

A minor key for the election campaign

Tory strategy might work in 2010, but the Eurosceptic parties could turn out to be the real beneficiaries later on

David Cameron's withdrawal of his policy a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, clears up the political scene.

After Vaclav Klaus signed the Treaty, Mr Cameron rejected the obvious next move of having a referendum after the general election on a "negotiating mandate" to repatriate the most objectionable items in the EU treaties. Such a mandate would have numerous advantages, as outlined by David Davis. It would be clear, transparent and accountable. The people would have their say and the government would have a formidable weapon to force change, rather than being depicted by EU politicians as an obsessive minority.

However, the Cameron policy change flows naturally from his previous strategy. This strategy is set by an incredibly small number of people – fewer than ten – who make all the decisions. This has the effect that policy and strategy are poorly thought out and the new Cameron proposals have been widely criticised and even ridiculed from all sides as ineffective and meaningless.

Moreover the Tory leadership regards the EU as a non-salient issue when it comes to obtaining votes in a general election. The fixation is on the strategy winning over the swing 20 per cent of voters in the swing 20 per cent of constituencies in what the *New Statesman* calls "the stranglehold of a million or so voters in a handful of marginal seats in Middle England."

More sophisticated observers, such as Kavanagh and Butler in their analysis in *The British General Election of 2005*, point out: "There was little correlation between the Conservative share of the vote and the change in the Labour share of the vote."

Labour's share of the vote was down by 6 per cent in 2005, yet the Conservatives gained only 0.5 per cent. For unexplained reasons, Tory strategists believe this trend will not

influence voting again. A number of political conclusions may be drawn from these events.

It is clear that in the next Parliament David Cameron will do nothing substantive to alter Britain's relationship with the EU. He has even reiterated the pledge to get Turkey into the EU. In effect, he has vindicated Gyles Brandreth's recommendation of David Cameron for a job with Kenneth Clark in 1994 by telling Clark "he is one of us", a liberal Conservative.

There is also the effect on David Cameron's reputation in general as regards his principles, his competence and his willpower. It is hard to see how his reputation for any of these will be enhanced. Many people who were on the edge of voting Conservative or voting for an alternative may have drawn conclusions, especially on Tory promises to cut immigration, keep taxes down and restore public sector financial discipline.

Some Eurosceptic Tory MPs, especially those of the BOO group, may maintain principle, but the leadership has indicated it will not address the EU issue and, apart from Dan Hannan and Roger Helmer, the Tory MPs and MEPs and candidates have gone along with the Cameron volte face.

This episode will give a substantial boost to the long-term trend of the Conservatives shedding votes to minor parties grounded on former Tory principles of democracy, patriotism and protecting the interests of the British people. These are UKIP, the BNP, the English Democrats and the Christian Party. It is often said that the BNP mainly takes votes away from Labour. That is true, but they are also votes which, in the face of disillusionment with Labour, in past elections before the 1990s the Tories would have gained and, indeed, must gain.

In 2005 the average vote secured by a

UKIP candidate was 3.2 per cent and the BNP 4.3 per cent. The upward movement was sustained in the Euro elections of 2009, with UKIP gaining 16.5 per cent and the BNP 6.2 per cent of the vote. UKIP performed very well in the recent by-election in the Norwich North constituency.

The drivers of discontent with the major parties have not gone away and have indeed been enhanced by the parliamentary expenses scandal. The minor parties seem well placed to be polling an average combined share of 6-8 per cent of the votes in the seats they contest in England, with outliers in the 10 percent range. With few gains expected for the Tories in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and with the Liberals likely to shed perhaps only 15 seats to the Tories, if that, the Tories need to win 100 seats from Labour in England to form a majority.

The minor parties would be well advised to concentrate their resources on these seats. Ten per cent of the vote is certainly sustainable in some seats and these could materially affect the election outcome.

Tory strategy is based on a Labour collapse and the Tories gaining a majority in what will be a very fragmented election. Even supposing this works and delivers an election victory, quite a number of seats will be won on low pluralities because of the fragmented votes, so the leakage to minor parties may carry on growing if the Conservatives continue to neglect core interests and ideals.

At present the prospect of a Conservative government is soaking up most discontent with Labour. If the Cameron government goes off the rails, the scope for the minor parties to grow is quite spectacular if they get their own houses in order.

It has seemed for some time that it is the election after 2010 that will have the scope for a major upset in British politics whatever the result this time.

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