

Stuart's political diary

Stuart Morgan-Ayrs



The British general election has come and gone, with the unexpected result of a Conservative majority – something largely not predicted by opinion polls. There was a stark contrast between prediction and result presented above and below the England to Scotland border, with the Scottish National Party (SNP) dominating as predicted in Scotland, taking 56 out of 59 seats and 50% of the popular vote, but Labour failing to achieve anything like the number of seats largely predicted to enable a Labour–SNP pact. Meanwhile, despite doing respectably in the polls, the first-past-the-post system meant that increased overall popularity failed to increase the number of seats held by smaller parties like UKIP (increased by 9.5%) and the Greens (increased by 2.8%), while the Liberal Democrats lost far more seats even than expected, losing 15.2% of the vote and 49 seats (BBC News, 2015).

Britain was left split between an anti-austerity and essentially socialist Scotland, and a Conservative-held England and Wales, with their allies in Northern Ireland. This, however, does not present the full picture in terms of the democratic vote, with the Conservatives overall gaining some 36.9% of those who voted nationally (BBC Online, 2015). However, although they gained 41% of the vote in England, the Conservatives only polled 27.2% in Wales and 14.9% in Scotland. Labour, by contrast, nationally polled 30.4%, in England 31.6%, Wales 36.9% and Scotland 24.3%. Although therefore being curtailed by the SNP in Scotland, Labour appealed more consistently across England and Wales. Essentially, therefore, Labour won in Wales, the SNP in Scotland and the Conservatives in England by only a 10% margin to give an effective UK victory.

In terms of nationwide representation, therefore, the crucial electorate appear to have been the 10% of additional Conservative voters in England. The result has been dramatic, with jubilant Conservative members of parliament returning with a majority last seen under the premiership of John Major. As with that last majority government, however, the majority is quite slim, only some 12 seats; and as the fox-hunting debate has already shown, when the SNP resistance proved numerically decisive, the government is vulnerable to determined and combined opposition.

July brought an emergency budget hot on the heels of the Conservative victory, and the decision to make massive savings yet again from the welfare budget. Promises to leave tax credits alone pre-election were abandoned in record time, as cuts were announced from April 2016 to Working Tax Credits, and Child Tax Credits limited to two children. This was meant to be offset by the combined approach of raising the personal tax threshold, and introducing staggered increases to the minimum wage, leading to the so-called 'living wage' before the end of the new parliament.

It soon became clear, however, that the amount in support removed from the poorest families was substantially more than that given back in these two measures. Bain (2015) crunched the figures and estimated that a single person earning £10k per annum would lose £1280, and a couple on the same income would lose £1250. A couple on £20k would gain £22 while a single person on the same would lose £1700. A couple with one earning with two children on £10k would lose £1207, with both working on the same amount with two children losing £1386. Couples on £20k with two children would be generally better off.

In most cases the mid- to high-level income single people and couples, with or without children, would be better off right up to the £130,000 income bracket. Working people on low incomes, therefore, will be noticeably worse off from April 2016, while higher earners will have a windfall. This reduction of income from the working poor, those previously lauded as the strivers and courted by the Conservatives, was explained away ideologically as an attempt to stop the ‘merry go round’ of taking away in tax and then giving back with a little more in welfare. It is interesting that under the New Labour government, Working Tax Credits were an incentive and enabler to work, but now these are ideologically seen as a negative welfare ‘merry go round’.

As usual, cuts also fell on the ill and the disabled. Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) rates are set to fall to the same as Jobseekers, no longer permitting any additional income for the ill. No longer do ill people need additional heating or incur any additional costs which the state will help with. This will make a difference of £30 per week for claimants, which many have used historically for private therapy because of the shortfalls of the creaking NHS system. Free CBT therapies may be available via online provision, however, and other social media-based facilities! Indeed, the fear of therapy being introduced for claimants which, if refused, could lead to sanctions is repeatedly being alluded to. Not only is there the danger of ‘therapy or sanction’, but the online services are of course dependent on internet access. Already at the local library where I live, the free internet service ejects people at their two-hour strict user limit, making claimants struggle to complete the required job search targets in time. Now, presumably, they will have to complete their online CBT within those two hours as well?

Housing benefit will also be reduced again. A two-fold approach of capping the overall total benefits payable to a family is being extended, hitting vulnerable families in better-off areas yet again. Little if any thought seems to have been paid to the long-term sociological effects of ‘cleansing’ poor people from ‘nice’ affluent areas into ghettos. Meanwhile, claimants of benefits such as ESA or Jobseekers will have to pay part of their rent from that benefit as a token gesture that accommodation is not free for poor people! For those already hit by the bedroom tax, this will mean a further reduction of vital income, from which food and heat is supposed to be purchased.

Behind the obvious and declared changes are other more subtle changes. The author had the dubious pleasure of supporting his disabled wife through the process of moving from Disability Living Allowance (DLA) to the new Personal Independence Payment (PIP). After three attempts during the stated opening hours when the phone simply rang out, the harassed-sounding Department of Work and Pensions staff member grumpily churned through 30 minutes of questions just in order to have a paper form sent out for completion. The process was stressful, long winded and

remarkably complicated, requiring a range of details to be provided, and answers to be committed to in advance by the disabled claimant. The process has been made a clear deterrent at each and every step of the way, which can only serve to discourage the most vulnerable and least able to self-advocate.

Against this background of austerity affecting both the poorest and also with vicious departmental cuts planned, the Labour Party's leadership election is taking place. From an early stage it appeared that the 'usual suspects' would apply, with Jeremy Corbyn being the token concession to socialism, who no-one was expected to actually vote for. Now, however, in August and shortly before the election itself, Mr Corbyn is the clear and overwhelming favourite to win. Standing on a platform of challenging austerity and its underpinning economic theory, heralding possible nationalization of railways and power suppliers, and promising a non-militaristic approach to foreign policy, Jeremy Corbyn has grabbed the attention of supporters and detractors alike. Depending on the commentator, he is either a dangerous Marxist about to condemn the Labour Party to oblivion, or the new Messiah, come to deliver us from the economic suicide and unfairness of austerity. The debate currently raging in the Labour Party would seem to indicate, whatever the final outcome, that a real conversation about the values of what should be our main opposition party has begun. In Scotland there is a sense of possibly having a future Labour leader in tune with Scottish left-wing values, who might be an ally, or perhaps a threat electorally to the SNP.

References

- Bain, S. (2015, July 9). Millions to benefit as Tories fulfill pre-election pledge to cut taxes; with a data analysis by Johnstone Carmichael Accountants. *Scottish Herald*.
- BBC News. (2015). BBC News, election 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2015/results>.