

General Elections in the United Kingdom

May 6th 2010

ANALYSIS

1 month before
the poll

On 6th April Prime Minister Gordon Brown (Labour Party) officially announced the date of the next general elections in the UK. « The Queen accepted to dissolve Parliament and general elections will take place on 6th May, » declared the Head of Government after having met Queen Elizabeth II on Tuesday at Buckingham Palace.

It will be the very first electoral battle as leaders for the three main political parties leaders: David Cameron, who has led the Conservative Party since December 2005, Gordon Brown, who succeeded Tony Blair as the head of Labour on 24th June 2007 (and on 27th June as head of government) and Nick Clegg, who was elected leader of the Liberal Democrats in December 2007. The last election in which three new leaders faced each other was in 1979 which was won by Margaret Thatcher ahead of James Callaghan (Labour) and David Steel (Lib-Dem). Whatever the results of this election may be it will lead to far reaching changes in the political arena.

Just one month before the election the gap between Labour and the Conservatives has closed significantly. Since the autumn of 2007 the latter have been forecast to be the winners (with a 20 point lead) by all the polls. A Labour victory, believed highly unlikely just a few weeks ago, does not now seem completely impossible.

A country in turmoil

The UK has suffered greatly from the economic crisis. After six quarters of GDP contraction the country only emerged from recession in the fourth quarter of 2009 (0.1% GDP growth against a forecast 0.4%), i.e. lagging behind the USA, France, Germany. During 2009 as a whole the UK witnessed a 4.8% contraction in its GDP i.e. the sharpest decrease recorded since 1949 by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Unemployment rates lie at 7.7% of the working population. This may rise beyond 10% in a few months time. The budgetary deficit reached £178 billion (193 billion €) at the end of March i.e. 12.6% of the GDP and public debt stood at 80% of the GDP. Another striking fact: from September to November 2009 salaries in the private sector stagnated for the first time since 2001.

In all, the British state committed £850 billion to saving the City of London as of autumn 2008 just as the international economic crisis started. Social measures were undertaken by the government, some still have

to be started. The most optimistic analysts placed their bets on the positive effects of the depreciation of the pound that was to lead to boosting exports likewise the public cash injections to the financial sector and the sharp reduction in interest rates. Low growth recorded in the fourth quarter of 2009 has been threatened by oil and gas price rises (which the UK now imports), the rise of VAT and finally the regeneration of savings.

Since January last ministers' and Secretary of States' salaries have been frozen just as those of 120,000 of the highest ranking civil servants in the kingdom - GPs, judges, dentists and general managers of the National Health Service (NHS) since the beginning of April. These measures are due to lead to £3 billion in savings by 2014. On April 1st 2010 the upper income tax bands were raised to 50% (+10 points) for anyone earning over £150,000 (165,000 €). Since the beginning of April bankers' bonuses have been subject to surtax of 50% on any sum over £25,000. The benefits of this measure which the Conservatives are challen-

ging (they prefer the abolition of deficit deferrals on banks which for a certain time exonerated the establishments which made heavy losses in 2009 of their tax obligations), are due to make a total £550 million. The VAT rate which was decreased to 15% on 1st December 2008 was raised to 17.5% on 1st January 2010. As from next year on as part of the stabilisation of public finance social contributions are due to increase by 1%. Six million civil servants will see their salary rises limited to 1% over 2 years and retirement contributions will be increased.

The UK has suffered a financial scandal which shook the political system. 392 MPs abused their professional expenses compensation system to gain reimbursement - with tax payer's money - for their personal expenses (ranging from the purchase of gardening materials to housing and making profits in real estate). In all, the sum embezzled rose to £1.12 million (1.28 million €). This scandal led to the resignation of the leader of the House of Commons Michael Martin (Labour) as well as that of 9 ministers, 3 Labour MPs and one Conservative Lord who are still being prosecuted for theft and accounts fraud. They run the risk of 7 years in prison. The probable consequence of this scandal: 150 MPs chose - or were forced to choose - not to stand in the 6th May election.

Executive civil servant Thomas Legg was asked to write a report with regard to this fraud. To date most of the MPs have reimbursed their debts. Prime Minister Gordon Brown paid back £13,000 (14,888 €). 75 MPs refused to pay arguing that the sums asked of them were too high. The average salary of a British MP totals £65,000 per year (73,000€), i.e. more than double that of the average British salary but a sum lower than the average remuneration of lawyer or a doctor. The consequence of this politico-financial scandal is increased mistrust on the part of the British with regard to the political classes. More than 8 people in 10 (82%) believe that politicians are liars.

At the end of March the Sunday Times and Channel 4 revealed that three former Labour ministers - Patricia Hewitt, Geoff Hoon and Stephen Byers - had accepted to plead the cause of private companies with the government for sums ranging between £3,000 (3.350 €)

to £5,000 (5.600 €) per day (the MPs were filmed with hidden cameras). These three MPs who are not standing on 6th May next did not really infringe the law since in the UK former members of the executive (and MPs) can undertake lobbying activities for private companies under certain conditions (that their remuneration is declared and is transparent and they do not undertake any activities directly targeting ministers). However the Labour parliamentary group suspended the three former ministers - and this was probably made all the easier because they were all campaigning at one time or another for the departure of Gordon Brown. The Prime Minister who is attempting to stand as the « Mr Clean » of politics since the expenses scandal has however refused to launch an inquiry into this.

The British Political System

The British Parliament comprises two Houses: the House of Commons and the House of Lords. MPs in the House of Commons are elected for a period that cannot exceed 5 years. Only three governments have ever sat for three terms in office: those after the elections of 1964 and 1997 and that formed after the last election on 5th May 2005. In most cases governments opt for shorter terms and do not wait for the end of that period before calling their fellow citizens to ballot on the date which they think the best for their party.

In the next elections the UK is being divided into 650 constituencies. Indeed the electoral reform approved on 31st October 2006 increased the number of constituencies by four and therefore the number of seats in Parliament also. The constituencies are reviewed very eight to twelve years. Voting takes place according to a single majority election in one round. Named « first past the post » in reference to vocabulary used in horse racing this system privileges the candidate who comes out ahead in the election whether this is 80% or 30% of the vote. Hence in the last elections on 5th May 2005 the Labour Party won 35.3% of the vote but won 55.20% of the seats in the House of Commons. The system is fatal for the « small » parties which can only win a seat if their votes are geographically concentrated. This is how the Scottish, Welsh or Irish nationalist parties succeed in having a few MPs.

Any person aged 18 and over can stand except for members of the clergy of the Church of England, Scotland and Ireland and also those of the Catholic Church, some high ranking civil servants, soldiers, professional policemen, judges and legal officers and finally ambassadors. Every candidate must, in accordance with the law, allow his campaign to be undertaken by an electoral agent who he can choose to pay or not.

At present 11 parties are represented in the House of Commons:

- the Labour Party (Labour), founded in 1900 and led by Prime Minister Gordon Brown. In office since 1997, it comprises 356 MPs;
- the Conservative Party (Conservative), the main opposition party created in 19th century and led since December 2005 by David Cameron - it has 198 MPs;
- the Liberal Democrats (LibDems), created in 1988 and led by Nick Clegg, has 62 MPs;
- the Scottish National Party (SNP), led by Alex Salmond, with 6 MPs;
- the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), a Conservative Protestant party led by Reg Empey with 1 MP;
- the Democratic Ulster Party (DUP), a Protestant party led by Peter Robinson, with 9 MPs;
- Sinn Fein (SF), a republican, nationalist party led by Gerry Adams with 5 MPs;
- the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP), a Catholic party from Northern Ireland led by Margaret Ritchie with 3 MPs;
- Respect-The Unity Coalition, a party that lies to the left of the political scale, created in 2004 by The Guardian journalist, George Monbiot and chair of the coalition Stop the War from Birmingham, Salma Yaqoob has 1 seat;
- Independent Kidderminster Hospital and Health, created to defend the medical unity of the Kidderminster Hospital and also the National Health Service has one seat.
- finally there is one independent MP in the House of Commons.

Just one month before the elections the main question is: will the 6th May election lead to a House of Commons without a real majority and therefore a hung Parliament? Or if the Conservatives win will they be

prevented from governing because they lack an outright majority?

To win the absolute majority in Parliament (326 seats i.e. 117 more than the number they have at present) the Tories have to win five more points than their Labour rivals with the electoral distribution tending more towards Labour (the constituencies of northern England, Labour bastions, are less populous but greater in number than those held by the Conservatives). In addition to this the Labour electorate is concentrated in certain regions notably the north whilst the conservative voters are spread across the entire country thereby limiting the chances of their candidates winning seats in Labour constituencies.

Just one month before the election the Labour Party seems to be recovering in its northern bastions where David Cameron's image, who is advising on greater budgetary austerity, is being damaged due to the budgetary cuts made by his conservative predecessors, notably Margaret Thatcher. In addition to this in the south (Sussex, Hampshire and Dorset), Labour's decline seems to be more in favour of the LibDems than the Conservative Party. According to all political analysts the real battle in these elections will take place in the Midlands, terrain to which David Cameron is devoting most of his energy.

Many observers fear that the election will be like the one in 1974 when no real majority emerged, an unusual event in the UK where the electoral system favours significantly the party that comes out ahead. « I think that a Parliament without a clear majority is becoming increasingly difficult to rule out except if the Conservatives manage to rise above the 40% mark, » stresses Simon Lee, political science professor at the University of Hull.

This scenario which is banal in many European democracies would prove to be a problem in the UK a country in which the political parties are not used to compromising or working in coalitions. A scenario like this might cause a paralysis of the system. The last Parliament without an absolute majority dates back to February 1974 (a minority Labour government). The situation led to more general elections in October of the same year won by Labour. Since 1978 no political party has managed to win more than 50% of the vote.

If the Conservatives win without taking an absolute majority they will be forced to form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. However the latter are a priori much closer to Labour than to the Tories, notably with regard to issues such as the European policy, taxation and the Welfare State. The concessions that David Cameron would be forced to make in the event of a coalition with the LibDems would potentially upset his supporters.

The volatility of the electorate, which increases as the election draws closer, is however quite normal. « The Conservatives probably went too far when they resorted to ideas about austerity, » analyses Tim Bale, political science professor at the University of Sussex. Those who indeed were quick to say that they would make great cuts in budgetary spending if they came into office changed their minds in the face of concern on the part of the electorate. In addition to this the spectre of a parliament without an absolute majority and in which the LibDems would play a key role may frighten some voters at the last minute and lead them to grant their votes in fine to the Conservative Party.

Can the Conservative Party lose?

« I always said that these elections would be closely run, that they were going to be a real choice: Labour or Conservative, Gordon Brown or me. And that these elections were going to be a difficult battle for our party, » repeats David Cameron. The opposition party faces a major problem: it has to adapt its programme to the economic crisis. This is why David Cameron is trying to convince the British that although reducing the debt is one of his priorities he will not sacrifice the Welfare State and he will keep up their social guarantees. « I think that everyone in this country knows that five more years of Gordon Brown would be a disaster. The Labour government is locked in a dangerous dance with death that is pulling our entire country down, » he declared adding, « These are elections we have to win because our country is in the most utter turmoil and it is our patriotic duty to put order back and offer it a better future. »

The Conservative Party, which in 2005 won more votes in England than its Labour rival, did see some of its vo-

ters (notably the eldest) leave it to join the ranks of the LibDems (or other parties) and the 25-34 year olds belonging to the wealthiest socio-professional categories from the ethnic minorities for example turn to Labour. These are the voters who David Cameron would like to see return to the Tory fold so that his party, which has not been in the opposition (13 years) for as long as this - since the 18th century - can return to power. To do this he has to reposition his party with regard to issues on which it has been relatively silent to date, such as for example the environment, child protection, the support of public services, etc ... David Cameron, who is more a pragmatist than an ideologist has understood that voters will only choose change if they are sure that they will not lose their benefits with the advent of the Conservatives as leaders of the State. A notable example of this position: David Cameron has promised to fight for « those who are being ignored, the young, the old, the rich, the poor, the Black, the White, homosexuals and heterosexuals. »

But the vital issue that the opposition has to face is the following: how are they going to reduce spending and maintain public services? The Tories have varied greatly in terms of their declarations so as not arouse doubt amongst the electorate, for example they have announced a tax break for married couples, then they changed their minds and went back on this promise. Some uncertainty started to emerge in autumn 2009. These intensified and focused on the personality of George Osborne, an orthodox economist responsible for finances in the shadow cabinet. « George Osborne is accused for his lack of knowledge of business and the City environment and his ability to manage the country's economy is now being doubted, » analyses the chair of the pollster YouGov, Peter Kellner. David Cameron therefore asked Kenneth Clarke, former Finance Minister (1993-1997) with John Major and Trade Minister in the shadow cabinet to take a higher profile in the electoral campaign.

David Cameron has a personal career which is characteristic of the upper classes in Britain. He was educated at Eton, a private high society school, then Oxford, the best university in the realm alongside Cambridge - the present Conservative leader did not however -

after his university studies - go to the City as most of his counterparts did but he started his career with the Conservative Party as a researcher. In 2001 he was elected MP in the constituency of Witney near Oxford (three of his ancestors were Conservative MPs in the 19th century and at the start of the 20th century and the Conservative leader is a distant descendant of King William (1830-1837)) before rising to take over the Conservative Party in December 2005. David Cameron tries to attenuate the image of privilege which dogs him and has tried to bring his party more to the centre. As a matter of fact he succeeded in winning over some former Blair voters in the ilk of the British business world which has turned its back on Labour.

Whilst Margaret Thatcher only acknowledged individuals, denying the existence of a British society David Cameron has made the idea of a broken society popular throughout this electoral campaign. He defends compassionate conservatism. He says he is a liberal, believing that society must help each individual give the best of himself, but he is also sensitive to the fate of the poorest who he wants to help improve their daily lives. He would like to convince people that the Tories are no longer a party of the privileged few and that they also are concerned about the poorest. « We must return to a responsible society. The main goal of the new policy we want to establish must be massive, in depth, radical redistribution of power: from the State to the citizen, government to Parliament, judges to the people, bureaucracy to democracy, » he said.

The Conservatives have made the reduction of the public debt and deficits the focus of their economic programme. However they say that they will not take up a policy of public cuts as Margaret Thatcher did. « Reducing deficits is not an alternative to economic growth, it is a vital aspect of it. The main goal that I have set is to be as radical in social reform as Margaret Thatcher was with regard to economic reform, » stresses David Cameron who is trying to reassure voters and soften the Tory image by promising to maintain public services.

With the slogan « A vote for change » the Conservative Party wants to address the balancing of public finances

as soon as it gets into office whilst Labour believes it wiser to wait at least one year until economic recovery has strengthened. « Public spending will have to be reduced and it will be painful. We must address the culture of irresponsibility in the UK and it will be difficult for many. The bureaucracy that Labour has introduced must be done away with, » repeats David Cameron. In order to refloat public spending the Conservative Party is planning to freeze civil servants' salaries for one year (except for those receiving wages below £18,000 - 11,960 €). 80% of civil servants - 4 million people - will therefore be involved, a measure that will lead to savings of £3.2 billion. The Conservatives want to reduce the cost of running the civil service by 30% (the Tories believe that British bureaucracy is excessive) and limit some social aid.

If his party wins on 6th May next David Cameron says that he will put forward an emergency plan for finance in the 50 days following his appointment. He promises to reduce taxes on companies by three points (bringing it down to 25%). This reduction in taxes would be financed by the remolding of the general system and by the elimination of some « loopholes » in the present tax system. On 20th March last he announced that he was planning to introduce a new banking tax « to reimburse tax payers the aid they provided and to protect them in the future. » « President Barack Obama said he would give tax payers every cent back. Why should it be different here? The new tax would not be popular everywhere in the City but I think it is fair and necessary, » declared David Cameron. « The tax on British banks by the Tories is a sure way of encouraging banks to leave the UK which will increase costs for borrowers, it will damage the UK's competitiveness and will cost the country tens of thousands of jobs, » answered present Secretary of State for the financial sector Paul Myners who added « this tax can only be international ». Kenneth Clarke said that the Conservatives had to think about a possible VAT tax.

David Cameron lost a certain amount of support when he failed to condemn the 10 point tax increase on the higher bands of income launched on 1st April together with the establishment of a surtax of 50% on bonuses over £25,000. But aware that no election can be won by offering « blood and tears », the Conservative

Party has modified its approach somewhat as the gap between the two parties has diminished.

The present Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling stresses that the Conservative promises can only be funded to a total of £11 billion whilst the total cost of its economic programme rises to £45 billion/year. George Osborne said that in addition to freezing civil servants' salaries the Conservatives are planning to reduce the salaries of government members by 5%, to undertake major budgetary cuts and to raise the age of retirement. This is due to rise from 65 for men to 66 years in 2026 and for women from 60 to 66 in 2020. The Tories hope to introduce this measure ten years earlier which would lead to savings of £13 billion. David Cameron did however promise not to reduce spending on healthcare. « We shall not reduce spending on the National Health Service. The NHS is special and I promise a real increases in spending each year, » he said. In 2007 before the crisis the Tory leader declared, « My priority comprises three letters: NHS »

With regard to the institutions David Cameron declared that he wanted to modify the electoral law so that set terms in office were established in the UK, he plans to reduce the Prime Minister's powers and allow the broadcast of parliamentary procedures on the internet site Youtube. He also wants to establish the right for a referendum initiative on both a local and/or national level.

Since the first half of the 19th century the opposition leader forms a shadow cabinet which meets every Thursday at the House of Commons. This tradition enables future ministers to learn about their area of responsibility and to prepare their working programme. In the present shadow cabinet 38 year old Conservative George Osborne is the closest person to work with David Cameron and is in charge of the Finance portfolio. He has already laid out a crisis budget that he intends to push through within fifty days of taking office if the Conservative Party wins. William Hague, Tory leader between 1997 and 2001 is responsible for Foreign Affairs; Kenneth Clarke, former Finance Minister to John Major (1990-1997) who supports the euro is Trade Minister; Michael Grove former BBC and Times journalist

is responsible for education. Finally Francis Maude is Shadow Minister for the Cabinet Office.

Although the Conservative victory has been announced for the last few months David Cameron does have a few reasons to be worried. The Tory leader knows that he owes most of his popularity to the ebbing in popularity of Labour. Some, including within the Conservative Party itself, doubt that he has the strength to assume the post of Head of Government and lead the UK. Others show concern about the determination of their leader to reduce public deficits. The most eurosceptic Conservatives who hold it against him for having abandoned the idea of a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty since this entered force say they are prepared to vote for the eurosceptic UK Independence Party (UKIP). « The Tory victory has been announced too early, » says the Conservative Mayor of London, Boris Johnson who add, « voters need the suspense - they succeed into pumping it back in where it did not exist. » « Victory is not certain, we have to continue working day and night to succeed, » repeats David Cameron.

In March the press revealed that billionaire Michael Ashcroft, the kingdom's 37th fortune, Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party and Member of the House of Lords did not pay taxes in the UK. Michael Ashcroft who promised to return to the UK to assume his responsibilities in 2000 just before he was appointed to the House of Lords indeed enjoys a non-resident tax status which exempts him from paying income tax since this mainly originates from abroad - from Belize in the main. This privilege is normally reserved for citizens who do not have British nationality and who take up temporary residence in the UK without intending to stay there. Lord Ashcroft is an important person in the Conservative Party of which he is the most generous donor. He is responsible for supervising the electoral campaign in dozens of constituencies that the Tories absolutely have to take if they are to win the elections. If the Tories win Michael Ashcroft has promised that he will become a full tax-paying Briton.

These revelations about a high ranking dignitary of the Conservative Party come at a bad time for David Cameron who has often said that he intends to clean up political life and who stands as a champion of integrity

after the expenses scandal in Parliament. The Conservative leader has promised to prevent those who are non-resident in the UK from sitting in Parliament if his party wins.

Can Labour win the election?

« The vote for change » will not take us forwards but backwards. Because the Conservatives will take the wrong decisions at the wrong time for the wrong reasons in favour of the wrong kind of people, » says Prime Minister Gordon Brown adding, « The Labour Party can and must win these elections. » After thirteen years at the head of the country, Labour, first with Tony Blair and then Gordon Brown, is somewhat frayed on the edges. It suffered greatly because of the economic crisis, the Iraq War and the expenses scandal. A short time ago victory seemed impossible for the ruling party which set one goal and that was for defeat to be the least humiliating as possible.

Gordon Brown has dedicated great time and energy in trying to change his image of being a rigid, distant man. On 15th February he gave a TV interview on ITV1 in which he revealed himself as never before, speaking of the death of his daughter from a brain hemorrhage ten days after she was born in 2002. Gordon Brown says that he has never hit anyone after editorialist Andrew Rawnsley accused him in a book published in February of hitting his co-workers and tending towards violent fits of anger. On this occasion he discussed the problems which are of concern. Gordon Brown, who is very different from his predecessor Tony Blair, who communicated perfectly with the British, is trying by all possible means to provide an image of a politician who is close to British citizens. In 1992 the then Conservative Prime Minister John Major boosted an electoral campaign which had started badly by talking directly to voters from a tribune set up in small provincial towns. To everyone's surprise he won the elections.

The future of public finances which are floundering because of the recession and the room to manoeuvre on the part of the future government are the major issues in this electoral campaign. When they came to power in 1997 Labour made a promise to the British: that they would put public services back on their feet wi-

thout eating into the State's accounts. The first part of the contract was respected: public services work better now than 13 years ago (2.3 million jobs were created in the civil service between 1997 and 2009); however the second part leaves much to be desired. Gordon Brown positions himself however as the only one who is able to rise to the economic challenges ahead.

Although budgetary deficits have reached 12.6% of the GDP Gordon Brown wants to continue increasing public spending. There is no question of reducing these before 2011. « Labour will be the party of investments and the Tories that of budgetary cuts, » indicated the Prime Minister. Qualifying the Conservative programme a 'mascarade' he added that the Conservatives will endanger the return of growth and lead UK into the kind of danger equal to that which is threatening Greece.

Whilst the Conservatives are moving back to the centre the Prime Minister is attempting to reintroduce the class struggle into the electoral campaign saying for example that the opposition's fiscal policy was « drawn up on the playing fields of Eton ». Gordon Brown has called for the establishment of a Tobin tax on international financial transactions and a tax on traders' bonuses. This repositioning on the left by the Head of Government seems to be winning over some voters. In addition by making the City take the blame for the British economic collapse and by punishing the main players involved in that Gordon Brown is attempting to free himself of all responsibility in the crisis.

« We are going to change the world again, » says Gordon Brown repeating that David Cameron wants only the happiness of some privileged individuals. Labour wants to divide the budgetary deficit in half by 2014 bringing down from 12.4% to 5% of the GDP; Gordon Brown hopes to see the goal to reduce deficits become law.

The nature of the international economic crisis also convinced the Prime Minister to break the New Labour taboo of not increasing taxes on the wealthiest in order to make the economy run better - which releases funds for the poorest. « We shall have to increase taxation on the wealthiest, reduce costs and make savings where it is possible, » declares Gordon Brown.

Labour wants to tax income over £100,000 (110,000 €) to a total of 50%. Half of the planned tax increases will be paid by 2% of the wealthiest Britons indicates

the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling who added, « it seems normal that those with the widest shoulders should bear the heaviest burden. » He also announced the freezing of the salaries of the 750,000 best paid civil servants. He maintains that the savings generated by this measure will enable the creation of four new schools or ten new medical centres per year or to pay the salaries of 3,200 nurses or 2,200 teachers.

To win the election Gordon Brown can only count on a change in the economic situation announced in growth statistics that are to be published on 28th April whilst the electoral campaign is in full swing. The Prime Minister has made five promises: to reduce the budgetary deficit by half, to boost the economy, to protect public services, to create a million qualified jobs and build an economy based on new technologies. On 24th March Finance Minister Alistair Darling presented the State budget for 2010-2011. The government has chosen to attack public deficit once growth has returned to the country. « A policy to reduce State spending immediately would be a dangerous mistake and may blow recovery off course, » recalled Alistair Darling who is planning that the next budget which should lead to savings of £11 billion will be « the most drastic in decades ». GDP growth forecasts are for the time being unchanged at 1.2% in 2010 and 3.3% in 2011 and 3.5% in 2012.

The 2010-2011 budget maintains the employment aid plan for young unemployed. It plans aid of £2.5 billion (2.8 billion €) for SME's, the creation of a green bank with a capital of £2 billion (half coming from the private sector the other from the sale of public assets) to fund innovative projects in the areas of transport and energy. The new budget doubles the threshold whereby people investing in real estate have to pay tax (£250,000, i.e. 280,000 €), increases the tax on the purchase of a property in excess of £1 million and freezes the threshold beyond which inheritance tax is due for the next four years. In addition to this pensioners who receive over £130,000 per year will see a reduction in their tax breaks and tax payers earning over £100,000 annually (the wealthiest 2%) will also lose their tax rebates. Alistair Darling has indicated that tax on bonuses had already brought in £2 billion (2.2 billion €).

Finally the Finance Minister announced that the public

deficit in 2010 will not be as high as planned - £167 billion (185,8 billion €), 11.87% of the GDP i.e. -0.8 points notably thanks to tax revenues and a fall in unemployment. « The Chancellor of the Exchequer's approach has been deemed politically adept. He has not promised to undertake certain types of spending but he revealed that public finances were in a better state than we thought just a few weeks ago. This gives him greater room to manoeuvre » analyses Ian Begg, Professor at the London School of Economics.

In addition to this on 17th March the Office for National Statistics indicated that the number of people receiving unemployment benefits had dropped (-32,000) in February i.e. the biggest decrease since November 1997. « A vital thing for Labour is the number of unemployed falling below the May 1997 level when it initially came to power, » stresses economist Michael Saunders.

On 9th February Parliament adopted - 365 votes in favour 187 against - the organisation of a referendum on the change in election methods applied during general elections. According to the planned system called the « alternative vote » voters will be able to rank the candidates they want to give their votes to by order of preference. The popular consultation on this electoral reform is due to take place in October 2011. David Cameron qualified this vote a « trick » and « a cynic attempt to save himself on Gordon Brown's part. » Political leaders remarked that Gordon Brown had always been a supporter of the present system, at least whilst it was going in his favour. The Conservatives also protested against a referendum, which in their opinion, will cost £80 million, an unjustifiable expense during this period of deep economic crisis.

In the political analysts' opinion this law is a clear gesture towards the LibDems, the eternal victims of the British two-party system. This electoral reform, if adopted, will comprise a true revolution in the UK where the formation of an electoral coalition is an exceptional matter and where the concentration of power in the hands of one party has been the rule for centuries.

Labour have also said they want to abolish the House of Lords and replace it with an elected House, another measure that would revolutionize the British system

and put an end to centuries of tradition. « I think the time has come to turn this House into an elected one, the only way to make a legislative assembly legitimate, » declared Andrew Adonis, Transport Secretary.

Will the LibDems decide which way the election swings?

In spite of their name the Liberal Democrats are closer to Labour than to the Conservatives. Indeed they support the Welfare State and are against decreases in taxation. The difference between the LibDems and Labour is however notable in terms of foreign policy. The most pro-European party in the kingdom, the third most important party was the only one to stand against intervention in Iraq and the dispatch of reinforcements to Afghanistan. The polls show however that foreign policy is of minor concern when it comes to voting.

The party has put forward four non-negotiable points in its programme in the event it is called upon by one of the two 'main' parties in government : aid to educate the poorest, a £10,000 increase in the annual revenue threshold on which tax has to be paid, a reform of the City via the separation of investment banks and the networks and the creation of a 10% tax on banks to fund the return to work of those who have fallen victim to the recession and finally a reform of parliament.

In the past the LibDems have reached government twice: in the 1930's with the Conservative Party and between 1974 and 1979 with Labour. Their leader Nick Clegg is particularly critical of the 13 years of Labour government refusing to say which of the two 'main' parties he prefers whilst maintaining that the one that gets the most seats will have the moral mandate to govern the country. The LibDems, who want to introduce a dose of proportional voting into the election method, may however be won over by Labour's offer to organize a referendum on the modification of the electoral system.

« Contrary to the previous election the LibDems have in their ranks leading men who might legitimately pretend to major posts in a coalition government, notably Vincent Cable, who is responsible for economic affairs, » analyses Patrick Dunleavy, Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics. Nick Clegg

likes to repeat, « I am not a kingmaker, the kingmakers are the 45 million British voters. »

British voters who seem extremely divided just one month before the vote will maybe decide as they watch TV. Indeed the 6th May election will be an opportunity for an all time first in the UK - i.e. the organization of TV debates between the leaders of the three main political parties and therefore the candidates standing for head of government. The polls show now that voters increasingly decide which way to vote according to the personality of the candidate standing for Prime Minister. Although the French and the Americans and more recently the Germans are familiar with this kind of exercise, the British who until now have chosen more a party rather than a man, have never had this experience.

David Cameron is greatly in favour of it convinced, possibly incorrectly or correctly, of his superiority over his rival Gordon Brown in this area. The leaders of the three main parties will be debating live on three occasions on ITV, Sky and on the BBC. Alistair Stewart of ITV, Adam Boulton of Sky News and David Dimbleby, the host on Question Time, will be the three journalists to chair the debates. The programmes will last 90 minutes and will take place before a selected audience. « These debates significantly change the nature of the electoral campaign in the sense that they will have to make it a high point, » stresses John Curtice, professor at Strathclyde University.

The first TV debate on 29th March on Channel 4 brought together the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling, his counterpart in the shadow cabinet, George Osborne and the spokesperson for economic affairs with the LibDems, Vince Cable. It was an opportunity for a heated exchange between Conservative and Labour with Mr Darling saying that he would resume office if Labour won. The journalists did however note that the Liberal Democrat who says he was the first to anticipate the crash in the real estate market and the bank loans crisis received the most applause. None of the three men explained clearly however how he would go about reducing public spending, a measure on which they all agree.

Although a Labour victory seemed to be totally impossible just a few weeks ago the gap between the two

General Elections in the UK 6th May 2010

main parties has closed up significantly just one month before the election. Since 17th February no poll has granted an absolute majority to David Cameron's party. Although voters do not seem to want to see Labour continue their government there is however no real sign that they want the Conservatives either. Hence a survey published on 30th March revealed a turn in the trend showing that the British are now more confident in Labour rather than the Conservatives with regard to managing the country's economy: 33% of those interviewed say that Gordon Brown has greater ability to improve the country's economic situation, 27% quote David Cameron and 13% Nick Clegg. The first time when this question was asked (10th December 2009), the Conservatives won 33% and Labour, 26%.

« Voters were not at all sensitive to Westminster's latest affairs such as for example the fact that Lord Mi-

chael Ashcroft does not pay his taxes in the UK. The only thing that counts right now is the economy and the question of seeing who will be the best in terms of bringing the country out of the crisis, » says Joe Twyman, political polls director for YouGov. The Conservatives will try to convince the British that five additional years of Labour will be catastrophic. « The economy is bogged down, society likewise, the entire country has been pulled down with Gordon Brown. And it is change we need... to make our economy, our country, our society move forwards, » declared David Cameron on 27th March. Labour will try to convince the population of the dangers the Conservatives will make the country run if they come to power.

The most recent polls by Angus Reid, published in the Sunday Times on 4th April credits the Conservative

Results of the General Elections 5th May 2005 in the UK

Turnout: 61.3%

Political Parties	N° of votes won	% of votes won	N° of seats
Labour Party	9 562 122	35.3	356
Conservative Party	8 772 598	32.3	198
Liberal-Democrats	5 981 874	22.1	62
UK Independence Party (UKIP)	603 298	2.2	0
Scottish National Party (SNP)	412 267	1.5	6
Greens	257 758	1	0
Democratic Ulster Party	241 856	0.9	9
British National Party (BNP)	192 746	0.7	0
Plaid Cymru (PC)	174 738	0.6	3
Sinn Fein (SF)	174 530	0.6	5
Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)	127 414	0.5	1
Social-Democrat and Labour Party (SDLP)	127 626	0.5	3
Respect-The Unity Coalition	68 094	0.3	1
Independent Kidderminster Hospital and Health Concern	18 739	0.1	1
Others	8 662 086	1.3	1

Source : British Parliament - the House of Commons

Party with 38% of the vote, 27% for Labour and 20% for the Liberal Democrats. A YouGov poll indicates that the Tories are due to win 39%, Labour 29% and 20%

for the Liberal Democrats. The challenge facing David Cameron is still not as great as the one facing Gordon Brown on 6th May next.

46 million Britons are being called to ballot on 6th May next to elect the 650 members of the House of Commons, the lower chamber in Parliament, within constituencies that include on average around 70,000 voters. Amongst the Britons living abroad only those who left the country within the last 15 years are allowed to take part in the vote. The UK, alongside Malta, Ireland, Cyprus and Denmark is one of the European countries to restrict expatriate voting the most.

The Conservatives, who for a long time were predicted to be the winners of the election are no longer guaranteed to win an absolute majority in Parliament. For the first time since 1992 the suspense is at its height just one week before the elections which have been qualified as « the most important in a generation, » by Tory leader, David Cameron who is calling for « a new start which the country so badly needs. » For his part Prime Minister Gordon Brown (Labour) is defending the government's results and is trying to convince Britons that Labour can embody change.

The main novelty in this election, apart from the use of internet, has been the first ever TV debates, three of which have been organized between the leaders of the three main political parties: Gordon Brown (Labour), David Cameron (Tories) and Nick Clegg (LibDems).

The first of these TV debates focused on domestic policy on 15th April on ITV. It took Nick Clegg, who had never enjoyed such a far reaching media tribune, nor had he ever been placed on a level as his rivals, just 90 minutes to become the man of the election. According to a poll 43% of those interviewed declared Nick Clegg « winner » of the debate, 26% quoted David Cameron and 20% Gordon Brown. 9.4 million Britons watched the debate. The Prime Minister, who is generally ill at ease before the media, this time seemed relaxed showing his confidence and playing on his experience as head of government. At the start of the debate a slightly nervous, defensive David Cameron advised for change whilst the Labour leader mainly spoke of prosperity and Nick Clegg, fairness. But above all the Lib-Dem leader succeeded in standing as a credible alternative to his two adversaries and by doing this he raised concern on their part. « I don't know what you think but I think that the more they attack one another the more they are alike, » he said addressing the viewers. The day after the debate, « I agree with Nick, » became the campaign phrase, five words uttered no less than seven times by Gordon Brown during the debate.

The organization of these TV debates between the main political leaders has naturally helped to bring a personal touch to the election. The personalities of the

candidates standing for Prime Minister will therefore be of the utmost importance on 6th May next.

The second debate took place on 22nd April on Sky News and focused on international affairs. Nick Clegg, by far the most pro-European of the three men defended his commitment to Europe explaining that the UK needed its EU partners and that only the union and therefore Europe could enable Britain to be strong enough to settle problems such as terrorism, environmental issues etc ... He also promised to bring home British soldiers stationed in Afghanistan during the next legislature, which both of his rivals contest. Gordon Brown pointed to his experience and maintained his pro-European commitment: « 3 million British jobs depend on Europe, our country does half of its trade with the continent and 750,000 companies work for Europe, » he indicated accusing David Cameron of « wanting to hem in the UK. » « I want to be in Europe but I do not want to be led by Europe, » said the Conservative leader. After the debate more than one third of viewers (36%) thought that David Cameron had won, 32% pointed to Nick Clegg and 29% Gordon Brown according to a poll by YouGov.

The third debate will take place on economic issues on the BBC on 29th April.

D-7

7 days before
the poll

Nick Clegg's performance during these two TV debates cast doubt amongst the Conservatives and to some extent was the cause of joy amongst Labour. The rise of the Lib-Dems is part of an historic movement which shows that Brits have been turning away from the two main parties over the last 60 years. In 1951 98% of voters chose either Labour or Conservative. In 2005 this figure had dropped to 59% (it was only 40% in the last local elections on 5th June 2009). The « small » parties have therefore regularly been gaining ground.

The Conservatives who see the emergence of a victory but without an absolute majority are extremely worried. Traditionally Labour needs less votes to win their seats thanks to an electoral split that is extremely favourable to it and an electorate which is concentrated in specific regions such as the north of the country whilst conservative voters are spread across the entire country. In addition to this in the south of England the Lib-Dems are often the Conservatives' leading rivals whilst the Labour bastions of the north are better protected against a possible Conservative victory. « Between us there is just a cigarette paper, » declared David Cameron with regard to his relations with Nick Clegg. Traditionally however the Lib-Dems are much closer to Labour than to the Tories.

For their part Labour perceive, in the event of a hung Parliament (the name given to a parliament that has no majority in the UK), the possibility of making an alliance with the Lib-Dems and thereby retain power. « If they have not succeeded in achieving what they put forward in the last 13 years who will believe that they can finally do it this time round? » asks Nick Clegg whose interest it is to distinguish himself from Labour during the campaign. He still refuses to say with which of the two big parties he would be ready to form an alliance and allows the courtship of both and at the same time plays one off against the other.

David Cameron repeats that a vote in support of the Lib-Dems would mean continuing with Gordon Brown in power for the next five years. « A Parliament without an absolute majority will be synonymous to instability, uncertainty, potentially higher interest rates and a loss of credit for the UK, » he declared in The Times. Ken-

neth Clarke, former Finance Minister (1993-1997) with John Major and Trade Minister in the shadow cabinet, brandishes the flag of threat in the shape of the IMF. « The obligatory market will not wait, the pound will fall if Britons do not elect a government with sufficient majority for it to be able to do its work and if the markets believe that we cannot address our debt issues and public deficit the IMF will have to take charge of it in our stead, » he indicated. This statement was qualified by the Chancellor of the Exchequer (UK Finance Minister), Alistair Darling, as « a desperate tactic »; Vince Cable, the economic affairs spokesman for the Lib-Dems said it was « alarmism of the worst possible kind. »

« Voters want more choice and the fact that two leaders are trying to refer to a comfortable past will change nothing. I hope that people will not be scared and will continue to trust their instinct by behaving differently this time round, » declared Nick Clegg, adding, « Do not let anyone tell you that the only choice possible is that of the old parties. »

« Previously voting for change meant voting for David Cameron. Since last Thursday (1st TV debate) this is no longer the case. The Lib-Dems are benefiting from the depoliticization set in place by the leading parties who now resemble each other – with compassionate conservatism on the part of David Cameron and the Thatcherism in the guise of Tony Blair, » says Jacques Reland, Research Director for the Global Policy Institute in London. « The election of a minority government will lead long term to an in depth reform of the electoral system with a trend towards a proportional system, » anticipates Tony Travers, political expert at the London School of Economics.

The Conservative Party chose the old power station in Battersea in south London as the venue to present its 130 page electoral programme which is « an invitation to join the UK government. » « If you vote conservative on 6th May next you will not only be voting to change the system as a whole, » says David Cameron, who promises to give power back to the people.

The programme attempts to be a summary of modernism and tradition. It sketches out what the To-

ries call « big society », a society in which the State grants most of its power to the citizens and in which the people takes part in decision making. Hence the Conservative manifesto plans for the organisation of referendum on local issues if 5% of the inhabitants in a town ask for it, a 10% reduction in the number of MPs in the House of Commons, the right to kick out MPs who fail in their mandate (as in California), the right for parents to « save » schools and the creation of cooperatives in the public sector. The latter idea came from John Spedan Lewis who after 1929 distributed shares and profits from his company to his employees (69,000 employees share profits at present). David Cameron announced in February that the civil service (except for the army, the police and the law) will be able, if their teams so decide it, to leave the service and create cooperatives or non-profit making companies to the service of the tax-payer. This system will enable savings and improve the efficacy of the service provided (in nurseries, schools etc ..). Cooperative workers would be called to organise their work and decide on their pay as they deem fit. « The country needs a big society and not a big administration. We shall give people the chance to be their own boss and offer citizens a better service, » declared the Conservative leader on 15th February.

In the event of victory the Conservatives have committed to adopt an emergency budget and to make major budgetary cuts as soon as they take office in order to reduce public deficit which in 2009/2010 rose to £152, 84 billion, a record level since the end of the Second World War. They hope to go faster and more thoroughly than Labour with regard to cutting public spending and have promised a save an additional £6 billion (6.8 billion €) in comparison with the Labour Programme. The Tories are planning to eliminate the structural share of the public deficit in 5 years. They are due to freeze civil servants' salaries in 2011 and increase the retirement age.

However they have promised increases in spending on the National Health Service, (NHS) in line with inflation and have promised to cancel the 1% increase in social taxes put forward by Gordon Brown's government. They are also promising to reduce taxes of married couples in order to promote the family, raise the thres-

hold whereby Britons have to pay inheritance tax and decrease company tax by 25%-30%. David Cameron has said that he wants to review half of the increases in social charges planned by Gordon Brown.

The Prime Minister stands as the defender of the middle classes. Labour chose the slogan « a fair future for all ». Labour presented its programme on 12th April in Birmingham. This plans – at least until 2015 – for a proportional increase in minimum wages (introduced in 1999 and which lies at present at £5.80 per hour) as well as increases in civil servants' wages (these had been capped at 1% in 2011/2012 and 2012/2013). It does not include increases in income tax but does not exclude increases in VAT. Labour, which is accusing Conservative of endangering recovery by wanting to cut public spending too fast and too much, intends however to eliminate half of the public deficit in four years. « If the Tories had been able to reduce spending last autumn as they would liked to have done we would still be in recession and not in the period of recovery which we have succeeded in reaching, » declared Gordon Brown, adding, « If they do it in June in the emergency budget they are putting forward the danger of recession will hover again over the economy and it will be difficult to restore confidence. » Labour are promising free healthcare for people in great need, a 2.5% increase in pensions and 1.5% increase in child benefits. Three public services are at the heart of Labour's electoral campaign: education, healthcare and security.

Labour also hope to transform the House of Lords into an elected assembly and reform the electoral system by adopting a new means of voting in the general elections – the alternative vote that will enable voters to rank their candidates they want to give their votes to in order of preference. This project would be put to referendum on October 2011. « Labour and the Lib-Dems have the same ideas and the same determination to reform the political system which is not the case on the right, » repeats Gordon Brown.

The Lib-Dem programme is 110 pages long and fosters four main points: the reduction of the public deficit, the reform of the education system, a constitutional reform to avoid a repetition of the expenses scandal

(nearly 400 MPs embezzled money from the professional expenses compensation system in order to pay back their own personal spending) and a reform of household taxation. The party wants to simplify the taxation system, arguing that some tax-payers take advantage of the complexity of the system and they promise that any household earning less than £10,000 (11,300 €) per year will be exempt of income tax. The Lib-Dems think they can save £15 billion by giving up the Trident nuclear submarines which comprise part of the British dissuasion force. To reduce the public deficit they want to limit pay rises in the civil service and introduce a bank tax. « We shall create a totally different banking system, we shall take the banks to pieces from top to bottom, » says Nick Clegg.

Many personalities have committed to this exciting electoral campaign. Actor, Michael Caine, a former Conservative who was won over by Blairism in 1997 has returned to his original party and is supporting David Cameron, likewise Billy Roach, the hero of Coronation Street, singer Phil Collins and actor Billy Murray. Labour enjoys the support of model Naomi Campbell, singer Lily Allen, actor Patrick Stewart, Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson, singers Geri Halliwell, Peter Gabriel and Harry Potter author JK Rowling who says, « poor, vulnerable families will be better treated by Labour than by the Tories under David Cameron. » Finally David Radcliffe, the actor who plays the role of Harry Potter and actor Colin Firth have both committed to the Lib-Dems.

In this electoral campaign the Labour Party has lost the electoral support of The Sun which has sided with the Conservatives. « After 13 long years in power the

government is lost. Now it has also lost the Sun, » ran the daily's headline in January. The weekly News of the World announced on 27th March that it also now supported the Conservative Party. The newspaper declared that it was modifying its editorial line because « the country is crying out for change. »

Finally former Prime Minister Tony Blair (1997-2007) Tony Blair gave his support to Gordon Brown as he spoke in his former constituency of Trimdon (North East) on 30th March. Many political analysts wonder however whether the support of the former Prime Minister, who is the subject of high feeling, particularly because of the war in Iraq, really is an advantage or not.

The polls are formal: whilst everyone was expecting the election to bring Labour against the Conservatives – matters are now being played off between three parties. The latest YouGov poll, published by the Sunday Times credits the Tories with 35%, 28% for the Lib-Dems who run ahead of Labour with 27%. Another poll by ComRes, published by the daily The Independent puts the Conservatives ahead with 34%, 29% for the Lib-Dems and 28% for Labour. According to Ipsos-Mori Nick Clegg's party is running third with 23% behind David Cameron (36%) and then Gordon Brown (30%).

Just one week before the election the question to be asked is can Labour succeed and stay in power by forming an alliance with the Lib-Dems or will the perspective of a hung parliament in which the Lib-Dems would play a key role finally scare off voters and lead to a vote largely in favour of the Conservatives?

RESULTS

The Conservative Party (Tories) won – as forecast in the polls – the general elections that took place in the UK on 6th May. David Cameron's Tories won 36.1% of the vote and 306 seats in the House of Commons i.e. + 97 in comparison with the last general election on 5th May 2005 but they need 20 more to have the absolute majority to govern (326 seats).

Labour led by outgoing Prime Minister Gordon Brown came second winning 29% of the vote and 258 seats (-91). The Liberal Democrats (LibDems) led by Nick Clegg did not achieve what the polls had forecast in the ballot and won 23% of the vote and 57 seats (-5).

In spite of its voting system built to define clear majorities uncertainty now hangs over the British political arena after these elections. The LibDems, in spite of their result, are however now in the position of king-maker.

« The electorate like neither Labour nor the Tories but they like Labour less than the Tories. And they doubt the LibDems, » stressed YouGov director Peter Kellner. « All of the parties have their reasons to be disappointed, » analyses Vernon Bogdanor, political expert at the University of Oxford.

The other seats in the House of Commons will be divided between several regional parties and the Greens: the Ulster Democratic Party (DUP), 8 seats (-1); the Scottish National Party (SNP), 6 (=) ; Sinn Fein (SF), 5 (=); Plaid Cymru (PC), 3 (+ 1); the Social Democratic Party (SDLP), 3 (=) ; the Alliance Party (APNI), 1 (+ 1) and the Greens (G), 1 (+ 1). Caroline Lucas, at present MEP became the first Green MP to be elected in the UK on 6th May as she won the constituency of Brighton Pavilion with 31.33% of the vote, 28.91% went to Labour and 23.68% to the Conservatives. The British National Party (BNP) failed to win a seat. Its leader Nick Farage was beaten in the constituency of Barking and Dagenham in the eastern suburbs of London.

Only 649 MPs were elected on 6th May; the death of the UK Independence Party candidate (UKIP) from Thirsk & Malton, John Boakes obliged the authorities to delay the election which will now take place on 27th May.

Turnout rose to 65.1% i.e. +3.8 points in comparison with the previous elections on 5th May 2005. Voters in several polling stations were unable to fulfil their civic duty however: at 10pm – the time when the election ends - many were still waiting to vote.

In England the Tories came first with 297 seats far ahead of Labour (191 seats) and the LibDems (43). In Scotland the Labour Party easily won taking 41 of the 59 seats with one only going to the Conservatives and 11 to the LibDems. In Wales, Labour won 26 seats, the Tories 8 and the LibDems 3. In Northern Ireland Peter Robinson, Democratic Ulster Party, was beaten in his constituency of Belfast East by the Alliance Party candidate Naomi Long. Reg Empey, the Ulster Unionist Party leader also lost his seat in South Antrim to the benefit of William McCrea (DUP).

Outgoing Prime Minister Gordon Brown was the best elected of the leaders of the three main parties. He won his constituency of Kirkcaldy & Cowdenbeath in Scotland with 64.5% of the vote, David Cameron won in Witney with 58.8% of the vote and Nick Clegg in Sheffield Hallam with 53.4% of the vote.

After the election the UK finds itself with a hung Parliament. The last parliament without an absolute majority dates back to February 1974. Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson governed for eight months without a majority in the House of Commons before convening new elections in October 1974, an election his party won.

The results on 6th May thereby open the way to negotiations between the political leaders.

« The Labour government no longer has any authority to govern our country, » declared David Cameron who started discussions with the LibDems on 7th May in the evening. Both parties who should be able to agree on economic issues – Nick Clegg said that he would approve the budget put forward by David Cameron – oppose one another however in a number of vital areas including European policy, immigration and taxation, nuclear energy and defence. The concessions that David Cameron would be led to make in order to form a coalition with the LibDems might be difficult for some of his party members to accept and he might upset his supporters. The Tories made a pre-electoral alliance with the Democratic Ulster Party (DUP) even though political analysts believe that some DUP MPs will refuse to support David Cameron.

Nick Clegg re-iterated his position adopted during the campaign which was that he was ready to negotiate with the party which won the greatest number of seats and which in his opinion had the moral mandate to lead the country. He indicated on 7th May that he wanted a fairer country in terms of taxation, its political system and a reform of the banks. During the electoral campaign the LibDems pinpointed four areas in their programme which would be non-negotiable: the payment of aid for the education of the poorest, the establishment of £10,000 as the threshold of annual income from which point tax is due, a reform of

the City via the separation of investment banks and networks and the creation of a 10% tax on banks to fund the return to work on the part of recession victims and finally a reform of Parliament. On this point, James Landale, a BBC journalist suggested that the Tories might accept that a referendum be held on a reform of the electoral system whilst reserving the right to campaign against it.

An alliance between the Conservative Party and the LibDems is the only one that will lead to a government that holds a real majority (363 seats).

« I shall play my role. It is my duty to ensure that the UK has a strong, stable government, » indicated outgoing Prime Minister Gordon Brown who said he was prepared to talk with Nick Clegg if the latter did not manage to agree with the Conservatives. However the alliance between Labour and the LibDems would only lead to 315 seats, below the absolute majority. Both parties might envisage forming an alliance with the Social Democratic Labour Party or the Alliance Party to form a minority government.

The Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru are still the unknowns in these negotiations. Both said during

the electoral campaign that they although they had negotiated with one of the « big » parties, they would do everything they could to progress their regional claims with regard to Scotland and Wales respectively.

No deadline has been officially established for the settlement of negotiations between the political leaders. They should however have concluded by 25th May the date when Queen Elizabeth II will speak to Parliament and when she will establish the next government's priorities.

For the time being it is difficult to forecast what the colour(s) of the next British government will be. One thing is certain however: the Britons would not look with a favourable eye on the parties which try to make them re-vote to solve the present cul-de-sac. « The elections are very expensive, the coffers are empty and the ones who are able to raise funds the easiest are the Conservatives which gives all the advantages to David Cameron,» stresses Tony Travers, political expert at the London School of Economics (LSE).

Results of the General Election on 6th May in the UK

Turnout : 65.1%

Political Parties	N° of votes won	% of votes won	N° of seats won
Labour Party	10 706 647	36,1	306
Conservative Party	8 604 358	29	258
Liberal-Democrats	6 827 938	23	57
UK Indépendance Party (UKIP)	168 216	0,6	8
Scottish National Party (SNP)	491 386	1,7	6
Sinn Fein (SF)	171 942	0,6	5
Plaid Cymru (PC)	165 394	0,6	3
Social-Democrat and Labour Party (SDLP)	110 970	0,4	3
Greens	285 66	1	1
Alliance Party (APNI)	42 762	0,1	1
UK Indépendance Party (UKIP)	917 832	3,1	0
British National Party (BNP)	563 743	1,9	0
Others	596 834	2	0

Source : Site internet de la BBC <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/election2010/results>)

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