The defeat of these two parties, beyond

short-term factors such as the choice of leader or broken promises, highlights the difficulty experienced by the British moderate left, as in other European countries, to maintain the support of the middle and working classes in a context of budgetary restrictions and widespread concern about globalisation.

Meanwhile indeed, the populist and nationalist parties have confirmed their new position in the British political landscape. Indeed UKIP's apparent failure in the general election (in which it only won one seat) should not mask the reality that it is now embedded in the political scene, with 12% of the votes and almost 4 million. It did well in Conservative areas of the South of England and working-class strongholds of the North, which traditionally voted Labour, leading to the loss of number of Labour seats, including the shadow Chancellor Ed Balls' near Leeds. It came second in 120 English constituencies, a third of which were held by Labour.

The other unexpected (at least until a few months before the vote) winner, was the SNP. Its success was paradoxical since the referendum in Scotland in September 2014 ended in the rejection of independence, taking only 45% of the vote. But the SNP surfed the wave in this campaign and argued successfully that it was the true mouthpiece, not only in terms of identity but also for the political, economic and social claims of a Scotland supposedly neglected and misused by London. This discourse convinced enough of the Scottish electorate for the party, with the help of the electoral system, to clinch 56 of the 59 Scottish constituencies, sending the third biggest parliamentary group to Westminster.

The two-party political system is once more questioned, especially the adequacy between the first-past-the-post system and the reality of the political landscape: with under 5% of the vote nationally the SNP won 56 seats, whilst UKIP with 12% won only one. The Greens retained the only seat that the party had won in 2010 with nearly 4% of the vote across the whole country. In May 2011 the Lib Dems obtained the organisation of a referendum on a new electoral system that would have included an alternative vote (proportional), but

that was then rejected by the electorate. This time round many have protested again, demanding reform, but this is not in the Conservatives' interest since they now hold the majority.

THE TWO UNIONS – THE FUTURE

The scores achieved by the protest parties have also brought two major issues to the fore again, which will undoubtedly dominate the political debate for years to come - the country's unity and the question of the UK's position in the European Union.

First, it is clear that the issue of Scottish independence was not settled with the referendum of 18th September 2014. Centrifugal pressure will increase with the SNP's newly gained power in Westminster. The Conservative government has been accused of being "illegitimate" in Scotland by Alex Salmond, the party's former leader. Nicola Sturgeon, the present party Chair, has already asked for further powers – particularly in the social field – to be granted to the Scottish Parliament in addition to the fiscal competence promised by the pro-union parties during the referendum campaign. In the event of another victory by her party in the Scottish election of 2016 and especially if the result to the "Brexit" referendum is negative, she will demand the organisation of another referendum on Scotland's independence that she would hope to win. For their part; the Conservatives engaged on a very slippery slope during the election campaign, accusing Labour of being prepared to make an alliance with the SNP, which stirred fear of Scots among English voters. They also promised that in the future only English MPs in Westminster would be able to vote on issues affecting England only (devolved to Scotland, Wales and/or Northern Ireland). The danger of this strategy is that it will alienate Scottish voters even further, cause discord between the electorates in the different parts of the kingdom and finally further strengthen the Scottish independence movement. The future of the United Kingdom is therefore unclear, unless the elites in London come to an agreement on a federal solution, a hypothesis that is now being considered by some Conservatives like Boris Johnson, the Mayor of London. Speculation about the UK remaining in the European

Union started immediately after the election, since with the Conservative victory the organisation of a referendum is no longer a hypothesis but a certainty. In his Bloomberg speech on 23rd January 2013 David Cameron promised to renegotiate the UK's EU membership terms, hoping to achieve enough concessions from his European partners to be able to recommend remaining in the Union to the British electorate during the promised referendum. Many questions remain. First, what more can the present government hope to achieve than what the UK has already negotiated in the past, i.e. opt-out or opt-in clauses on the euro, Schengen, justice and home affairs? Second, will Cameron be able to achieve enough to satisfy the most radical wing of his party – 80 to 100 MPs who are prepared to leave the EU? Finally will the referendum lead to the result that is officially hoped for – the UK remaining in the EU?

On the first point, David Cameron remained vague on purpose so that his hands would not be tied. We know however that the issue of EU migrants' rights, the repatriation of certain policies nationally (notably social policy), an increase in the powers of national parliaments' on European issues, the protection of the interests of non-euro area countries and the rejection of the idea of an "ever closer union" are the themes on which he will wage battle. He was hoping to take advantage of the launch of negotiations over a new treaty to obtain concessions on these various issues but Angela Merkel and François Hollande have clearly asserted that there will be no new treaty. Hence there is now discussion of a protocol being added to the Lisbon Treaty. It remains to be seen what the European institutions and the heads of State and government will be prepared to grant the UK - no one wants to see a 'Brexit' from the Union but no one wants to create a precedent by unravelling the treaties either. Some symbolic measures such as the exemption from an "ever closer union" might be accepted more easily than for example the restriction of the social rights of European residents in the UK, even though in the latter case a recent decision by the European Court of Justice on a German case shows that national amendments to the rule of equal rights for all European citizens might be possible. For the time being, David Cameron lacks

allies in Europe because of the negative attitude he has displayed since 2010: the Scandinavian countries have now turned their back on him and the countries in Central Europe dislike his critical rhetoric about the free movement of people within the EU, which mainly affects their citizens. The project to replace the Human Rights Act passed by the Blair government, which enables the direct implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights by the English courts, with an English Bill of Rights will not improve the popularity of the present British Prime Minister in Europe as it might lead the UK to withdraw from the Convention and to substitute the English Supreme Court for the European Court of Human Rights. The next few weeks leading up to the European Council of 25th-26th June, during which time David Cameron is planning a tour of the capitals of Europe, should in any case give an idea of the degree of good will held by his partners and his room for manoeuvre.

The second question pertains to the issue of the internal management of the Conservative Party. David Cameron will have to win the support of at least a majority of his MPs and his government. His narrow parliamentary majority leaves him at the mercy of a rebellion over Europe. It is highly likely that UKIP will be against him, as well as part of his parliamentary group which will never be satisfied with concessions achieved in Europe, whatever their shape or form. Although the organisation of a referendum is also designed to enable him to circumvent this opposition, David Cameron would be politically weakened by such a rebellion.

It is difficult to foresee the result of the referendum. The polls undertaken since the Bloomberg speech in January 2013 show a movement towards remaining in the EU if the government achieves a new status. But, apart from the fact that the general election showed that the polls are not necessarily reliable, British opinion has always been extremely volatile as far as Europe is concerned. At this point no one can predict the direction of an electoral campaign. We also know – as was the case in Ireland in 2001 and 2008 and in France in 2005, that in this type of ballot, voters do not always answer the question asked but pass judgement

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on the government that is organising the referendum, and even express their more general discontent about politics. Conversely experience shows that the status quo often wins the day in the event of a referendum, as was the case in the first referendum on Europe in 1975 (when the UK, already a member of the EEC, chose to remain), in the 2011 alternative vote referendum and also in the Scottish independence one.

CONCLUSION

The general election on 7th May illustrates the growing strains in the British political system in spite of an apparent stability. It heralds a period of uncertainty regarding the country's future and its place in Europe, largely due to the government's policy since 2010.

The future of Scotland in the UK in the long term is unknown, as well as that of the UK in the EU in the short term since a referendum might be organised by the end of 2016 or at the beginning of 2017. This will at least enable a true debate about the advantages and costs of belonging to the Union to take place in the UK.

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