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Britain

The implications of the general election results

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A combination of a fear campaign by the Tories and deep flaws in Labour's stance produced a slim Tory majority that no one (including the Tories) expected in the British General election on 7 May.

The opinion polls were right about two things.

The first was the decimation of the Lib Dems which have been reduced to 8 seats with major figures "the people who have been propping up the Tories for the past five years" from Vince Cable to Danny Alexander now out of parliament. [1] They bear direct responsibility for all the attacks the Tories have mounted. Labour failed to gain from their collapse as significantly as it would have if it had put forward a consistent anti-austerity message.

The second was the staggering swing to the SNP in Scotland, with Labour reduced to just one seat. In some constituencies the swing from Labour to the SNP reached almost 40%. Only three seats were not won by SNP, one LibDem, one Tory and one Labour.

Labour's life threatening wounds in Scotland were self-inflicted through their reactionary adherence to ossified unionism, the enthusiastic way they stood alongside the Tories to defend it in the referendum campaign and their failure to take up an anti-austerity and anti-Trident policy. This was massively punished by the Scottish electorate, who swung in an unprecedented way to the SNP and wiped out Labour for a generation. [2]

However, while the shock of this was massive, it's a trend that's been growing for a number of years culminating in a major swing among Labour voters towards independence and anti-austerity and a massive tactical vote for the SNP to wipe out Labour. SNP MPs are likely to be a diverse group, with some radicals likely to emerge within them.

This was the single most significant factor in the election; an earthquake in British politics, which is not going to go away.

But overall the UK is becoming more fragmented electorally, in reality there were actually four different elections going on – Scotland, Wales, England and the North of Ireland. Labour won by around 10% in Wales, the Tories won by around 10% in England and hence scooped the majority of seats, the SNP were triumphant in Scotland and the North of Ireland has its own unique dynamics.

The relentless demonisation of the SNP by the Tories and the Lib Dems clearly had an impact on English voters that did not show up in the polls.

Plaid Cymru was the party with a strong woman leader that benefitted least from the anti-austerity sentiment "with only a modest increase in its vote of 0.8%, while UKIP saw a dramatic increase in its vote in Wales of 11.2% (the swing across Britain as a whole is 9.5% "kept lower than would otherwise be the case by its poor showing in Scotland).

The advance of Sinn Fein in the six counties was halted, not least because of the contradiction of its presentation of itself as an anti-austerity party which is deeply tainted with the implementation of austerity in the coalition government of the six counties with the reactionary DUP. [3] There was a significant anti-austerity alternative vote against SF in

its base in West Belfast. [4]

The victory of the Tories (based on winning England) will open a further deeply reactionary phase of government with a Queen's Speech [5] laden with massive cuts in welfare benefits, attacks on living standards, cuts in public expenditure, increases in university fees, more racist controls on immigration etc. A referendum on EU membership is now highly likely within a couple of years, with a deeply reactionary underlying racist anti-migrant agenda.

Labour lost the election rather than the Tories winning it. They failed over the past five years to refute the Tory claim to economic competence. The leadership capitulated to the Tory's economic policies and failed to offer a much needed alternative or to project an anti-austerity pro-working class agenda.

When they put forward a few good and popular policies such as taxing the wealthy, these were overshadowed by what was seen as its ambiguous attitude to austerity, promising further cuts and leading to abject confusion about its message. Voters deserted it in droves, though this was also partly offset by the collapse of the Liberal Democrats and some compensating gains.

Labour remains a significant force in English local government, winning practically every local government seat in the big cities of the North and Midlands. However it is under pressure from UKIP to its right and the Greens to its left while it fails to provide an anti-austerity alternative – this is likely to provoke a severe crisis in its ranks and areas controlled by it as it meekly implements the cuts and austerity agenda of the new Tory government. Building local struggles against austerity by resistance to cuts will be essential if the left is to build a base for the future

The inquest into Labour's general election defeat started even before Miliband resigned. [6] There is now a real danger that the conclusion (under pressure from the Blairites) that the campaign had been too left wing and the answer is to move further into the "centre ground". Only Peter Hain mentioned the word neoliberalism and that it is not working. [7] Charles Clarke actually described the 1% as the "wealth creators" echoing right-wing ideology as though wealth could ever be created in the absence of human labour working to produce it. [8]

UKIP gained massively on the back of a right-wing campaign with many racist undertones, but failed to breakthrough electorally in parliament under the first past the post system. They got 4 million nationally and increased their penetration into Labour seats in the North. Farage has resigned but he is likely to be back before the end of the year. [9]

Despite their deeply reactionary character, they now support electoral reform as both Carswell's acceptance speech [10] and Farage's resignation statement showed. But while this was a savvy media move they are not going to campaign around it.

They will win many local council election seats however and are capable of winning control of councils in the coming period – a major setback for progressive politics in Britain. [11] Much of the migrant population (mainly from the EU countries) is denied a vote in general elections but does have a vote in local elections. This community needs to be mobilised by the left in a massive anti-xenophobic campaign to combat the racism of UKIP and the Tories. However the tactics used against fascists will fail to achieve this and the left needs to rethink its tactics in order to pursue this approach seriously.

The Greens had their best general election results ever winning a total of over a million votes and Caroline Lucas substantially increased her majority in Brighton – one of the few bright spots in the English political landscape. [12]

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They benefited from the LibDem collapse and a higher profile for anti-austerity and left policies particularly among younger voters. They won an increased number of votes and won a number of second and third places; but despite this they are not likely to make much progress electorally. They have massively increased their membership and presence and the left needs to relate to this, especially in the wider audience that now exists for a major campaign around climate change and ecological issues.

The Scottish Greens significantly underperformed due to massive tactical voting for the SNP to destroy Labour; there is every sign this could swing to the Greens in the list (PR) vote in the Scottish Parliament elections in 2016.

The National Health Action Party did moderately well. [13] They ran a good campaign and gained 20,210 votes standing in only 12 seats – well targeted against high profile opponents. Former independent MP Richard Taylor won 14% in Wyre Forest while first time candidate Louise Irvine took 8% against Jeremy Hunt. [14]

The socialist (left of Labour) parties did badly, including Left Unity and TUSC, with most candidates down at less than 1%, with only a few exceptions. TUSC is not going anywhere and should be discontinued as should Respect which also failed to build on the by-election victory of Galloway.

The left wing organisations have failed to build a serious alternative to Labour and have been eclipsed by the SNP and Greens. We are worse off than we were 15 years ago when the Socialist Alliance existed and the gains of the Respect period have been willfully discarded by the major left organisations (SP and SWP). A major rethinking is necessary and a more consistent attitude towards the building of a long term united left wing alternative.

Despite generally poor electoral results Left Unity has clearly emerged as the only hope for such a development, not least because it exists on 8 May. [15] The potential can be seen in votes such as the 949 (1.8%) for Glyn Robbins in Bethnal Green and 542 (1.2%) for Stephen Hall in Leigh.

There are a number of key conclusions to be drawn from all this.

The near 5 million votes for the Greens and UKIP resulted in just 2 MPs compared to over 200 for Labour with less than double the vote shows there is a major crisis of democratic legitimacy of the parliament – the Tories have won a majority of seats on just 36% of the vote with deeply unpopular policies they will now try to implement. Far from being stable there are likely to be periodic crises over the coming period.

The voting system is outrageously undemocratic. For the smaller parties their share of seats is out of all proportion to their percentage share of the vote. The Greens are only represented by a single MP despite getting a million votes. The DUP won 8 seats with just 180,000 votes. A key campaigning demand now should be proportional representation, so that future elections give parties a fair share of seats according to their real support.

Left Unity rightly made this point central to its post-election statement [16] – it will need to work over the next weeks to explore how to make this a campaigning priority – and how to work with others to address this massive democratic deficit.

The results also reinforce the need to build a broad left party as an alternative to Labour. They bring home in full force the price we are paying for the squandering of previous attempts to build broad parties in Britain over the past 25 years. None of the socialist left parties in this election has results that match the election results of Respect in its most healthy period or in the Socialist Alliance before it. We have been going backwards whilst the left in many other countries in Europe have been going forward.

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The importance of LU is that it is attempting to address this by building a party that is democratic and inclusive and seeks to build ongoing branches – but we are starting from a long way back.

Such an alternative needs to combine presenting a radical political alternative at the ballot box with campaigning on the streets. Left Unity will rightly mobilise for the first major demonstration against the new government called by the People's Assembly on June 20 " and then further ahead for the COP21 demonstrations in Paris as well as much more locally and nationally. We also need a united campaign to defend the NHS " this will be increasingly privatized and cut back by the new government.

But if the SNP and the Greens were better placed to attract anti-austerity voters on 7 May it was not least because they had been appearing on the ballot papers over a long period of time. Left Unity needs to build that credibility not only in communities and campaigns but also at the ballot box in a consistent manner.

[1] Vince Cable was Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, and Danny Alexander was Chief Secretary to the Treasury, in the Conservative-LibDem coalition government 2010-15. Both lost their seats at the election.

[2] For a balance sheet of the September 2014 referendum see [Independence loss contains seeds of future victory](#).

[3] DUP, Democratic Unionist Party, largest of the two unionist (pro-British) parties in Northern Ireland. Governs Northern Ireland in a power-sharing agreement with Sinn Féin.

[4] In the traditional Sinn Féin stronghold of West Belfast (formerly held by party leader Gerry Adams up to 2011) the People Before Profits candidate came second with 19% of the votes to the Sinn Féin candidate's 54%.

[5] The "Queen's Speech" is the speech outlining the government's legislative programme at the beginning of a new parliamentary session.

[6] Ed Miliband was elected leader of the Labour party in 2010 and resigned the day after the May 2015 election.

[7] Peter Hain is a former Labour MP and government minister, and was a noted anti-apartheid campaigner in the 1970s. He stood down in 2015.

[8] Charles Clarke is a former Labour MP and government minister.

[9] Nigel Farage, leader of UKIP, failed to get elected to the Westminster parliament in May 2015. He offered his resignation as leader but it was rejected by his party NEC so he is still leader. He is MEP for South East England.

[10] Douglas Carswell is the only MP for UKIP. Elected as Conservative MP for Clacton in 2005 he defected to UKIP in 2014. He resigned and was re-elected in a bye-election before being again elected in the May General Election.

[11] Local elections were held in most districts in England, but not in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, on the same day as the general election. The results were not available when this article was written.

[12] Caroline Lucas is the Green Party MP for Brighton Pavilion constituency. She is the former leader of the party and strongly associated with its left wing.

[13] NHAP, The National Health Action Party (NHA) campaigns against the privatisation of the English National Health Service and for a reversal of the cuts to NHS funding, services and staff. The party opposes austerity and has called for political reform to counter sleaze.

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[14] Richard Taylor is the founder of NHAP and was elected MP for Wyre Forest in 2001 on the basis of campaigning for the reopening of the local hospital. He was re-elected in 2005 but defeated when the Liberal Democrats stood against him in 2010. He stood again in 2015. Louise Irvine was a candidate for the NHAP, standing against outgoing Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt.

[15] In other words, Left Unity is a formation fighting to build a party, not a simple electoral coalition.

[16] [Left Unity statement on election results.](#)