

The End of Strong Government?

by Derek Turner

THE MAY 6 GENERAL ELECTION in England was one of the most eagerly contested in recent history. At stake were 649 parliamentary seats (one vote has been postponed because of the death of a candidate) for which there were almost 4,150 candidates. Also up for grabs were 4,222 local council seats in 164 English local authorities, and 4 mayoral seats in Greater London.

This was the first election in Britain to have featured U.S.-style televised debates between the main party leaders, and the strong performance during those debates of the Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg, appeared to have made the usual two-party race into a three-party affair. There was hyperbole about "Cleggmania" and predictions that his party could wield the balance of power. A very large number of sitting MPs were stepping down (many had been implicated in a scandal over expenses), and many constituency boundaries had been redrawn, further complicating matters.

In the event, there was a hung parliament, the first since 1974—a strangely inconclusive outcome, with no clear winner or even obvious trends. The Conservatives won 306 seats (up 97, but considerably short of the 326 needed to form a parliamentary majority), Labour 258 (down 91), and the Liberal Democrats 57 (down 5, Cleggmania notwithstanding). This equates to a national vote share of 36.1 percent for the Tories, 29.1 percent for Labour, 23 percent for the Liberal Democrats, and 11.9 percent for others. There were a few high-profile casualties, most importantly Northern Ireland's First Minister Peter Robinson but also two former Labour home secretaries and several other former ministers.

Labour did much less badly than might

have been expected from all the opinion polls and the dire state of public finances, with a nationwide swing away from them of just five percent. Brown was expected to lose a great deal of support from traditional Labour voters because of his gaffe in Rochdale, when a microphone he had forgotten to remove recorded him describing a lifelong Labour supporter as a "bigoted woman." Yet even this embarrassing insight into his character made little difference; he increased his own parliamentary majority, and the party won Rochdale. Either Labour's relict white working-class supporters are extraordinarily torpid, or they are simply being replaced by ethnic minority bloc voters. (Incidentally, the election saw an increase in the number of ethnic minority MPs, from 15 to 27.)

The outcome is an implicit reproach for David Cameron, whose party could not, or would not, engage with these alienated millions. Just a few months ago, the Conservatives were 26 points ahead in the opinion polls, but even before the Clegg irruption Labour had closed the gap.

Cameron has an inoffensive persona, arguably too bland for TV debates or the kind of personality-cult campaign run by Central Office, which featured his hugely magnified (and too obviously airbrushed) face on posters everywhere, alongside such vacuities as "Time for Change."

The Tories' central philosophical tenet, derived from the impressive *Red Tory* author Phillip Blond, of a Burkean "big society" in which government plays a subordinate role to communal groups is a great improvement on Thatcherism—but it never caught fire. Conservative-supporting blogs were and are filled with grumbles about why the party isn't saying more about public finances, crime, Europe, defense, polit-

ical correctness, and immigration.

Cameron was probably right not to be more specific about spending cuts; any politician who had been entirely forthcoming would have been committing career hara-kiri. As Terence said, "Truth breeds hatred."

Nor, judging from the underwhelming performance of the United Kingdom Independence Party, would he have gained much traction talking about Europe (although UKIP supporters are claiming that the Tories lost in about 20 contests by roughly the same number of people as voted UKIP). But Cameron's fastidious refusal to throw any red meat to the public almost certainly prevented him from really connecting with many voters. A tougher policy on immigration, in particular, would have played well with the electorate, who raised the issue again and again during the campaign as second only to the economy on their list of concerns. But Cameron kept trying pathetically to square promises to cap immigration with continued membership in the European Union (responsible for some 80 percent of inward migration), the party's support for Turkish E.U. membership, and the continued presence on the statute book of the Human Rights Act.

The party's right wing has been made incandescent by what it sees as a missed opportunity; as the *Guardian's* John Gray wrote on May 8, the result was "very good for the bigoted tendency." It remains to be seen whether they can become an organized caucus; their organizational track record is unpromising.

The poor performance of the Liberal Democrats reflects rather reassuringly on the discrimination of voters who may have been temporarily bedazzled by Clegg's TV

skills but nonetheless could comprehend that behind the unobjectionable figurehead lay deeply distasteful policies, notably joining the eurozone and granting amnesty to illegal immigrants.

THERE FOLLOWED complicated maneuverings to see whether Gordon Brown or David Cameron would be first to hammer out a deal with the Liberal Democrats or some *ad hoc* combination of Democratic Unionists and Scottish and Welsh nationalists (and the Green MP, Britain's first). Throughout the campaign, Labour ministers had made persistent efforts to ingratiate themselves with the Liberal Democrats, even advising tactical voting in Tory/Liberal Democrat marginals, and they were always likelier than the Tories to agree to some kind of electoral reform, one of the Liberal Democrats' core policies. But key Labour figures were reluctant, and on May 11 it was announced that there would be a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, the first coalition in 65 years.

Cameron will be prime minister and Nick Clegg deputy prime minister, with Liberal Democrats also taking the roles of secretary to the treasury, business secretary, energy and climate change secretary, and Scottish secretary. The Tories made concessions—those earning under £10,000 will no longer be taxed, public-spending cuts will be scaled down, there will be fixed-term parliaments and a referendum on the Alternative Vote system. The Liberal Democrats dropped their proposed amnesty for illegal immigrants, have ruled out joining the Euro for the lifetime of this parliament, and have agreed to tax breaks for married couples and civil partnerships.

Two fringe candidacies attracted much attention. The first was in Buckingham, where the much-disliked House of Commons speaker John Bercow was being challenged by UKIP's Nigel Farage. UKIP tried hard to broaden their appeal this time, putting up more than 500 candidates, armed with a populist, right-wing manifesto that

included a five-year moratorium on immigration and a ban on the burqa. But despite their efforts, and despite Farage being inadvertently in the headlines on election day after he was injured (not seriously) in a plane crash, Farage only came in third, with 17.4 percent of the vote. Nationally, the party's vote was 3.1 percent, or 917,832, some way short of the aimed-at one million. The UKIP blogosphere is abuzz with recrimination, which UKIPers have turned into an art form.

The other seat that attracted media attention was Barking and Dagenham in east London, where it was thought the British National Party's leader, Nick Griffin, might snatch the seat from Labour and the party might take the local council. But the BNP's campaign was extraordinarily inept. To add to the party's perpetual moral and material disadvantage, there were embarrassing revelations of a plan to topple Nick Griffin by the party's head of publicity—a man whom Griffin had promoted against the advice of colleagues (and who, incidentally, has threatened to kill Griffin). There were problems with the party's accounts, followed by a bizarre episode in which a jar of Marmite was used in a BNP election broadcast, not out of incompetence (the obvious inference) but as a woefully misjudged publicity stunt. The brand's owners, Unilever, naturally took out an injunction to stop the party from using it.

Then, two days before polling day, the party's webmaster closed down the BNP website and Twitter and Facebook pages. Thousands of site visitors were redirected to a statement he had written, accusing Griffin and others of incompetence, infighting, wasting money, and stealing copyrighted site content, and threatening Griffin with violence. It was a very damaging intervention at the worst possible moment.

In the circumstances, it was hardly surprising that the Labour candidate increased her majority, knocking Griffin into a poor third instead of the strong second he had expected, while all 12 local BNP councillors

lost their seats. The party also lost council seats elsewhere. The only comfort it can take is that it increased its national share of the vote to 1.9 percent, a total of 514,819. For the party to do so badly in such favorable circumstances has made some members ask if Griffin can continue as leader. He may be saved purely because there is no obvious successor in a party chronically lacking in senior-level talent.

It remains to be seen how the coalition will work in practice, but the odds are that whatever administration is cobbled together will not be very long-lasting—given the internal tensions and the tough choices that need to be made. Much will depend on whether the apparently amicable Cameron-Clegg understanding can persist.

Perhaps Britain is doomed to many more such elections thanks to social fragmentation, with the country divided irreconcilably along innumerable and ever more complex fault lines—English *versus* Celtic fringes, middle *versus* working classes, whites *versus* ethnic minorities, Christian/post-Christians *versus* Muslims, urban *versus* rural, inner-city *versus* suburban, and perhaps others.

It is possible that the days of first-past-the-post voting and “strong government” have gone forever, as a growing number of Tories concede. When one considers what social fruits have been produced by this vaunted strong government, perhaps it is not worth preserving in any case. It will be painful for some Tories to accept, but perhaps the introduction of proportional representation will be the only way of ensuring that some kind of genuinely conservative voice can be heard in the torrid and tenebrous times to come.

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Give Me That Old-Time Religion

by Joyce Bennett

IN MY 1950'S CHILDHOOD, boys and men, hair slicked down with tonic, girls and ladies in mantillas and hats primly veiled with mesh worshiped at small country churches against which lapped the green and white fields of late-summer tobacco. On Easter Sundays, prissy and full of ourselves on such a special occasion, my sister and I wore brand-new gloves and pastel dresses ballooned and swishy with crinoline and too proudly showed off our ribbon- and artificial-fruit-festooned bonnets. Descended from Maryland's earliest settlers, we were those rare birds—Catholics of English extraction. After four long decades, I was finally brought to a tearful reconciliation with my ancestral faith in spite of misgivings about the Marxist leanings of modern churchmen. And there is still for me sometimes on the Sabbath a temptation to drive over to the Southern Baptist services, because I am much more comfortable with the Baptists than with the wan contemporary Catholics I find at Mass these days (although the Baptist Church, according to Flannery O'Connor, is maybe a little too respectable for the real Catholic, who was, she insisted, not as far from her lunatic fundamentalist prophets as some of us might think).

I know that my criticisms of the present-day Church will be viewed by some as the crabbed groushings of just another rosary-praying Jansenist longing for the good old days. I have no illusions, however, about human shortcomings, and I understand that there were wrongdoers—even monsters—among the laity and clergy “way back when.” But the Mystical Body endures despite Catholic hypocrites and sinners and despite the many who hate Catholicism not for what it is as much as for what it is not, to paraphrase Archbishop

Fulton Sheen. Unfortunately, to accommodate those who are discomfited by “medieval” notions of sin and redemption, Catholicism in America is morphing most conveniently into Reverend Leroy's Church of What's Happenin' Now.

And a progressive Catholic hierarchy champions pet liberal causes, not the least of which is the “plight” of the immigrant. In a joint statement, the archbishops of Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, Donald Wuerl and Edwin F. O'Brien, droning on about the “dignity” of “persons” and comparing the undocumented to those “most precious migrants” Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, urge that Catholics not be distracted by mere “questions of legality.” They do concede that “sovereign nations have the right to control their borders” but only “provided . . . regulations promote the common good of our universal human family,” whatever that might mean. No matter how nuanced their rhetoric, I believe Catholic officials could not care less about stemming the tide of illegal immigration. When America collapses economically and socially, however, who then will bankroll Catholic Charities? The left-wingers at the chancelleries fail to make the distinction between a hateful xenophobia and a healthy interest in preserving the integrity of a nation's boundaries, as they similarly fail to delineate with real clarity unjust and just war.

Designed to stifle dissent, gratuitous charges of racism from the religious or secular left will not silence some of us. America has no obligation to commit national suicide in the name of brotherhood. (I do have to wonder if parish priests would be quite as inclined to provide church-based asylum to undocumented Unitarians as they are to hide out illegal Catho-

lics.) The U.S. bishops' view that everyone in the world should be allowed to move to America—and why not to Vatican City?—is a manifestation of collegiate sentimentality, not Christian love, which is reason itself. I know what Jesus would do: He would, with courteous resolve, send the *illicit* ones packing.

Even if Church leaders could make a case for open borders, feel-good big-government largesse, and forced charity, there is no way around the abortion issue for those who call themselves Catholic. While a woman who believes she has a “right to choose” is perfectly free to reject Catholicism, she has no right to demand that the Church bend to her will, genuflect to her little gods. But Catholic leaders, it seems, are only halfheartedly defending the most vulnerable among us. Just before the 2006 elections, the Maryland Catholic Conference shockingly implied that a Church-friendly Maryland General Assembly candidate need only support safer abortion clinics, parental notification before underage girls abort babies (or take “morning-after” pills), and better data collection regarding the number of abortions performed. While correctly objecting to “the asexual creation of human beings through cloning,” the MCC did not condemn abortion outright, though it did in very clear terms call for the abolition of capital punishment.

An MCC 2008 survey sought to identify those congressional candidates who agreed that “Federal Policy should . . . restrict the use of taxpayer funds for abortion” and that “Federal agencies and states that receive federal funds should not discriminate against health care providers who do not perform or participate in abortions.” The candidates, however, were not polled on the question of outlawing abor-