



Political Studies Association

The State of the Parties

Media Briefing Pack

11th September, 2013

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NB. All slides will be emailed round following the event, along with these notes

The State of the Electoral Battle

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This is not a party conference season at which any of the three main parties at Westminster can enjoy in the confident expectation that they are clearly on course for victory at the next general election, now less than two years away.

Labour remain ahead in the opinion polls, as they have been – bar one brief interruption in the immediate wake of David Cameron’s decision in December 2011 to wield a European veto – ever since November 2010. However, there has been a discernible softening in the party’s position during the course of the spring and summer. The party’s poll share averaged 40% or more throughout the twelve months leading up to March this year. But since then it has consistently been below that mark. As a result the party’s lead over the Conservatives has more than halved from an average of eleven points in the three months to March to just five points during the course of the summer.

Past precedent suggests that this is well short of the kind of lead that an opposition party that is set to win an overall majority in a little under two years time should be enjoying. Hitherto, no opposition with a lead as small as five points at this stage in a (four or five year) parliament has gone on to claim the freehold of 10 Downing St. True, Harold Wilson only had a six point lead in May 1972, but he only went on to become the largest party in a hung parliament – after an election called unexpectedly early in the wake of a miners’ strike. The smallest lead to be enjoyed at this stage in a parliament by an opposition that went on to unalloyed victory was the nine point lead enjoyed in Dec. 1962, a lead that in fact was to lengthen further the following year.

The summer decline in Labour’s rating has been accompanied by a decline in Miliband’s personal ratings. According to the most recent Ipsos-MORI poll, only 28% are now satisfied with his performance as opposition leader, the lowest reading yet. It can often be difficult to disentangle cause and effect in the relationship between a party’s overall standing and the rating of its leader, but there can be little doubt that Miliband’s continued failure to make a favourable impression on the public is more hindrance than help. Only one opposition leader who was anything like as unpopular as Miliband currently is at this stage in a parliament went on to become Prime Minister – Edward Heath – and he was helped by Harold Wilson’s decision to rush to the country too quickly in June 1970, a mistake that the Fixed Terms Parliament Act effectively does not allow David Cameron to make.

Meanwhile, we might note that one common criticism of Mr Miliband’s leadership – that he has failed to set out a sufficiently clear strategic direction for his party – receives a clear echo in a recent Ipsos MORI poll. As many as 51% agreed that they did not know what the Labour leader stood for, while only 37% disagreed – a net clarity rating of -14. This was every bit as bad as the equivalent rating for Nick Clegg, -13, whose party is one whose stance voters are often unsure about. In contrast Cameron has clarity rating of +23, while Nigel Farage, the UKIP leader manages +13.

On the other side of the despatch box there has been some encouraging news in recent weeks; on nearly every polling measure on the subject the public have begun to become rather more optimistic about their

own financial future and that of the economy in general, Indeed on some measures the public are more optimistic now than they have been at any time since the coalition first came to power. What remains to be seen, however, is whether the coalition parties can succeed in making electoral capital out of any economic success.

There certainly is no sign that economic optimism is translating into an upturn in Liberal Democrat fortunes; their average poll rating remains at around the 11 point mark it has been ever since the party's U-turn on tuition fees nearly three years ago. Indeed, with around one in three 2010 Liberal Democrat voters still inclined to vote Labour, Ed Miliband's hopes of making it into Downing St. now look heavily reliant on the continued disenchantment of former Liberal Democrats. Without them his party's lead would soon disappear.

Still, it perhaps comes as little surprise that a brighter economic mood has not immediately translated into better news for the junior partners in the coalition. In contrast, the senior partners, the Conservatives, probably anticipate having relatively little difficulty in claiming credit for any economic improvement. Yet they might be wise not to count their chickens. According to YouGov, public confidence in the ability of the coalition to handle the economy fell sharply in the wake of the 2012 Budget, which together with the accompanying charge of omnishambles resulted in a sudden fall in Conservative support. Although still well short of the readings in the early days of the coalition, the proportion who think that the coalition is managing the economy well has returned in recent months to the level it was before that fateful Budget. However, that has not as yet translated into commensurate electoral support; Conservative support is still some four to five points below what it was before spring 2012.

Much of the loss of Conservative support during the last 18 months has of course been the result not of people switching to Labour, but rather to UKIP. And at present the flow of votes from the Conservatives to UKIP remains just as high now as it was in the spring, immediately before UKIP's impressive local election performance; some 14% of 2010 Conservative voters still say that they would vote UKIP now. Although many of these voters may have initially been dislodged from their Conservative perch by a loss of confidence in the party's ability to handle the economy, the question that now arises is whether, having found a new seemingly congenial perch, they will regard a few chinks of economic light as sufficient reason to fly back again. Mr Cameron and Mr Osborne may need to dangle more than economic success before their eyes.

9 September 2013.

The Conservative Party

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The Commons rebellion on launching military strikes on Syria suggests reports that David Cameron was well on the way to healing relations with some of his backbenchers (via a combination of Number Ten BBQs, economic recovery and the PM's support for the EU Referendum Bill) may have been, to say the least, a little optimistic.

Clearly, there were reasoned objections to taking part in any mission against Assad among those who voted against their own government. But a look at the list of those who did so reveals that many of them had form, and few would bet against them deciding to give Cameron another bloody nose and forcing him in the future into some sort of climb-down on other issues: obvious possibilities include reforms to the planning system or HS2, both of which touch a sore nerve even with backbenchers more favourably inclined to their party leader.

That said, Syria may have been a humiliation but it does not seem, by any stretch of the imagination, to have been an electoral disaster. Partly due to Cameron more or less gracefully accepting defeat and thereby appearing to have listened to the great British public (who are clearly not up for going to war on this issue) and partly because of the Tories' effective media operation against Ed Miliband's supposed perfidy and indecision, the Prime Minister and his party appear to have emerged, at least in the short term, relatively unscathed from the affair. Indeed, a YouGov poll for the *Sunday Times* published on 8 September suggested 41% think Cameron responded well, with only 27% thinking the same about Miliband.

In fact, on virtually every measure that counts, the Prime Minister, although in largely negative territory, remains not just an asset to his party (in the sense of being more popular than it is) but way ahead of the Leader of the Opposition. Of course, many observers recall that such a gap did not prevent Mrs Thatcher from beating Jim Callaghan back in 1979 or Ted Heath from doing the same to Harold Wilson in 1970. But this is to forget that in both cases the Opposition had, before the polls began to narrow in the government's favour as election day approached, been recording leads that were much bigger than Labour has achieved since 2010. This is not to say that the Conservatives are on course for an overall majority at the next election; but there remains at least a reasonable chance that they will emerge as the largest single party, thereby giving Cameron first go at forming another government.

To achieve that goal, the Tories are clearly sticking to an obvious but possibly very effective strategy, namely convincing people that a) due to their tough love, the economy is on the up and that to allow Labour back in would be a huge risk, b) that Labour is led by a weakling who's supposedly not up to the job, in hock to the unions and surrounded by many of the same people who allegedly made such a mess of things in the first place, and c) that fears about what a Tory government would mean for schools, hospitals, pensions and the police have not in fact come to pass.

On the economy, the main challenge (one taken up in George Osborne's speech on Monday) is to convince people that the recovery they are hearing so much about these days is actually real – something they can feel, touch and taste – which is why the Tories know they cannot allow Labour to make the running on living standards. Economic pessimism is falling and optimism is rising, opinion polls suggest, but real wages

– often a crucial indicator when it comes to electoral success – are not. There is little the government can or is willing to do about this: wage rises means extra costs for businesses only just beginning to get going again; the utility companies appear to be untouchable; and there is – to a prudent Chancellor anyway – limited scope for tax cuts. In short, it may be that the Conservatives have to rely on their rhetoric to some extent trumping reality – one reason why, inevitably, they will be doing as much, *à la* 1992, to undermine their opponents as trumpet their own record.

On Miliband and Labour, the Tories seem, with a little help from their supporters in the media and some whispering from within the ranks of the Opposition itself, so far to have won the battle of perceptions. If Ed does manage to win some sort of symbolic victory over union leaders, there is no guarantee that it will resonate with the public as much as some Labour supporters hope. And anyway there is no way that such a victory will somehow shame the Conservatives into making less use than they otherwise would do of the election war chest they have amassed, thereby rendering any shortfall in union funding even more damaging. On the other hand, all polling suggests that the six or so percentage points worth of erstwhile Lib Dems that Labour has gained since 2010 are going nowhere, especially perhaps after the vote on Syria, making it difficult to see where Cameron is going to get the extra five or so additional points he needs at minimum to form a Tory majority government.

On public services, the pensions issue seems to have been sorted, at least for the moment. And, while the police could well play rougher than they currently are, they remain slightly stymied by the fact that crime does not appear to have increased as the result of cuts. Border control remains an issue, but while the Tories are not gaining as much as they might have hoped from the fall in numbers coming into the country and may still miss their target, they are not actively in trouble on the issue. Most problematic, however, are schools – in particular the pressure on primary pupil numbers – and hospitals (in particular the pressure on A&E this winter). Both issues can be used to cast doubt not just on the Tories' commitment to publicly-provided education and health but, just as damagingly, their competence too.

While voter concern and the reality on the ground means that none of this can be spun away if problems occur, the Party can claim to have upped its game when it comes to communications. Lynton Crosby has clearly helped simplify the message. Jim Messina may help too. And making Graeme Wilson, the deputy political editor at *The Sun*, Cameron's Press Secretary might also be a smart move. Sharpening up the campaigning and communications operation, however, might not entirely make up for lack of boots on the ground at the election, particularly if it proves to be a very close contest, although Labour's trade union troubles (and the Tories' cash reserves) may redress the balance.

And then there is UKIP. Farage is likely to come roaring back at the Europeans, and still stands a good chance of finishing first. The crucial question, then, is whether Cameron can then keep him out of any television election debates. If he can't, they may not take place at all. If he can, the Tories may still not recover the five or so percentage points' worth of former supporters who have currently parked themselves with UKIP. If most of them stay and if those previous non-voters and first-timers who currently claim they would vote UKIP do the same, then the Tories' worst fears may be confirmed. Trying to counter UKIP by copying its policies, however, may well be a fool's errand, running the risk of losing as many voters as it attracts.

The Liberal Democrats and Labour

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The Liberal Democrats

Leadership: Clegg's leadership is secure until the outcome of the General Election in May 2015. He is, unlike many Lib Dems, nationally identifiable and performs competently in the media. Likely he will be replaced post-election by Tim Farron. Many activists, Lib Dem voters and a fair share of his MPs feel the party has had an insufficient effect on the Conservative-led Coalition.

Ideology: Shouldn't be forgotten that the Lib Dems are the most ideologically divided of the three main parties. They are a very different organisation in Hull than they are in Basingstoke and different still in Aberystwyth. There exists three distinct schools of thought:

1. The Orange Book (economic liberals)
2. The SDP left
3. The Liberal left (social liberals)

There is a fair amount of overlap between the SDP left and the Liberal left especially as time has gone on. From the bottom of the party to the top the Lib Dems do not have a shared view of British political economy. Put another way, they differ markedly over the balance between state and market in the distribution of resources.

Nonetheless the Lib Dems are held together by the following ideological/policy perspectives:

1. Social Liberalism
2. Civil Liberties
3. Environmentalism
4. Constitutional Reformism
5. Pro-Europeanism

Party Organisation: A very difficult 18 months lie ahead. Membership stands at 42,000 which is low for recent times. This will hamper the effectiveness of campaigning something which the Lib Dems pride themselves on. With fewer foot soldiers it will be harder to stave off both Conservative and Labour challenges. Fewer members means less income which has been a persistent worry since the formation of the Coalition.

Electoral Offering: To their base the Lib Dems can trumpet some modest achievements in government for example the raising of the tax free allowance; the increase in wind farms; fixed term parliaments; and the Localism Act. To the nation their narrative can be that they are a serious party of government; that a vote for the Lib Dems is not a wasted vote; and that their presence has acted as stabilising tendency to the 'more harsh' free market approach of the Conservatives.

Beech's Verdict: This will be an immensely difficult narrative to sell to the British electorate. With 5 of 22 Cabinet members and no Liberal in the great offices of state, the Lib Dems lost the Coalition negotiation, and so their governmental influence has been limited.

The U-turn on higher tuition fees; the botched AV referendum; the increase in 900,000 people living below the poverty line; and above all, the scale and disproportionate national impact of the politics of austerity will undermine the Lib Dem message of 'fairness'.

The Labour Party

Leadership: Miliband's leadership continues to be under sustained pressure due to unfavourable polling numbers and a lack of a 'breakthrough moment' despite performing competently on Murdoch, Leveson in general and the Syria debate. Labour are historically cautious about replacing their leaders and arguably lack the ruthlessness of their Conservative rivals in this aspect of party politics. Miliband's tenure is safe until the outcome of the General Election.

Ideology: The PLP is fairly united. Not difficult when opposing a controversial government comprising your two main rivals! Nonetheless there exists an ongoing debate about ideological and public policy revision. At the heart of the debate is the question of localism versus the central state in the provision and distribution of goods and services. Another key argument is whether to accept the Chancellor's view that austerity was worth the pain or whether to espouse more aggressive long-term growth strategies.

Party Organisation: Labour's membership was boosted in the post-2010 period as many former members returned in light of a Conservative-Liberal Coalition. Approximately 190,000 members appears a relatively healthy amount but Labour's funding is another matter. There is uncertainty over future trade union funding especially given the political fund 'opt in' debate and what that may do to the funds unions have to campaign politically and, in turn, what that means for specific donations to Labour.

Electoral Offering: From conference this year until next May Labour must begin to flesh out policy perspectives - not a manifesto - but clear positions on jobs, immigration, education, NHS, welfare and above all on economic management. Labour can exploit Coalition confusion on Britain's future membership of the EU; persistent unemployment, underemployment and zero-hours contracts; the reduction in funding in the NHS which is now leading to targets being missed and a poorer service for patients.

Beech's Verdict: Labour need an ideological narrative and One-Nation Labour may or may not prevail. It is easier to expound that message if the economy stutters or slows once again. However, if the economy grows meaningfully (by 1.5-2%) over the next year and, especially if led by an export recovery, Labour will find that message increasingly tricky to convey in the face of 'the pain was worth it' argument. The data on growth, employment and lending suggests the British economy is still anaemic so a recovery cannot be said to be underway. Miliband must have a strong conference to inspire the his party; to quieten more than silence his detractors in the media and in Westminster; and to 'breakthrough' in the public consciousness as a Prime Minister in waiting. One speech is insufficient to achieve this but it is a necessary step along the road to national political credibility.

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From British Euroscepticism to Euroscepticism in Britain

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'British Euroscepticism' is a recurrent theme in political and scholarly debate within the UK as well as in political and scholarly debate abroad about the UK. In these remarks I would like suggest that this in many ways understandable preoccupation with 'British Euroscepticism' hides or occludes a much more differentiated pattern of attitudes across Britain towards the European Union. More specifically, there are some strikingly differentiated attitudes towards Europe both within and between the different national territories of Britain.¹ Having said something about them I will then go on to suggest that these different attitudes may well end up having significant political effects.

What is Euroscepticism?

There is not, as far as I am aware, an agreed definition of Euroscepticism. Rather it is a terms that is applied to a number of different, if related, attitudes including, *inter alia*:

- An expressed intention to vote No in any referendum on continuing EU membership;
- A suspicion of 'Europe' and all its works;
- A propensity to vote for UKIP; etc.

We will return to all of these in a moment. But before doing so let me make clear my first and most important claim. No matter what we understand by Euroscepticism, England is the most Eurosceptic part of Britain and the English the most Eurosceptic national group.

National identities and attitudes towards EU membership

My first slide is based on data from the 2012 Future of England Survey and shows how respondents would have voted if a referendum on EU membership had been held in November 2012.

Table 1: ENGLAND. Vote in referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union by Moreno National Identity, 2012 (%)

	ALL	English not British	More English than British	Equally English and British	More British than English	British not English
Remain	33	17	28	33	45	49
Leave	50	72	58	48	37	35
Wouldn't vote	5	3	3	6	5	3
Don't know	12	8	10	13	13	13
n	3600	545	734	1405	371	234

Source: FoES 2012

¹ Please note that I do not intend to say anything about Northern Ireland but will rather focus on territorial differences across Britain.

There are two points to note:

1. **The extent of support in England for withdrawal is very striking.** (It should be noted that more recent polling evidence suggests that this may have been a period of particularly strong Eurosceptic sentiment – but still...) English attitudes are also very different from attitudes elsewhere in Britain. In crude terms, attitudes in Scotland are the mirror image of attitudes in England whilst Wales sits somewhere between the two – the latter largely reflecting the demographic differences between the two countries.
2. **Support for withdrawal is very much stronger among those with a more exclusive English sense of national identity whilst (pace much Eurosceptic rhetoric) those with a more exclusively British sense of national identity are in fact the most pro-European!**

National identities and attitudes towards EU influence

National differences in attitudes towards the EU are nicely illustrated in Table 2 which shows that, on average, people in England are far more likely than people in Wales to regard the EU as playing the dominant role in determining how their country. Indeed, roughly one third of English voters view the EU as having most influence (a figure that rises to fully 69% among UKIP supporters.) That this influence is regarded in wholly negative terms is underlined when we recall that this third would vote to leave the EU by a margin of some 8 to 1. Put in other words, it appears that around one in three of the English electorate are hard-core Eurosceptics. The proportion is much lower in Wales (and, indeed, Scotland and – to the extent that data is available – across the rest of western Europe.)

Table 2: Perceptions of EU influence: Wales and England compared (%)

<i>Has most influence over how Wales/England is run?</i>		
Local Authorities	7	3
Welsh Government	19	--
UK Government	56	55
European Union	8	31
Other	--	2
Don't know	10	8
N	2544	3599

Source: Welsh Referendum Survey 2011, FoES 2012.

National Identities and Voting Intentions

That Scotland and Wales are two of UKIP's weakest regions has been confirmed in every European election since 1999. Specifically, Scotland is the weakest and Wales is the party's second or third weakest region. But as is clear from Table 3, even within England, UKIP is concentrated among those with the most exclusively English sense of national identity. (Which incidentally helps explain why London – the part of England with the weakest sense of English and strongest sense of British identity – has been another weak spot for Nigel Farage's party.) By some contrast, in Wales evidence suggests that UKIP support is weakest among those with a more exclusively Welsh sense of national identity and strongest among those who feel most exclusively British. One might reasonably expect the situation in Scotland to resemble that in Wales in this regard.

Table 3: ENGLAND: Moreno national Identity by Voting Intention, 2012 (%)

	All	Lib-Dem	Labour	Conservative	UKIP
English not British	15	7	13	17	27
More English than British	20	18	18	26	28
Equally English and British	39	40	40	40	32
More British than English	10	16	13	8	6
British not English	7	10	6	6	3
Other	6	7	7	3	4
Don't know	3	3	3	1	1
n	3600	262	1197	931	312

Does any of this have possible political implications?

1. **The timing of the European elections and the independence referendum.** The former will be followed less than 4 months later by the latter, and what price the following result to set up the Scottish poll: UKIP win in England, the SNP in Scotland and Labour in Wales? Might such a result – and in particular the response in London to it – have a bearing on the result of the subsequent independence referendum? It might. Some polling evidence suggests that Yes side strengthened if it appears that UK heading for exit...
2. **Territorial tensions within UKIP?** My colleagues and I have argued that UKIP is, *de facto*, the English National Party. Given the different profiles of party supporters (and especially activists) in England as compared to Wales and Scotland, what are the implications for the party as it apparently moves to embrace this position more self-consciously by championing English devolution? NB current UKIP MEP has already threatened to abandon the party on this issue.

European issues in domestic politics

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Europe and the European Union will be an issue of continuing political importance over the coming months. In addition to the on-going debate within and across the parties of the UK's future relationship with the EU (and the continuing issue of an in-out membership referendum) there are sets of events which give Europe a heightened salience:

Result of the German General Election

The German Federal Election result on 22nd September, and the confirmation of Angela Merkel as Chancellor, looks set to trigger a further debate on the future of the EU, the governance of the Eurozone and unlock the debate on another Greek government debt bailout. The UK government will be a tangential player on these issues but may be faced with a prospective reform agenda with which it would rather not engage.

European Parliament elections

The European Parliament elections are scheduled to take place on Thursday 22nd May 2014. The results will not be known until Sunday 25th May when the polls close across the other European Union (EU) member states.

Traditionally viewed as a barometer for the level of public support for the main political parties the extra *frisson* on this occasion will come from the contest between the UKIP and the Conservative Party.

The 12 multi-member constituencies and party lists make for awkward campaigning and limited public understanding of the process (especially with the regional party list proportional representation system for England, Scotland and Wales and STV in Northern Ireland). The personalisation of the campaign between Farage, Cameron, Miliband and Clegg is a likely scenario. The issue of an in-out UK membership of the EU referendum will be a major campaign issue, and a high level of support for UKIP could be presented as a mandate for a referendum vote pre-2015 General Election. The last European Parliament elections were notable for both the low voter turnout of 34.7% and the election of candidates from parties including the BNP and the Greens in addition to UKIP, which has suffered from defections from the party whip.

A curiosity for the elections will be that for the first time each of the political groups in the European Parliament will be campaigning on the basis of a named candidate for the role of President of the European Commission. The intention is to generate public interest in the vote with the largest political grouping in the party determining who heads the European Commission for the next 5 years. This aspect of the election is likely to be played at a low key by the UK political parties as none of the candidates likely to be chosen by the pan-European political groupings will be a UK national. Further, the Conservative Party remains outside

the main centre-right European Peoples Party (EPP) political grouping and within its group of European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR).

New Commission President, President of the European Council & Commissioners

In addition to the new President of the European Commission post-EP elections there will also be the appointment of a new set of European Commissioners and a President of the European Council (whose term ends on 30 November 2014).

Unlike the last occasion on which these appointments were made in 2009 (when both Tony Blair and David Miliband were prospective candidates for the positions, respectively, of President of the European Council and High Representative/Vice President of the European Commission) the UK is unlikely to have a candidate contending for a senior EU role. Baroness Ashton is not seeking reappointment to her role so the British Commissioner slot will be vacant and requiring a nominee from the government.

The coalition and the EU referendum

The coalition government partners have separately adopted 'holding' strategies on an in-out referendum on UK EU membership. These may unravel post-European Parliament election results. Within the coalition the government will continue with its Balance of Competences review - which was intended to defer the issue of a referendum on the UK membership of the EU and allow for the management of the coalition parties differential European policies. New Labour's stance on a referendum on the UK's membership of the EU remains in an unsettled condition.

Biography

Professor Richard G. Whitman is an Associate Fellow of Chatham House and Professor of Politics and International Relations, Director of the Global Europe Centre at the University of Kent. His current research and publications are on UK European policy, the external relations and foreign and security and defence policies of the EU, and the governance and future priorities of the EU.