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# Total uncertainty just one month before the UK elections

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On 7th May next Britons will be renewing the 650 members of the House of Commons, the lower chamber of the British parliament. Only one thing is certain about just one month before the election: the two "major" Parties – the Conservative and Labour – will retain their position as the country's two main Parties. However neither is due to win an absolute majority. Speculation is running high about possible coalitions: Conservative with Liberal Democrats and the Ulster Democratic Party (DUP), or Labour with the LibDems and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), or the Green Party of England and Wales (G) or the Welsh party Plaid Cymru-Party (PC). The formation of the future governing majority is the real issue at stake in the upcoming elections in the UK.

In the UK where the election (first past the post), largely favours the "big" Parties has not changed in four centuries and the political system is extremely stable. In 2011 Britons even approved the system since two thirds of them (67.87%) refused to change the voting method in a referendum which gave them the choice of replacing it with the alternative vote. A consequence of the electoral system is that bipartism has dominated the country since 1935. No new party has succeeded in asserting itself since then. Fragmentation is made impossible by the voting method that enables the election of an MP with just 30% of the vote. During the last election on 6th May 2010, together Conservatives and Labour won more than two thirds of the vote (65.1%), a figure that has declined however over the years: 65.7% in 2005; 72.4% in 2001; 73.8% in 1997 and 76.3% in 1992 and 97% in 1951!

The last elections led to a hung parliament – i.e. without any real majority and for the first time the Conservative Party had to join forces with the LibDems to enjoy an absolute majority in the House of Commons. Bipartism is therefore struggling today. The Conservatives have everything to fear from a rise to power of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) which would deprive them of many votes (and several seats). However even if this event, the latter might not win more than ten seats (15 at best, five forecast in the polls) due to the voting method. The LibDems won 23% of the vote in the last

election but took 8.80% of the seats in the House of Commons. The question therefore is not so much about how far can Nigel Farage get (or how many seats can he take) but rather who will benefit from the turmoil he represents?

Other parties might play a vital role in the upcoming election. Hence the Scottish National Party (SNP) which intends to have its "revenge" over the lost referendum on the independence of Scotland on 18th September last, might find itself in the role of kingmaker in the 7th May election. Indeed it might deprive the Labour Party of an absolute majority as it takes a greater number of vote in the country's north (up to 50 of the 59 Scottish MPs in the House of Commons) and thereby become the third political force in Westminster. Labour's opposition to Scotland's independence and their participation in the "no" campaign alongside the Conservatives displeased a great many Scots. The high concentration of nationalists (the party only exists in Scotland) means that it does not suffer from the voting method.

Labour might be obliged to join forces with a party that is advocating Scotland's independence to guarantee a government majority. The Scottish National Party has already expressed what it wants: a reduction in budgetary austerity, the launch of work on the new high speed train in Edinburgh rather than London, the

dismantling of the Royal Navy nuclear bases in Scotland and total control of Scottish taxation by the Edinburgh parliament. Labour leader, Ed Miliband has understood the danger of this and has promised that he will not form a coalition with the Scottish National Party. For his part, Prime Minister David Cameron can always repeat that "*Labour wants to creep into Downing Street by allying itself with people who want to break our country up.*"

Finally the LibDems who are against the organisation of a referendum on the country's possible exit from the European Union promised by outgoing Prime Minister David Cameron if his party wins might change have a change of mind and decide to join forces with Labour. The present electoral distribution is to the advantage of Labour i.e. with the same number of votes as the Conservatives, Labour would have more seats in the House of Commons.

The uncertainty surrounding the election is also to be found in the polls: a recent survey by YouGov, published in the Sunday Times on 29th March last granted victory to the Conservatives with 36% of the vote, four points ahead of its Labour rival whilst a poll undertaken at the same time by ComRes led to the opposite result: success for the left-wing opposition with the same lead (36%). Finally the most recent poll by Populus, undertaken at the end of March declared that the two main British parties were running equal (34%). UKIP would take third place followed by the LibDems, then the Green party and the Scottish National Party.

According to the polls economic issues, healthcare and immigration are the three priority issues for the British in these elections. The official electoral campaign started on 30th March. In line with tradition Prime Minister David Cameron went to Buckingham Palace to ask Queen Elizabeth II permission to dissolve parliament.

The European Union is also a stake – albeit indirect – in these elections. In May 2013 David Cameron announced that a referendum would be organised on the UK's exit of the EU, as he hoped with this gesture to undermine the Eurosceptic position. However the Prime Minister was caught out since this did not calm the fervour of the anti-European camp. He then worked

towards winning a revision of the treaties in Brussels but Germany and France have refused to enter into negotiations on this issue.

The LibDems and Labour are against the organisation of a referendum on the EU except – and this is highly unlikely – there is a further transfer of power over from London to Brussels.

Nearly two thirds of Britons say they are eurosceptics (63%) according to an annual report by NatCen Social Research published on 26th March last. However more than half of those interviewed (57%) said they wanted their country to stay in the EU with one third (35%) saying they wanted it to leave.

#### DAVID CAMERON'S RESULTS

In office for the past five years outgoing Prime Minister David Cameron has unquestionable results in his support: growth has recovered and today it is at its highest level since 2007 (2.6% in 2014 and 3.5% forecast this year) and unemployment is at its lowest level since June 2008 (5.6% in November 2014). As a comparison growth lay at 1.5% in Germany and 0.4% in France last year. The Conservatives have created two million new jobs over the last five years. The flexibility of the labour market explains these excellent economic results in the main.

4.6 million Britons are self-employed i.e. 15 % of the country's labour force. Between 2008 and 2014 the number of Britons with a job increased by 1.1 million people of whom 732,000 were self-employed. The trend has changed however over the last few months with the number of self-employed stagnating and even declining somewhat with traditional jobs increasing by half a million in 2014. In the same year wages rose by 2.1% i.e. more than inflation notably due to a fall in oil prices. The rise of the pound sterling (+ 18% in one year against the euro + 15% against the dollar) has also influenced wages.

David Cameron has not achieved all of his 2010 goals however. Hence the country's deficit remains high (5% of the GDP) likewise its debt (80.4%) even though these two figures are better than they were five years ago. The Conservatives destroyed tens of thousands of civil service jobs and today employment in the public sector is at a record low in the UK.

Positive growth figures also mask a rise in inequality. The Organisation for Cooperation and Development in Europe (OECD) recently expressed concern about the negative effects of social inequality in the country (and about the low level of productivity) but it granted a satisfecit regarding the reforms started by David Cameron. The OECD suggested the government initiate investment in infrastructures again but also in education, research and development (R&D) to foster a rise in productivity.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Economy Minister) George Osborne qualified the UK as a comeback country. He maintained that the country's wealth would be more than that of Germany in fifteen years' time. He is also promising budgetary balance by 2020-2021. He plans to reduce public spending to 36% of the GDP i.e. just over the 1957-58 level (35.8%) and of 1999-2000 (35.9%). Savings are to be spread over three periods: social security is due to save £13 billion; various ministries £13 billion and the fight to counter tax fraud should bring in £5 billion. Conservatives are promising however to maintain the healthcare budget and investments in education. At the end of March Mr Osborne did however attenuate public financing cuts that had been planned over the next few years thereby depriving the opposition of one of its campaign arguments which suggested that the Tories wanted to roll back the State to 1930's levels.

The Conservatives also hope to reduce taxes. They are promising on the one hand that people earning under £12,500 per annum will be exempt of income tax payments (a measure that should lighten the taxes of some 27 million people) and that on the other hand the highest tax band (40%), set at £41,900 will be raised to £50,000. Social contributions paid by employers will also be cut.

George Osborne also wants to stimulate youth employment (18 to 21 year olds) by simplifying the procedure to in finding work. He is planning investment of £8 billion in books in schools, apprenticeships and the recruitment of teachers. Finally the Conservatives intend to continue their policy of social assistance monitoring: no household that enjoys unemployment benefit will receive allocations over the average

wage of a household that is in work. The government announced that it wanted to bring the maximal threshold of social benefits per year and per household down from £26,000 to £23,000.

Strangely however David Cameron's socio-economic results and the improvement in the economy have only been of little benefit to Mr Cameron. Aware of this the government decided on 18th March last to deliver some pre-electoral "gifts"; in October the minimum wage will be raised by 3% (it will rise to £6.70 i.e. 9.40 €), the biggest rise since 2008. The minimum youth wage will rise to £3.87 (for those aged 16 to 17) and to £5.30 to those aged 18 to 20. Apprentices will benefit from a 20% wage rise (£3.30 per hour). *"Five years ago when I came in this door millions of people were out of work, families had no economic security and people were worried that the country would not be able to pay its debt. The UK was on the edge of the abyss. Five years later, thanks to our long term economic plan and to the difficult decisions we have taken we have the highest rate of employment in our history and living standards are rising. The UK is recovering,"* stressed David Cameron during his appointment with Queen Elizabeth on 30th March last. *"In 38 days' time the Prime Minister who enters this door will be me or Ed Miliband. It's up to you to decide between a growth economy or chaos,"* he added.

David Cameron is still seen however as the representative of the British aristocracy. His refusal to accept a face-to-face debate with the Labour leader Ed Miliband was ridiculed by some journalists. The TV channels BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Sky 2 wanted to organise three pre-electoral programmes bringing the seven political leaders from the "biggest" parties together, and one week before the election, for a last time between David Cameron and Ed Miliband, which the Prime Minister refused to do. Pre-electoral TV debates are not a British tradition. The first to be organised during the previous election took place in May 2010. They attracted an audience of 22 million. David Cameron did however have an indirect debate with Ed Miliband on 26th March (journalist Jeremy Paxman led consecutive interviews with the two men who were also interviewed by voters). The outgoing

head of government seemed to take the upper hand: 54 % of viewers appointed him the victor whilst 46% found Ed Miliband more convincing. On 2nd April a TV debate brought all seven representatives of the main political parties together for a two hour round of questions on the government deficit, the public health system, immigration and young people. A first poll undertaken after the programme granted "victory" to Labour's Ed Miliband; second place went to the SNP's Nicola Sturgeon and third to David Cameron and Nigel Farage.

At the end of March the outgoing head of government surprised everyone by announcing that he would not run for a third mandate if he were to be elected on 7th May next thereby risking immediate arguments over who will succeed him as head of the party. He even went as far as quoting the names of three people, who in his opinion, might succeed him as the Tory leader: Home Affairs Minister Theresa May, Chancellor of Exchequer George Osborne or the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson.

In part David Cameron has failed on one point – immigration. He promised to halve the migratory balance (immigration less emigration) and to bring the number of annual entries under the 100,000 mark. This figure totalled 243,000 last year however. Half of this number came from the European Union, notably Bulgaria and Romania – immigration which the government cannot influence.

*The Guardian* published a study on 6th March by Oxford University showing that the number of immigrants had increased by 500,000 over the last three years. According to the report two thirds of those entering the UK between 2011 and 2014 were born in other EU Member States. Today David Cameron is promising to reduce the number of additional immigrants to "*some tens of thousands.*"

All of the political parties want to reduce immigration (Labour are supporters of limiting access to social benefits by new arrivals to a duration of two years), even though each of them is aware that the country needs immigrants.

## LABOUR STRUGGLES TO MAKE ITS MARK

The Labour Party is running for the vote of the UK's electorate under the banner "*A better project, a better future.*" It is however difficult to differentiate between the Labour project and that defended by the Conservatives. Labour is undoubtedly promising more social equality via greater taxation of the wealthiest and is advocating social spending cuts that are not as drastic and spread over more time. Without an alternative project it is only haggling with the Tories over method and equalisation.

The reduction in the gap between left and right is leading to a personalisation of political life. Unfortunately this has barely been to the benefit of Ed Miliband, deemed to be less credible from an economic point of view than his main rival and not charismatic enough. According to a recent poll only one fifth of Britons believe that he would make a good Prime Minister (20%).

The defeat suffered by Labour in 2010 was not severe enough for them to revise their electoral offer.

Labour, which launched its campaign on 27th March from the top of the Arcelor-Mittal Orbit, tower, the emblem of the 2012 Summer Olympic Games, is promising to raise the minimum wage (from £6.5 to £8) and to halve the number of poorly paid jobs. It wants to re-introduce a 50% income tax band. However it wants to reduce corporate tax. Labour hopes to end zero hour work contracts (this allows an employer to recruit employees for an indeterminate length of time without guaranteeing him a minimum number of working hours, and therefore a wage), it is promising to double the number of first time property buyers and wants to help more young people to access apprenticeships. They are focusing on green industries and hope to double the million jobs that have already been created in this sector.

Ed Miliband's party is also promising to increase family allowance and to modernise the health system by taking on 36,000 (orderlies, doctors and nurses). The cost of these measures is estimated at £3 billion which Labour believes will be provided by the mansion tax – which in its opinion will bring in 2.4 billion €; another tax on tobacco and finally anti-tax fraud measures will bring in the rest. Labour stands as the defender of

the National Health Service (NHS), which is free and universal, since this is the UK's favourite institution.

Ed Balls who would become Chancellor of the Exchequer if the opposition won on 7th May next maintains that British workers are not feeling the positive effects of growth. He maintains that real wages have fallen by £16,000 (2,410 €) since 2010. Ed Miliband criticises the Conservative government similarly for taking an interest in just a few Britons whilst Labour is addressing all of them.

Finally the Labour leader is using the fears of business leaders and financiers regarding the effects of a referendum on the UK's exit of the EU and on the economic situation of the country. *"Nothing could be worse than playing with the place of the UK in the Union. It is a recipe for two years of uncertainty, during which foreign investments will dwindle. This may block the European market to both small and large businesses. Our country has no future in threatening to leave. The Union has to be reformed from within,"* he stressed on 30th March last as he spoke to an audience of business leaders.

## THE OTHER PARTIES

UKIP launched its electoral campaign on 12th February. Initially created on 3rd September 1993 by Nigel Farage, a former Conservative Party member, with the members of the Anti-Federalist League founded by Alan Sked in November 1991 to counter London's signature of the Maastricht Treaty in the general elections of 1992, and long-time positioned on one single issue (the European Union), the party is now one like any other addressing all types of subject.

The party would like to bring mass immigration to an end – it hopes to bring the number of immigrants down from 300,000 (figure provided by the eurosceptic party) to 50,000 per year and to ban immigrants from benefiting from social assistance before having paid taxes for five years.

UKIP surprised everyone in the European elections on 22nd May 2014 as it won with 26.77% of the vote, taking 24 of the 73 British seats in the Strasbourg assembly. Labour won 24.74% (20 seats), slightly ahead of the Conservatives which won 23.31% of the vote and 19 seats.

UKIP which has 40,000 members recently reduced its ambitions in terms of the number of seats it wants in parliament even though its leader, Nigel Farage said that his party would win more than the two or three additional MPs forecast by the polls. *"We are a party which hopes to win a good representation this year but which is expecting to make a massive entry into the House of Commons in 2020,"* he declared.

Eurosceptic UKIP has mentioned the possibility of case-by-case support to a Conservative government. *"I will try to come to an agreement in which we shall support vital votes such as the budget but in exchange for extremely specific criteria over a referendum on the European Union. The terms of my agreement with the Tories would be very precise and simple. I want a fair referendum organised in 2015,"* indicated Mr Farage. Fair in his eyes means that only those holding British passports would be allowed to vote, that the campaign spending would be limited and that voters would have to answer the following question: *"Do you want to live in a free, independent, sovereign democracy?"*

*"By simply discussing an agreement between Nigel Farage and us gives him credibility whilst he has none,"* answered George Osborne when he was asked about a possible rapprochement between the two parties.

Nigel Farage announced that he would resign if he was not elected in the constituency of South Thanet (Kent) where he is standing and where he faces Al Murray – one of the country's most popular comedians – also TV and radio presenter. Recently UKIP had to exclude MEP Janice Atkinson who was standing in a Kent constituency in the general elections on 7th May over a false expense scandal. Moreover another of its candidates left the party criticising it for the racism that reigns within its fold.

The LibDems that are clearly losing ground are hanging on to the government's results to justify staying in the Conservative coalition. *"The fact that we participated in the first government coalition was controversial and we had to take some unpopular decisions,"* declared their leader Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg.

The party is fighting to protect a united Great Britain and maintains it defends general interest whilst each of the two "main parties" tend – in its opinion – to

position themselves on extreme ends of the scale. Nick Clegg says he is against continuing with budgetary cuts advocated by the Conservatives likewise the borrowing that Labour would like to undertake.

The LibDems have to retain their 30 seats on 7th May if they want to stay in government.

Led by Natalie Bennett the Green Party of England Wales (G) is rising in the polls but will encounter problems in raising the number of its MPs. The ecologist party, popular amongst the middle classes, has seen the number of its members double over the last three months and now counts 51,00 members which is more than the LibDems.

#### THE BRITISH POLITICAL SYSTEM

The British Parliament comprises two Houses: the House of Commons and House of Lords. The MPs of the House of Commons are elected for five years. For a long time the legislature was not set and the Prime Minister could decide to convene an election at any time. Since 2011 and the Fixed Term Parliaments Act general elections have taken place on the first Thursday of May in the fourth year that follows the previous election. The House of Commons is automatically dissolved 25 days before this date (30th March this year).

For the general elections the UK is divided into 650 constituencies: 529 in England, 59 in Scotland and 40 in Wales and 18 in Northern Ireland. The Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act of 2011 planned for a electoral redistribution and a reduction in the number of MPs from 650 to 600. Since the bill was amended in 2013 the redistribution of constituencies will only now occur in 2018.

Voting takes place according to a uninominal single round majority poll. The first past the post system (horse racing jargon) is one which privileges the candidate that comes out ahead in the election whether this person has won 80% or 30% of the vote. Hence during the last elections on 6th May 2010 the Conservative Party won 36.1% of the vote but took 47.63% of the seat in the House of Commons. This system is fatal to the "small" parties that can only hope to win a seat

if their vote are geographically concentrated, which explains why the regionalist parties (Scottish, Welsh and Irish) are those which win seats with the greatest ease.

Anyone over 18 can stand in the election except for the clergy from the Church of England, Scotland and Ireland and from the Roman Catholic Church – some high ranking civil servants, policemen, professional soldiers, judicial agents and finally ambassadors cannot stand either.

The lists of candidates have to have the support of at least 10 voters. A deposit of £500 (690€) has to be paid which is reimbursed if the candidate wins at least 5% of the vote cast in the constituency.

The general elections on 7th May next are the first in which it will be possible to register on-line.

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

- Conservative Party (Conservative), a party founded in the 19th century and led since December 2005 by outgoing Prime Minister David Cameron, 307 MPs ;
- Labour Party (Labour), founded in 1900 led by Ed Miliband, 258 seats;
- Liberal Democrats (LibDem), created in 1988, members of the outgoing government led by Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, 57 seats;
- Democratic Ulster Party (DUP), a Protestant Unionist party – supports the maintenance of Northern Ireland in the UK, led by Peter Robinson, 8 seats;
- Scottish National Party (SNP), secessionist party led by Nicola Sturgeon, 6 MPs;
- Sinn Fein (SF), Irish Republican, nationalist party led by Dawn Doyle, 5 seats;
- Plaid Cymru (PC), a Welsh regionalist party led by Leanne Wood, 3 MPs;
- the Social Democratic and Labour Party – an Irish Catholic Party from Northern Ireland led by Alastair McDonnell, 3 seats;
- Green Party of England and Wales (G), an ecologist party led by Natalie Bennett, 1 seat;
- the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, a centrist movement led by David Ford, 1 seat.

One independent woman MP has a seat in the House of Commons.

UKIP won its first seat in October 2014 thanks to Douglas Carswell's victory (a former Conservative Party member who joined Nigel Farage's party in the Clacton-on-Sea (Essex) by-election). A month later the same thing happened again and former Tory Mark Reckless was elected in the constituency of Rochester and Strood –Kent.

**Reminder of the general election results on 6th May 2010 in the UK**

Turnout : 65,1%

Political Parties	No of votes won	% of votes cast	No of seats
<b>Conservative Party (Conservative)</b>	10 726 614	36,1	307
<b>Labour Party (Labour)</b>	8 609 527	29	258
<b>Liberal Democrats (LibDem)</b>	6 836 824	23	57
<b>Democratic Ulster Party (DUP)</b>	168 216	0,6	8
<b>Scottish National Party (SNP)</b>	491 386	1,7	6
<b>Sinn Fein (SF)</b>	171 942	0,6	5
<b>Plaid Cymru-Party of Wales(PC)</b>	165 394	0,6	3
<b>Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP)</b>	110 970	0,4	3
<b>Green Party of England and Wales (G)</b>	285 616	1	1
<b>UK Independence Party (UKIP)</b>	919 546	3,1	0
<b>British National Party (BNP)</b>	564 331	1,9	0
<b>Others</b>	578 995	2	2

Source : BBC

The second chamber in British parliament – the House of Lords comprises 760 members at present (the figure is variable). It is made up of life peers and people who have been knighted for services rendered to the nation – former MPs, former high ranking civil servants, judges, industrialists, hereditary peers (abolished by the reform of 1999 but 92 of them, chosen by the colleagues and groups in the House of Lords were

maintained in office provisionally) and 26 bishops from the Church of England. Yearly each political party has the right to put names forward of those it wants to raise to the status of life peer.

The Lords cannot impede the approval of a bill put forward by the government or the House of Commons but simply delay it, which they do only rarely.

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