

## **The crisis of representation in Great-Britain**

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**The scandal over expenses and the recent revelations about the corruption of former Labour MPs have seriously weakened the legitimacy of British political leadership. Florence Faucher-King retraces the main episodes and factors that have led to an unprecedented crisis of representation in the country of parliamentary government.**

At first sight, nothing had prepared observers for the fact that the British elections of May 6 would offer anything but a predictable duel between the two main parties that have dominated political life until now, although their lead had recently declined, leading to the expectation of a narrow majority of seats. But the organization (for the first time) of three televised “American-style” debates between the candidates for the job of Prime Minister has completely changed the game. Invited to participate in these debates, even though his chances to become the next occupant of 10 Downing Street were very slim, the leader of the Liberal Democrats has disrupted the combat. In the days that followed, polls revealed a strong push of voting intentions in favour of the LibDems, some polls showing them taking the lead, others showing them in front of the Labour Party who was relegated to third place. Admittedly, Nick Clegg’s performance during the debates revealed a young and confident politician whose straight talk contrasted with the standard oppositions. Was this success anything but an epiphenomenon linked to the personalization of British political life and to the charm of the orator? Those debates have given unusual publicity to a party usually regarded with condescension and has opened

up Pandora's Box of conflicts. They have legitimized the claims of a third party, showing that its weak performance in the polls was due only to a lack of information and allowed us to glimpse an alternative.

### **The Dispersion of Electoral Votes**

The prospect of a Coalition Government is presented as doomed to lead to cataclysmic chaos by the Conservatives. These last few years, the symptoms of what we may call "a crisis of representation" have multiplied: a decline in membership and political activism for the main parties; growing abstention, especially – but not only – in local and European elections; a rejection of institutional politics and a loss of confidence in parliamentary institutions, parties, and elected members; the rapid expansion of third parties and tactical or protest voting. Until now, the type of ballot used for the elections in Westminster – one-round uninominal majority – has allowed the status quo to be maintained since it guarantees a majority of seats for the two major parties who govern in turn thanks to the support of absolute majorities in the House of Commons.

In order to understand the importance of what is at stake this year, it must be noted that the candidates of the two main parties, Conservative and Labour, were rallying almost 90% of the votes cast (77% of the electorate) in 1950. In 1983, this proportion was reduced to 51% of the electorate. In 2005, the Labour Party won a third mandate and a comfortable majority of 66 seats with 35% of the votes cast, which represented the support of roughly a quarter of the electorate. This domination of the two main parties has been progressively eroded by third parties that were able to benefit from mid-term elections and the introduction of voting systems that included a dose of proportional representation. Reduced to 14 MPs in Parliament in 1974, after their merger with the SDP, the Liberals have rebuilt their parliamentary group (62 MPs elected in 2005) and increased their local presence. The nationalist parties have been reenergized as well since the devolution of 1998. In Wales, *Plaid Cymru* has formed a coalition government with the Labour Party. Since 2008, the SNP has led a minority government in Scotland. This challenge to the main parties manifests itself also in the emergence of nationalist and populist English parties, such as the xenophobic BNP and the separatist UKIP (both had MEPs in 2009). Born in 1974, the Green party waited until 1998 to gain seats in the

Greater London Council and in the Scottish and European parliaments. This dispersion of the electoral votes is hardly a new phenomenon, but its growing impact points to a rejection of traditional bipartisan politics. The successes are tangible in votes as well as seats, because the diminution of the number of so called “marginal” constituencies – those susceptible to changing hands during the elections – reduces the effects of the disproportional aspect of the voting system. Third parties are better represented in the Commons and absolute majorities (that have nevertheless benefited Labour in 1997 and 2001, with 178 and 166 members elected in advance) are more difficult to obtain. In addition, responding to the desire to have some influence despite the rigidity of the system, strategies of tactical vote have increased, made easier these past few years by the creation of Internet websites.

### **The Disaffection with Conventional Politics**

At the same time, abstention has doubled between 1950 and 2001 (to reach a record high of 40%). The increase of safe seats explains this trend in part. The certainty that a candidate will be elected tends to dissuade citizens from carrying out their electoral duty. The same phenomenon encourages parties to focus their campaigns on undecided voters in a hundred key constituencies (“Worcester woman” or “Mondeo man”, depending on the years), turning campaigns into jousts between team managers. The British Social Attitudes Survey shows a decline in the belief that voting is a duty (68% of the people asked in 1991 versus 56% in 2010), an evolution especially marked among young people (41% of people under 35 year old in 2010). The decline in rates of participation has particularly affected the working class, depriving Labour of part of its traditional base (as was manifest during the European elections of 2009) and benefited protest parties.

However, what could pass for growing apathy has more to do with disaffection with conventional politics and the parties that have dominated it. In fact, studies do not show disaffection with politics in the larger sense. Associations are thriving: their membership, as well as their financial resources, is on the increase. The capacity for mobilization, including mass protests, still exists, as the protests against the Iraq war (1 million protesters in February 2003, according to the organizers) or poverty (200,000

people in Scotland in 2002) have shown. The unexpected character of the current campaign contrasts with earlier campaigns, and a strong demand for postal votes offers the prospect of a slight increase in participation and a tight race.

At the same time, studies show that the representative institutions are less and less perceived as playing an important role in the lives of citizens. In a way, this feeling is confirmed by the manner in which Neo-Labour governments have occasionally tried to bypass Parliament. Being at the head of a large majority that ensures, despite the rebellion of a few elected members, the adoption of his proposals, Tony Blair has often chosen to address the electorate directly, breaking with a tradition of parliamentary privilege. In addition, the traditional model of centralized public service has been transformed by the multiplication of quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations (quangos) and by the outsourcing of the management of public services. When the problems can be presented as “technical”, decisions and management can be de-politicized, thanks to the judgment of experts who offer both an analysis and solutions. By hiding behind multiple agencies and acting as distant pilots, Labour governments have been able to protect themselves in part against the consequences of unpopular politics. Although they have freed energies and encouraged greater participation, this type of democratization essentially favours the middle-class. The project of a “Big Society” proposed by the Conservatives is a radicalization of this approach combined with a reduction of the Interventionist State.

### **Scandals and Problems of Corruption**

The cynicism of the electorate has been fed by a succession of scandals that have put into question the honesty of politicians and the independence of politics from the business world, and by a general weariness towards modern practices of political communication. In 2000, the Neo-Labour Party, who had promised to sanitize public life, adopted a law requiring private donations to be declared and regulating the contributions of legal entities and private individuals. The commercial activities of the parties have escaped strict controls. During the following years, the Conservatives and Neo-Labour Party have diversified their financing through the creation of new types of contributions, often linked to the “sale of services” (such as the organization of private meetings with

members of the government). The enthusiasm manifested by Labour leaders for such entrepreneurial strategies is at odds with the practice of prudent management that they had inherited from a working class tradition and its mistrust of the corporate world. Inevitably perhaps, the Labour Party has been carried away by the exercise of power and a new way of life.

When Tony Blair left 10 Downing Street in 2007, his party was under police investigation for the ennoblement of businessmen who had lent large amounts of money to the party. To cope with the increasing costs of electoral campaigns, the Neo-Labour Party and the Conservatives used private loans that were exempt from public declaration by the legislation on the financing of political life. And yet their interest rates, significantly inferior to market rates and, in some cases, the absence of any repayment date, potentially turned them into secret donations. Although no one was sued or condemned in the end, this is one example among many. To these setbacks having to do with the financing of the parties, we must add the growing suspicion of venality on the part of some elected members. A few weeks before the elections of 2010, former Cabinet members were filmed offering to rent their services (and address book) to lobbying firms. At the same time, the Conservatives were forced to confess that one of their main benefactors, Lord Ashcroft, did not pay any taxes in the country, despite the fact that his nomination to the House of Lords depended on his fiscal residence. But the most damaging scandal concerning the political community has to do with the publication, in the spring of 2009, of details of expenses claimed by MPs – which included requests for reimbursement for gardening costs, fictitious real estate loans, chocolate bars, or the rental of pornographic films. The inability of some elected members to understand the way in which their behaviour could be construed as “indelicate” in a time of economic crisis and rapid increase of the public debt, helped project the image of a political establishment detached from the difficulties of ordinary life. Whatever the result of the vote of 6 May will be, the transformation of the House of Commons will be profound, since almost 150 of its members will not run again: if some of them have been invited by their superiors to withdraw, others have preferred to avoid an almost certain defeat and others still have been simply demoralized by the general accusations of corruption and by the degradation of their standing in the public eye.

## **The Reign of Communication**

The disaffection with ordinary partisan politics must be linked as well to the growing suspicion on the part of ordinary citizens of political modes of communication, which increasingly seem to distort reality. Successive parliamentary inquiries have not managed to establish to what extent Tony Blair intentionally lied or not to Parliament and to his fellow citizens about the circumstances in which he had decided to engage British troops in the Iraq war alongside the Americans. This feeling of having been misled added to the growing frustration about the pernicious role of press officers and spin doctors. It is the case that this industry has developed faster and spread more widely in England than in any other European country since its emergence under Thatcher. Initiated by Neil Kinnock and embodied by the team surrounding Tony Blair, the modernization of communication has been an important internal reform for the return of the Labour Party to power. Peter Mandelson and Alastair Campbell have allowed Neo-Labour politicians not only to respond to the media – that were considered as irremediably hostile (especially following the lost campaign of 1992) – but also to take control of the political agenda. Since its first mandate, however, this systematic use by the government of the same techniques to control its image has led to accusations of manipulation. Beyond the repeated claims of investment, we may recall, for instance, the memorandum sent in 2001 by a press officer from the Department for Transport advising its office to make use of the September 11 attacks to “bury the bad news” about rail safety.

It would be too easy to put the blame for the degradation of the image of politicians on elected members and parties only. Other actors must be taken into account if we want to understand how the legitimacy of parliamentary institutions has deteriorated so rapidly in the United Kingdom. While the parties were trying to better diffuse their message against the rise of continuous news coverage, the media turned their attention to the political processes and public relations techniques that were deployed. The spin that has developed during the first two Labour mandates has permanently transformed the way we look at politics: from then on, any message could be seen as partisan, biased, or possibly deceitful. This discrepancy was confirmed by the revelation, coming from a respectable think tank, that none of the three parties was presenting an honest program

when it came to the extent to which budget cuts would be necessary to straighten out the economy. At the same time, studies point to the growing professionalization of political communication and the distorting role of media coverage. For instance, in the case of the financing of the parties, the press focuses mostly on very large donations to the detriment of the majority of individual contributions, therefore increasing the impression that parties depend on a few wealthy corporate donors.

The public policies developed by the Labour Party have encouraged social agents, both collective and individual, to behave like rational and instrumental actors in a society where market mechanisms erode the normative basis of institutions and collective action. They have rewarded successes and punished bad choices, British society being particularly tough in comparison to other countries in continental Europe. Even though Neo-Labour politicians have presided over a faster growth of revenues among the poorest, the gap in wealth has increased. People's attitudes have changed as well: today, 28% of the British people think that the poor are lazy – while there were only 15% who thought so in 1994. A large number of reforms have tried to make these actors aware of their responsibilities in the name of transparency and the competition necessary in a global society. The multiplication of audits about performance, security cameras, rankings and controls, incentives and sanctions, reinforce the idea that individuals are naturally selfish and erode the feeling of interpersonal and social trust. Confidence in Parliament has diminished from 54% in 1993 to 14% in 2000, and trust in the Civil Service from 46% to 17%. Electoral campaigns have started to focus on the personality of party leaders rather than on political issues or the economy. Led by an unpopular and hardly telegenic Prime Minister, the Labour Party will be the first victim of this disaffection of the British electors when we count the votes. The Conservatives do not stir up great enthusiasm either, but the loss of equilibrium is perhaps even more worrying as we enter a period of unavoidable austerity.

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