

Tories ignore new politics at their peril

Lord Ashcroft rightly starts his analysis of the Conservative Party's failure in the 2010 election by stating that: "Many Conservatives were disappointed with the result. The party faced a shambolic government, an unpopular Prime Minister, a recession, a huge budget deficit and an overwhelming national desire for change. Surely this was an open goal. How could they come so close to missing?"

In fact, a good deal of the explanation for the Conservative failure can be inferred from the matters left out of the book. Indeed, it would be a good primer in how to win a general election in, say, 1966 and, for that matter, winning lots of seats with low pluralities in 2010. All Lord Ashcroft says about the nuts and bolts of election winning is quite valid, so far as it goes, but it seems a book from a different era.

He does not say a word about developments in the wider world. A beginning would be to put the failure of the Conservatives into an international context, but Lord Ashcroft adjusts his focus to the doings of Westminster politicians and the British mass media.

There has been a cracking, sometimes a break-up, of centre-right coalition political parties throughout much of the Western world. New conservative parties have come into being representing that part of the middle and working classes ignored by the centrist leaders. In some places, such as the US and Australia, established centre-right parties are showing signs of a renewal process. Yet the centrists in the UK, who pride themselves on being internationalists, ignored these trends. Lord Ashcroft does not mention a single political development outside

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the UK.

As for the UK, he neglects to mention the continuing decline in the percentage total votes for the two major parties, now down to the mid-40s in European elections and a record 65 per cent low in the 2010 general election. Almost all his analysis is concentrated on the struggle between Labour and Conservatives for this 65 per cent, with some small asides on the Liberal Democrats.

Of course, because Britain lacks either proportional representation or primary elections without leadership-determined shortlists of candidates, it is relatively easy for centrist leaders to keep control of their parties and to win elections with smaller and smaller percentages of the vote. This comes at the cost of an almost pathological concentration on the fewer than one million voters in the middle who determine election results. It also means the main parties become almost stationary in their political attitudes, immobile in their ideas, hostile to renewal and absorbed in presentation.

Furthermore, there is no doubt that the UKIP and BNP played a large part in the election and that, glacially, British politics is changing. In a forthcoming book, to be published by the Social Affairs Unit, I show that in the three "north of Birmingham

regions" targeted by Francis Maude and the modernisers, UKIP and the BNP gained 60 per cent as many votes as the Conservatives despite tiny bases and the overwhelming advantages the Conservatives possessed in having taxpayer-paid MPs, councillors and political aides working for them, enormous media presence and massive fundraising. In the three northern regions, the 35 per cent of votes that can swing in an election swung to new parties. This did not happen before, but Lord Ashcroft passes blithely by.

The mathematics of the election are easy to outline. With a Conservative base vote of 33 per cent, Labour's base at 29 per cent and a Liberal Democrat base of, say, 18 per cent, that comprises 80 per cent of the electorate. Add in the Ulster parties, Scots and Welsh nationalists and the Greens and sundries, and you reach another 7 per cent of the vote, leaving some 13 per cent of the electorate "in play".

UKIP and the BNP represented some 5 per cent of the vote, leaving about 8 per cent that could be attracted to the Conservatives if they did not attempt to win over UKIP or BNP votes – and Lord Ashcroft makes it plain that attracting UKIP or BNP supporters was not part of the plan. In fact, the Liberal Democrat vote held up to 23 per cent, Labour just held its base, so the Conservatives picked up the residue, about 3 per cent of the 8 per cent targeted.

What happens at the next election if UKIP and BNP get 8-10 per cent of the vote? The votes available for the Conservative Party will compress dramatically. Voters leaving the Liberal Democrats would seem to be going over to Labour. No doubt the Tories will need Lord Ashcroft even more to try to win seats that are decided by even tinier swings.