



The UK Parliament at Westminster. What if they had an election and nobody won? A hung Parliament on May 7 is a real possibility. Flickr photo

The British Election that No Party Wants to Win?

Andrew MacDougall

The British election set for May 7 remains up for grabs, with David Cameron's Conservatives and Ed Miliband's Labour polling within a margin of error, both in the low 30s. The question Canadian Londoner Andrew MacDougall has is, why would anyone want to win? With the Lib Dems, UKIP, SNP and the Greens all claiming enough support to guarantee a thorny coalition negotiation and a likely conundrum for the Queen, governing may present more headaches than it's worth.

What if there was an election that no party wanted to win? An absurd thought to be sure, but given the headache that awaits the victor of the United Kingdom's election on May 7, the question bears asking. Trouble lurks everywhere: a re-elected Conservative government would be forced to face down a potentially ruinous referendum on Europe, while a Labour government would have to do its own delicate dance with the resurgent nationalists in Scotland. Both issues

threaten to tear the parties—and potentially the nation—apart.

Does victory represent a poisoned chalice?

If early campaigning efforts are any indication, the major parties are all too eager to sip from the cup and acquire the headaches of power. The election campaign is certainly in full swing. David Cameron and the Conservatives have narrowed their focus to the economy, while Ed Miliband's band of Labour brothers have tried to frame the election as a battle between needy workers and greedy bankers.

Each party is looking to press its advantage, using all of the tools available. The parties' social media channels are clogged with partisan attacks and fundraising appeals are being issued seemingly by the hour.

If the tactics have a decidedly foreign feel, there's good reason. Both Labour and the Conservatives have imported key players from Camp Obama to help them over the line: Miliband has tapped the US president's long-time advisor David Axelrod, while Team Cameron, although led by Australian strategist Lynton Crosby, is supported by Jim Messina, a veteran of both Obama presidential campaigns. Their impact has already been felt; indeed, it is Messina who has been messianic over the need to preach the economy.

By economic metrics, Prime Minister David Cameron should be sprinting to victory. Growth has returned to the British Isles, unemployment is down, and the recent slump in oil prices is finally providing relief to the family pocketbook. The prime minister also holds a significant advantage over Miliband on the all-important leadership question. And yet he trails in the polls.

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writ is dropped. The lead makes even less sense when you consider the context in which Miliband is operating: with a hostile press and a restive backbench unsure of his mettle or resonance with the public, Miliband has too often had to divert his assault from Cameron to shore up his rearguard.

Meanwhile, Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg faces the loss of over half of his party's seats, collateral damage of partnership in a coalition government that has seen its policy victories overshadowed by defeats on key issues such as student tuition and electoral reform. Long a protest party, the Liberal Democrat experience of governing has exposed a team of idealists to the brutal truths of government. To govern is to choose and, given the choice, one expects a significant number of Lib Dems would rather not have had the experience.

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And yet the Liberal Democrats could find themselves in exactly the same position come May: junior partners in a coalition government. While they might end up with the same role, the cast of supporting characters has changed significantly.

Clegg's role as the leader of an insurgent outsider party in 2010 has now been firmly eclipsed by a new generation of leaders. In Nigel Farage's United Kingdom Independence Party, Alex Salmond's Scottish Nationalist Party, and Natalie Bennett's Greens, the fringes of British politics have never been more mainstream.

While Salmond tasted bitter defeat in last September's Scottish referendum, resigning his premiership, his expected return to Westminster at the head of a parliamentary delegation that could boast upwards of 50 seats (from its current six) threatens to wreak havoc on a prospective Labour government. The spectacular collapse of Labour's support in Scotland leaves the party facing annihilation in their traditional heartlands north of Hadrian's Wall.

This leaves voters facing the troubling question of who would speak for the unity of the supposedly United Kingdom.

With Cameron already shut out in Scotland, bar a lone MP clinging to a border constituency, and Miliband facing a similar fate, the Union is under threat. What appeared to be a decisive referendum result last autumn could instead morph into pretext for a prolonged—and perhaps fatal—round of constitutional wrangling. Prime Minister Cameron's ham-fisted attempt to capitalize on the Scottish referendum result by pursuing so-called “English votes for English laws” has demonstrated to all just how tricky reforming a jerry-rigged UK constitution will be.

Add in UKIP, the Greens, the Ulster Unionists and the Plaid Cymru from Wales to the strengthened SNP, and voters could wake up to a Humpty Dumpty parliament. The latest es-

timates have these “fringe” parties taking over 100 seats in the 650 seat House of Commons, making the 326 seats of a majority government a distant prospect for either Labour or the Conservatives.

No matter the result, the party with the most seats come the morning of May 8 will face a challenge finding a combination that will produce a stable governing coalition.

Stability is, of course, something the broader business community craves, as the economic recovery that is currently the envy of Europe is not yet assured. Both main parties have committed to balancing the country's books in the next Parliament (albeit to varying degrees and through differing policy tools) and markets will be looking for reassurance that there will be no fiscal recidivism.

Will Labour be able to pass an economic program that pleases the Scottish nationalists, their most likely coalition partners? Would they want to? Will David Cameron need to rely on multiple fringe parties to pass his budgets? And, if yes, at what cost to policy files like immigration and foreign affairs? The policy possibilities are endless.

And then there's Europe.

Long an Achilles heel for UK Conservatives, Europe has once again been planted firmly on the political agenda by the rise of Nigel Farage and his little Englanders. As a result, Cameron has been forced to tack to the right and re-emphasize his commitment to an in-out EU referendum, a policy pledge that poses significant risk to Britain's economic future by fueling uncertainty in the service industries so critical to the UK economy.

Nigel Farage and UKIP have enjoyed nothing short of a meteoric rise since last May's European elections, with their positions on European legislation (too intrusive) and EU free movement policies (too liberal) resonating with voters in communities who either feel disenfranchised or are struggling to adapt to a globalized world.

As a result, UKIP has captured their first two seats in Westminster through the defections, and subsequent re-elections, of two former Conservative MPs, Douglas Carswell and the aptly named Mark Reckless. But by-elections are one thing, a general election another.

No one is quite sure how a UKIP vote at 18-20 per cent would translate at the national level. Farage and his team are thought to be targeting approximately 20 seats, largely in southeast England (where they go head-to-head with Conservatives) but the party has also demonstrated an ability to eat into Labour's vote in the North. Best estimates project 5-8 seats for Farage, but it's how the UKIP will split the voting in other constituencies that have analysts guessing.

But Farage isn't alone in complicating electoral projections.

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The recent surge of Green support (they currently hold one seat at Westminster) to 10 per cent has thrown another spanner in the works, this time for Labour. With SNP killing them in the North and Greens eating into their support in the South, Labour is caught in a pincer movement. Despite a policy platform that can best be described as lunacy (amnesty for terrorists and ballooning the deficit), Green Leader Natalie Bennett had demonstrated an ability to attract left-wing voters exhausted by government austerity. Just how her vote will combine with

UKIP to split constituencies in the South of England is unknown.

Were this enormous electoral complexity unfolding in a vacuum, it would be one thing. But with trouble looming between Greece and the Eurozone, and with a revanchist Vladimir Putin showing no signs of abandoning his quest for Novorossiia, an inward-looking Britain risks being sidelined diplomatically at a time when it can least afford it.

The global community will need Britain. The question becomes: will Britain have enough time to pay attention to the global community?

So, how does the United Kingdom avoid the instability and unpredictability coming its way this election?

With a majority apparently out of the cards, David Cameron and Ed Miliband can only hope to gain enough support to be able to form a coalition with Nick Clegg's Liberal Democrats, the only partner who wouldn't be anathema to either party's base.

Campaigns still matter, and the numbers could shift. Will voters warm to Miliband enough to produce a majority? Will enough UKIPers vote Conservative to swear off Labour? Will Labour find its feet in Scotland and blunt the advance of the SNP?

One thing is certain: the post-election period promises to be filled with twists and turns as the various parties make their bids to lead. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth could be presented with multiple proposals.

The coalition negotiations between Cameron and Clegg following the 2010 election took five days.

Negotiations following this election could stretch to five weeks, and no one is expecting the next government to match the outgoing one, lasting five years. **P**

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