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FROM TWO-PARTY TO MULTI-PARTY POLITICS

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This lecture is on the modern British party system, an attempt to draw together the threads of the previous five lectures.

But I must begin with a confession. I first outlined my programme for these lectures before last year's General Election, and that is why I called it "From a Two-Party to a Multi-Party System". The Election appears superficially to contradict that thesis for, in the Election, 84% of those voting supported either the Conservative or Labour parties, the largest level of support for the two major parties since the General Election of 1970. But is not yet wholly clear, in my view, that the 2017 General Election does contradict the thesis that we have moved from a two-party system to a multi-party system. Indeed, if we looked more closely, I believe we would see the generalisation that Britain has returned to a two-party system needs to be very severely qualified. There must be some doubt as well as to whether the Election last year is the beginning of a trend or an aberration as a Brexit election. More of this later. Still, what happened in 2017 is a salutary warning against seeing as trends what might be no more than contingent developments. A trend, someone said, is a trend only until it ends.

The traditional picture of British politics was well summed-up by W. S. Gilbert in the comic opera that he wrote with Sir Arthur Sullivan, "Iolanthe", and in that opera, Private Willis, who is guarding the Palace of Westminster, sings, "I often think it comical how nature always does contrive that every boy and every girl that is born into this world alive is either a little Liberal or a little Conservative." Now, since the 1920s of course, you would have to say, "a little Socialist or a little Conservative".

But until the 1970s, identification with the two main parties was extraordinarily high. When the first study of party identification was carried out around the time of the 1964 General Election, 81% said they identified either with the Conservative or the Labour Parties, while around 40%, two-fifths, said their identification with their preferred party was "very strong". Now, only around 15% are strong identifiers.

The basis of the two-party system was social and geographical homogeneity. That is not to say, of course, there were not deep and profound differences within British society, primarily divisions of social class. Indeed, during the heyday of the two-party system, between 1945 and 1974, it was the division between the classes which structured the party system. In 1967, one student of electoral behaviour declared that, "Class is the basis of British politics – all else is embellishment and detail," and that was certainly true at the time that he said it. Roughly speaking, around two-thirds of working-class voters would support the Labour Party, while an even higher proportion, around 90% of the middle-class would support the Conservatives. British politics was the politics of democratic class conflict. Yet, paradoxically, this democratic class conflict provided for stability. The conflict was, to put it very crudely, one concerning how the cake should be shared out between the classes. A conflict of this sort is open to be resolved by bargaining. Each party could seek to win over supporters from the opposing party by judicial concessions. The Conservatives could show they were not the enemies of the working-class by supporting, and indeed improving, the Welfare State, while maintaining full employment, as indeed they did during the 1950s under the leadership of Winston Churchill and Harold Macmillan. Labour could show that the middle-classes had little to fear from a Labour Government and that, indeed, they might gain if Labour could fulfil its promise of raising the rate of economic growth, which would benefit all in society, whatever their class. If only the rate of economic growth could be increased, there would be no class war since all would gain. There was a floating vote in the centre, composed disproportionately of the so-called C2s, the



skilled working-class. These were the so-called swing-voters, which each party could hope to convert, so long as it adopted moderate policies.

One can contrast this sort of politics, based on class, with a politics based on identity and religion in Northern Ireland, where there was no centre ground and no floating vote. Where political differences are tribal, based on religion or national identity, there is nothing to bargain about. One cannot change one's national identity and very few are prepared to change their religion. Karl Marx, the bicentenary of whose birth we have just been commemorating, regarded class conflict as destabilising and as likely to undermine what he thought of as bourgeois democracy, which operated in the interest of the ruling class. In fact – and this I think is true of most of Marx's predictions – the opposite of what he predicted has come true. Class conflict within a democratic state has proved a stabilising influence. It is the conflicts over religion and national identity that are destabilising and threaten the state. Moreover, the class allegiances of voters alter at a glacially-slow rate. There will not be much change in the class allegiance of voters from one election to the next, therefore there will be comparatively little electoral volatility, and that is another reason why class politics is a politics of stability.

The system was also held together ideologically. The agenda of the post-War period was set by the reforms of the Wartime Coalition Government and the Attlee Government which followed it. These Governments set up a mixed economy, based primarily on private ownership, but with the nationalisation of the public utilities, and a welfare state providing a safety-net against severe hardship. In addition, both Labour and Conservative Governments succeeded in maintaining full employment. In fact, the Conservatives, who returned to office in 1951, reversed hardly any of the policies of the Attlee Government. There was a high degree of ideological continuity between the One Nation Toryism of Churchill and Macmillan and the moderate socialism of Attlee and Harold Wilson.

British political culture was such that, whatever the differences in British society – and they were, as I have said, quite profound – most people felt themselves, with the significant exception of Northern Ireland, where the British party system never really took root, most people felt themselves as one nation. We felt that we all belonged to the same country. This was well summed-up in an essay in 1941 written by George Orwell, a socialist, who had said that Britain resembled a family, "...a rather stuffy Victorian family, with not many black sheep in it but with all its cupboards bursting with skeletons. It has rich relations who must be kowtowed to, and poor relations who are horribly sat upon, and there is a deep conspiracy of silence about the sources of the family income. It is a family in which the young are generally thwarted and most of the power is in the hands of irresponsible uncles and bedridden aunts. Still, it is a family. It has its private language and its common memories, and at the approach of an enemy, it closes its ranks." And he concluded: "A family with the wrong members in control, that perhaps is as near as one can come to describing England in a phrase." That perhaps is not too bad a description of early post-War Britain, "a family with the wrong members in control". So, even those on the left, who felt the wrong man was in control, still felt that it was their family and that they belonged to it.

The most obvious sign of this social homogeneity was that the same two parties competed in the whole of England, in Scotland and Wales on the same basis, though not, as I have said, in Northern Ireland. General election campaigns were broadly similar in England, Scotland and Wales and the issues were broadly the same. The competition was primarily between the same two major parties. No nationalist MP was elected in a general election until 1970.

In general elections, there were national swings. Older members of the audience may remember a machine on the BBC's election night programme called the Swingometer, often attributed to Robert McKenzie, but it was in fact the invention of David Butler. That machine enabled you to predict, from the first few results, the final outcome because there was a broad national swing which was similar across the whole country, so that, once it had settled down, after the first constituency declaration had been made, you could be confident in predicting the final result.

Finally, of course, the two-party system was buttressed by the first-past-the-post electoral system, which made it so difficult for a new party to break through. Far better to try and influence one of the existing parties than to



take the risk of striking out on one's own, a stance which still appears to be the case, even in the very different conditions of the 21st Century, to those Labour MPs, the majority in fact, who have no confidence in the Corbyn leadership. For them, the failure of the SDP constitutes an awful warning towards anyone seeking to buck the two-party system.

But the social and geographical homogeneity which sustained the two-party system no longer exists. Class lines are far more fluid than they were. Instead of a polarised system of two classes, we have a series of complex gradations, and few are now prepared to vote on class lines or vote the same way as their parents did. Fifty years ago, it was quite common to hear people say, "We've always been Labour" or "My family have always been Conservative". Statements of this kind are heard much less often now. Society is much more fluid and so are the voters. That makes for more volatile behaviour in elections, more switching between elections.

Geographically, there are now very wide differences between the different parts of the United Kingdom. There are differences in party competition in the four parts of the United Kingdom. Until the 1970s, the same parties competed on the same basis in England, Scotland and Wales. That is no longer true. In England, the competition is primarily between the Conservatives and Labour, with the Liberal Democrats and UKIP "also-rans". In Wales, the system is tilted towards Labour than it is in England, and there is also of course competition from the Welsh nationalists. In Scotland, the Conservatives were, until the 2017 General Election, very weak, and the main competition was between Labour and the Scottish Nationalists. In Northern Ireland, the British-based parties have had no success since 1970.

In 2015, for the first time, though it was to be repeated in 2017, a different party won the election in each part of the United Kingdom: in England, the Conservatives won; in Wales, Labour won; in Scotland, the SNP won; and in Northern Ireland, the Democratic Unionist Party. This is clear evidence that Britain is no longer a geographically homogeneous society but a multinational state in which voting behaviour depends in part on which area of the country you happen to live. Instead of a single nationwide general election, as in the 1950s and 1960s, there were four separate general elections in different parts of the United Kingdom. The issues, particularly in Scotland and Northern Ireland, were quite different from those in England. In Scotland, the main issue was whether there should be a second independence referendum. In Northern Ireland, the main issue was, as always, the border, and whether Northern Ireland should remain part of the United Kingdom or be joined with the Republic. But there was also an additional issue: the future of devolved institutions in the province, institutions which are temporarily in abeyance due to an unresolved quarrel between the Unionists and the Nationalists.

The outcome in Scotland in 2015 was particularly notable. In the General Election of 2015, the SNP won 50% of the vote, and 56 of the 59 Scottish seats. They won more seats in 2015 than they had won in all the previous general elections put together. In 2017, the Party fell back and won just 35 seats out of 59 and 37% of the vote. Most commentators remarked on the decline of the SNP and the revival of Labour, and even more of the resurrection of the Scottish Conservatives under the leadership of Ruth Davidson, and most unionists heaved a sigh of relief. Even so, the SNP remained the largest party in Scotland, and its performance in 2017 was far better than at any previous general election except the 2015 one, and, because of advances made by the SNP, it is now customary for the Nationalist leaders, as well as the Liberal Democrat leader, to participate in television debates between the party leaders. These debates can no longer be confined to the leaders of the two major parties.

Perhaps one reason for this fragmentation, a fragmentation reversed, perhaps temporarily, in 2017, is that the political parties have seemed less successful than in the past at resolving complex national problems, although it may be that voters' expectations of politicians and the demands they make on politicians are greater than they were 50 years ago. Nevertheless, until the late-1960s, there seems to have been a belief that the government in power could resolve Britain's economic problems, and that if it could not, then the opposition would be able to do so. That belief started to collapse with the failure of the Heath Government in the early-1970s to govern against the wishes of the trade unions, and it is no coincidence that the first clear sign of the decline of the two-party system came in the "Who Governs?" Election of 1974, a snap-election called by Edward Heath to secure a mandate for a stronger policy against the trade unions. The public declined to give their confidence to either



major party and just 75% of those voting supported Labour or the Conservatives, the rest voting for the Liberals or the national parties. That was a precipitous fall from the 89% who had voted Conservative or Labour in the previous General Election in 1970, while the peak of the two-party system had come in 1951, when 97% voted for one of the two major parties. Indeed, in none of the four general elections during the 1950s were more than 12 MPs elected who did not belong to one of the two major parties, and that includes Northern Ireland elections.

Now, this decline in support for the two major parties was of course masked by the first-past-the-post electoral system, which meant that single-party majority government continued even when that government was supported by just over two-fifths of the voters, a far cry perhaps from majority rule. British government was becoming no longer ruled by the majority but ruled by the strongest minority. Since 1974, the highest vote gained by a winning party in a general election was 44%, by Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives in 1979. The overall figures are very striking. In the seven elections between 1945 and 1970, the average support for the two major parties was 90%, and in no election during that period did it fall below 87%. In the 12 elections from February 1974 to 2017, and I am including 2017, the average support for the two major parties was 74%, and in only two elections, those of 1979 and 2017, was it over 80%.

Confidence in political leadership seemed to increase during the long premiership of Margaret Thatcher from 1979 to 1990, but her landslide victories were won on comparatively low proportions of the national vote – 44% in 1979 and 42% in 1983 and 1987, just over two-fifths of the national vote. In other words, even at the height of Margaret Thatcher's power, nearly three-fifths voted against her, were opposed to her, something that historians should bear in mind when they claim that Margaret Thatcher enjoyed hitherto unexampled levels of popularity.

The same was true of Tony Blair, whose landslides of 1997 and 2001 were gained on just 43% and 41% respectively of the national vote, but they gave him very large majorities of 160 on each occasion.

But Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair did succeed in establishing a new ideological consensus to replace the Attlee One Nation consensus, and this was built around market liberalism. The Blair Government, in practice, accepted the market economy pioneered by Margaret Thatcher and it did not seek to reverse the privatisation measures nor the trade union reforms of the previous Conservative Administration. Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair created a new consensus, based on a much more restricted role for the state than had been apparent in the earlier period, and there was more reliance on the mechanisms of the market in the public services, including the welfare services.

But the credit crunch of 2008 has undermined that consensus. So far, nothing new has replaced it, but during the 2017 General Election, both major parties distanced themselves from it. Jeremy Corbyn's outlook had hardly anything in common with the New Labour years of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Indeed, to supporters of Corbyn, the term "Blairite" is almost the worst possible insult that you can imagine. The Conservatives, for their part, distanced themselves from the neoliberalism of the Thatcher years. Their Manifesto declared, the 2017 Manifesto: "We must reject the ideological templates provided by the socialist left and the libertarian right", thus, as it were, equating Margaret Thatcher and perhaps even David Cameron with Jeremy Corbyn, the socialist left and the libertarian right. The Manifesto went on to say: "...and instead embrace the mainstream view that recognises the good that government can do", not, I think, a sentence you would have got in any of Margaret Thatcher's manifestos. Later, the Manifesto said: "The Government's agenda will not be allowed to drift to the right." Theresa May was as far away from Margaret Thatcher as Jeremy Corbyn was from Tony Blair. This is surely the clearest sign that, in Britain, as indeed in much of the Continent, social democracy and economic liberalism, the basis of the Margaret Thatcher/Blair consensus, is now very much on the defensive. Jeremy Corbyn reacted against the one, Theresa May against the other. The 2017 Election thus marked a movement away from the consensus on economic liberalism and social democracy to internationalist doctrines which had ruled Britain from the time of Margaret Thatcher to that of David Cameron.

The first-past-the-post system still survives as a factor inhibiting the chances of the minor parties, but over the past 20 years, proportional representation has been introduced in other elections: elections to the devolved



bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; elections to local authorities in Scotland and Northern Ireland; also, in elections to the London Assembly; and elections to the European Parliament. It can no longer be complained with any plausibility that proportional representation is too complex for voters to understand or that it has no relevance to British conditions, and the introduction of proportional representation has probably encouraged voters to consider voting for parties other than the two major ones.

UKIP had a great electoral success in 2015 when it won one-eighth of the vote, though just one seat in the House of Commons, but before that, it had come first in the 2014 European Parliament Elections under a system of proportional representation.

The SNP had tremendous success in the Election of 2015, where it won 56 out of 59 seats, but before that, it had gained control of the Scottish Parliament, first in 2007 and then again in 2011, in elections under a system of proportional representation. Moreover, in Scotland and Wales, proportional representation had sometimes led to hung parliaments and coalition or minority governments, without any obvious ill-effects.

Is it not possible that we have taken a brief period of British political history, the years from 1945 to 1974, as the norm when they are in fact the exception? Perhaps this has excessively influenced our view, these years, of how the party system works. It is also, and perhaps no coincidence, the period when Political Science developed as a discipline. In fact, the two-party system has been much less prevalent in Britain than many suppose.

If we go back to the beginning of the 20th Century, from the great Liberal victory of 1906 to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, there were three general elections. In these elections, the left was represented by two separate parties, Liberals and Labour, the right, by a coalition between two parties, the Conservatives and Liberal Unionists, and there was also the Irish Nationalist Party. So, there were two large parties and three smaller parties, but each of the smaller parties was aligned with one of the larger ones, Labour and Irish Nationalists with the Liberals, the Liberal Unionists with the Conservatives. So, there was a two-bloc system but not a two-party system, and two of the three elections in this period resulted in hung parliaments.

After the First World War, between 1918 and 1931, there were six general elections, fought between three independent parties – Conservatives, Liberals and Labour, though the Liberals were split until 1923 between the Asquithan Liberals and the Lloyd George Liberals. Two of the six elections resulted in minority governments and two yielded coalition governments. During the whole period from 1886 to 1931, the Liberal Governments of 1906 to 1910 and the Conservative Governments of 1923-4 and 1924-9 were the only single-party majority governments. All other governments were coalitions or minority governments. So, whilst single-party majority government was certainly the pattern after 1945, it was not the pattern in the 60 years before 1945. So, it is a myth that the two-party system with its concomitant single-party majority government has been the norm in Britain. That is the conventional wisdom. The facts show something quite different. But even though reality is different from the myth, the facts have not proved sufficient to destroy the myth, for we continue to treat a relatively brief period of British history, from 1945 to 1970, as the norm from which other periods are a deviation. This has perhaps excessively influenced our view, not only about how the party system works but how it ought to work.

The interesting question is whether we are in fact returning to the pre-1945 condition, a period of multi-party politics in which single-party majority government was no longer the norm. Certainly, until the 2017 General Election, it appeared the trend was in fact in that direction. Even so, the last three elections have resulted in two hung parliaments and a very small overall majority of 10 in 2015 for the Conservatives, a majority that might well not have lasted for the full five years of a parliament.

The first-past-the-post electoral system is often defended with the argument that it produces strong government, which is generally equated with single-party majority government, but the outcome of the last three elections must raise serious doubts as to whether the electoral system is still capable of performing this function. Labour has not won a general election since 2005, 13 years ago, when it had a majority of 66 and just 35% of the vote – in other words, nearly two-thirds of those voting supported other parties. The Conservatives have not won a comfortable majority since 1992, 26 years ago, when they had a majority of 21, though even that was not



enough to last the whole Parliament – by the beginning of 1997, it had disappeared, through by-elections and defections, and we were back into a hung parliament.

The 2017 Election certainly saw a trend towards the resurrection of the two-party system and the combined vote for the two major parties was 84%, as I said, the highest figure since 1970. Theresa May was widely criticised after the Election for calling a snap-election, which many thought unnecessary, yet her Conservatives won a higher percentage of the vote than Margaret Thatcher did in her landslide in 1987. Jeremy Corbyn, though he did not win the Election, won a higher percentage of the vote than Tony Blair did in 2005 when he had a comfortable majority. Indeed, Labour secured the highest percentage increase in its vote between one election and another, an increase of around 10%, since its victory under Clement Attlee in 1945, and that of course came after an interval of 10 years since the previous election and a World War.

Perhaps one main reason for the seeming revival of the two-party system in 2017 is that it was a Brexit Election, and this polarised the voters according to their view of Brexit. The British Election Study asked: “As far as you are concerned, what is the single most important issue facing the country at the present time?” The dominant answer was Brexit. More than one in three mentioned Brexit, as compared to fewer than one in 10 who mentioned the National Health Service and one in 20 who suggested that it was the economy.

In 2015, the favoured parties for those who were to vote Leave in the 2016 Referendum had been either the Conservatives or UKIP, but the absence of Nigel Farage from the UKIP leadership and a belief that, for the Conservatives, in Theresa May’s famous words, “Brexit means Brexit” – in other words, a so-called “hard Brexit” – meant that the bulk of Leave voters supported the Conservatives in 2017. Over half of 2015 UKIP voters swung to the Conservatives in 2017, just 18% swung to Labour, while 18% remained with UKIP. Taking Leave voters, over 60% supported the Conservatives in 2017.

Labour, by contrast, won Remain votes from the Greens and, remarkably perhaps, from the Liberal Democrats, even though the Liberal Democrats were more obviously a Remain party than Labour, since the Liberal Democrats, unlike Labour, were proposing a second referendum on Europe to undo the consequences of the first. Nearly a quarter of those who had voted Liberal Democrat in 2015 supported Labour in 2017 and so did nearly two-thirds of those who had voted Green in 2015. Around half of those who had voted Remain in 2016 voted Labour in 2017, a quarter Conservative, and just 15% for the Liberal Democrats.

Perhaps all this is a sign that the Liberal Democrats are, once again, being seen as a minor party and that all of the gains they had made since the General Election of 1997, when their number of seats had increased from 20 to 46, reaching a peak of 62 in 2005, following the Iraq War, that all these gains had now been lost. Perhaps they were suffering from being seen, once again, as a party with no chance of being in government, and perhaps also suffering from the aftermath of their coalition with the Conservatives from 2010 to 2015, an alignment which seemed unnatural to many of those who had voted for the party. Tony Blair had said that if one attacked a Labour Government from the left for 13 years and then joined a coalition with the Conservatives, one had some questions to answer. The Liberal Democrats never did succeed in answering those questions.

But the Election of 2017 showed that the Conservatives are increasingly being seen as a Leave party, with Labour being seen as a Remain party, despite the fact that Theresa May and a majority of her Cabinet were Remainers, while Jeremy Corbyn and his allies have always been, to say the least, somewhat equivocal on the virtues of the European Union.

Referendums were once seen as a threat to the British Constitution, but in reality, they are a threat to the party system – they shake it up. The 1975 Referendum on Europe prefigured the split in the Labour Party in the 1980s and the formation of the SDP. The 2014 Referendum on Scottish Independence prefigured the SNP electoral landslide of 2015 and the eclipse of Labour in Scotland. The 2016 Referendum proved disruptive for both major parties, re-aligning voters along the Remain/Leave axis. That is ironic because both the 2016 Referendum and the 2017 General Election were intended to exorcise Europe from British politics.



David Cameron had hoped that the Referendum would legitimise Britain's membership of the European Union and stop the Conservatives from, to use his words, "banging on about Europe". Instead, the Referendum had the opposite effect, ejecting Britain from the European Union and emphasising the divisions within the Conservative Party on that issue. Theresa May called the General Election a snap-election to resolve the issue of Brexit once and for all, but her failure to retain her overall majority has only served to re-open it. Some of you may remember the famous comment of Ernest Bevin about Europe that "Once you open that Pandora's Box, you never know what Trojan Horses will fly out" and it seems to me there are as many Trojan Horses flying out when we are trying to close the box as there were when we were trying to open it, and that it is proved almost impossible to exorcise the issue from British politics, and that everyone who has tried – and I am sorry to mix metaphors – everyone who has tried has found it a boomerang.

The Election helped the Labour Party because, in a sense, it could finesse the issue of Europe. The Labour Manifesto declared that the Party accepted the outcome of the Referendum. It said that a Labour Government would leave the European Union, that it would institute a policy of managed immigration in place of free movement, and that it would seek to retain the benefits of the Single Market and the Customs Union. But membership of the Single Market requires acceptance of free movement. Labour never made precisely clear how it would square this circle. But perhaps that did not matter. Labour was able to win the support of areas that had voted Remain in the Referendum, even in seemingly safe Conservative seats, such as Kensington & Chelsea and Canterbury, neither of which had ever gone Labour before, while retaining the support of Leave voters in its working-class strongholds.

The Conservatives, on the other hand, secured a higher share of the vote in 2017 than they had won in 2015 in areas of the country that had voted to leave the European Union, and indeed, the six seats the Conservatives gained from Labour – Copeland, Derbyshire North-East, Mansfield, Middlesbrough South, Stoke South, and Walsall North – were all areas with heavy Leave majorities in 2016.

This new constituency alignment shows very clearly how class has come to be so much less important in voting behaviour. Kensington & Chelsea and Canterbury are, after all, middle-class areas, won by Labour, and, remarkably, by a Labour Party far more left-wing than it had been in the past. Constituencies such as Mansfield, Middlesbrough, Stoke and Walsall, on the other hand, are located in post-industrial Britain, areas hollowed out by the processes of industrial change and deserted by many of the ambitious, who have moved to the large conurbations, yet these areas were gained by the Conservatives.

Brexit was, as we have seen, a major factor. Age was another. Just 27% of 18-24-year-olds voted Conservative, while 61% of those aged 65 or over voted Conservative. Education was also a factor. Those with educational qualifications were much more likely to be Remain supporters and Labour votes; those without were more likely to be Leave supporters and Conservative voters. Of those with no educational qualifications, 52% voted Conservative and 35% Labour; of those with a degree or higher educational qualification, 33% voted Conservative and 48% Labour. One might perhaps expect that the erosion of class ties shown in this Election would, in the long run, lead to an erosion of the two-party system, but of course that is a speculative argument.

The Brexit issue overcame the traditional class alignment. The Conservatives made a net gain over Labour of 4% amongst the skilled working-class and 6% amongst the semi-skilled and unskilled working-class, but a net loss of 9% amongst classes A and B, a striking outcome. Labour, whose policy was perhaps the most left-wing the Party has ever seen, gained votes amongst the more affluent classes and lost them among the poorer classes. In total, amongst manual workers, 44% voted Conservative and 41% Labour, while amongst non-manual workers, 42% voted Conservative and 39% Labour. So, it is crass to say, as many commentators have done, that the 2017 Election was a protest against austerity, for those who might be presumed to be victims of austerity swung to the Conservatives, while those who had suffered least or even benefited, swung to Labour. Brexit has helped to turn class politics upside-down.

The General Election of 2017 therefore was a Brexit Election, and there is some evidence also that the recent local elections were also Brexit elections, even though of course local authorities have no responsibility for Britain's membership of the European Union. The fact that 2017 was a Brexit Election is the clearest indication



possible of the extent to which questions of identity have replaced questions of economic ideology in British politics. During most of the 20th Century, the political debate was one essentially about the role of the state and of the distribution of income – did voters want a greater or a lesser degree of state control, did they want a redistribution of income or a retention of incentives for the better-off? But the General Elections of 2015 and 2017 were elections in which the prime issue was one of identity – how British are you, or perhaps how English are you, and is being British or being English compatible with being European? In Scotland, the questions were: how Scottish are you and is being Scottish compatible with being British? The parties of identity, UKIP and the SNP, attacked their political opponents not for being too left-wing or too right-wing but for being insufficiently British or insufficiently Scottish, and that marked a sea-change in British politics.

These elections also showed that the strength of identity politics was greatest in the areas that were not strongly connected to global growth – suburban communities, post-industrial towns, and decaying coastal areas – in contrast to the large conurbations which on the whole benefit from globalisation and which are the centre of a new knowledge and creative economy. For former areas tend to have stronger community ties than the large conurbations, ties which globalisation have undermined, and they have found immigration more unsettling than those living in London or other conurbations. They are likely to be more pessimistic and fearful of the future, precisely because their communities are being undermined by change, than areas which have benefited from globalisation. Those areas which have not benefited from globalisation voted for Leave, the conurbations largely for Remain. Labour's strength is increasing in the conurbations and the university towns, while the strength of the Conservatives, paradoxically, is increasing in provincial England and amongst those struggling to manage, many of whom voted for UKIP in 2015 but returned to the Conservatives in 2017. It is the contrast, as one journalist working for the Economist has put it, “between Clacton and Cambridge”.

Now, two political scientists, Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker, who have analysed this new cleavage, have called it “a tilting of Britain's political axis and a bifurcation of Britain, a bifurcation resulting from the uneven impact of globalisation on different parts of the country.”

Perhaps one should be careful about drawing too many conclusions from the 2017 Election precisely because of the Brexit factor. The obvious question to ask, therefore, is whether the 2017 Election signifies a new pattern or whether it was an untypical election, a one-off election on a single issue. Will Brexit be an issue still in 2022 or could there even be another Brexit election before 2022? How will Brexit continue to affect the parties? Will it continue to be disruptive? Might we see a resurrection of UKIP if it appears the Conservatives fail to produce a “hard Brexit”? To all these questions, there is an obvious answer: it is that neither I nor anyone else can have the faintest idea!

We also need to qualify the conclusion that the General Election of 2017 entirely restored the two-party system for third parties still retain a considerable base of support in the House of Commons, a total of 70 out of 650 seats, larger than at any general election since the War before 1997. Part of the reason for this is that, although smaller parties such as the Liberal Democrats are under-represented -their 7% of the vote won them just 2% of the seats, while UKIP's 2% won them no votes at all – the Scottish National Party found itself over-represented, and it is now by far the largest of the minority parties in the House of Commons, even though its vote was under half that of the Liberal Democrats. The large number of third party seats in the House of Commons means it will become increasingly difficult for one of the major parties to secure an overall majority.

But there is a second reason why the hung parliaments of 2010 and 2017 may not be aberrations, and this is because of a trend first noticed by two students of elections, John Curtice and Michael Steed, in the 1980s. They pointed out there had been a dramatic fall since the 1950s in the number of marginal seats. They defined a marginal seat as a seat won by either the Conservative or Labour Parties, contested by both parties, where the Conservative share of the two-party vote lay between the range 45% and 55% - in other words, a 5% swing would switch it from one major party to another. In terms of that definition, there were 166 such seats in 1955 but only 89 in 2017, a reduction of nearly 50%, a result of the consistent trend. This means that any given swing will shift just over half as many seats from one main party to another than had been the case in 1955. So, the consequence is that a major party needs a much larger lead over its main competitor to have an overall majority.



Why has this shift, perhaps the most important in Britain's post-War electoral history, occurred? The cause, in the view of Curtice, is that there has been a long-term change in the geography of Conservative and Labour support. Beginning with local elections in the late-1950s, Conservative support became increasingly concentrated in areas where they were already strong – the South, the Midlands and rural areas, while Labour performed better in areas where it was already strong – Scotland, the North and inner-city constituencies, although that was partly counteracted, as we have seen, in 2017. But the reason for this long-term change is unclear, and its effect was, at first, very small, but small and cumulative shifts gradually resulted in a fundamental change: the creation of more safe seats for each of the two major parties, and this means that Labour is less well-represented in rural areas and the South of England than it was in the 1950s, while the Conservatives are less well-represented in Scotland or the inner cities than it was in the 1950s. In 1955, remarkably, the Conservatives enjoyed a dominant position in Scotland, with an overall majority of both seats and votes, the only time, apart from the SNP victories in 2015 and 2017, that this has been achieved by any party in the post-War years. So, by contrast with the 1950s, when Britain appeared a geographically homogenous society, it now seems divided. Britain now appears bifurcated between two different halves.

All this means is that the party now needs a larger gap between its main rival to enjoy a working majority. On this point of view, the Conservatives were unlucky. They enjoyed a 2.5% lead over Labour. That is the same lead that Clement Attlee's Labour Party enjoyed in 1950, which gave them a small overall majority of five, admittedly probably insufficient to last a whole parliament but a majority all the same. In 2010, David Cameron enjoyed a 7% lead over Labour, a larger lead than had been obtained by Anthony Eden in 1955, Harold Macmillan in 1959, Harold Wilson in 1966, or Edward Heath in 1970, yet all these elections yielded comfortable majorities for the winners. Cameron's margin over Labour in 2010 was roughly similar to Margaret Thatcher's margin over Labour in 1979, but she had a majority of 43 seats – Cameron had a hung parliament. So, for these two reasons, the rise in the representation of third parties and the decline in the number of marginal seats, the hung parliaments which were the outcomes of the 2010 and 2017 Elections may not be an aberration or an accident but a harbinger of things to come. It is just possible that the era of single-party majority government which characterised the immediate post-War period has come to an end and that the future will see an era of multi-party politics, despite the outcome of the 2017 Election – but who knows?

There is a salutary warning against making psephological predictions, which was well put as long ago as 1959 by Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, having won an election, to many people's surprise. He said: "One of the latest so-called sciences is one called psephology, the study of how the people voted last time, how they will vote next time, all apparently capable of mathematical calculation, irrespective of the electoral campaign or the issues at stake. This sort of political Calvinism is only redeemed by the recent discovery that their predetermined anticipations are generally proved wrong. The electors do show, from time to time, a regrettable outbreak of political free will."

I began this lecture with a confession; I end with a warning on the limitations of the subject. Men and women have always tried to achieve certainty about the future, and they have always been disappointed. The Ancients consulted the Oracles at Delphi. Later, it was thought that history might give the answers: the more we know about the past, the better we could predict the future. But as the Oxford historian, A. J. P. Taylor, once said, "We learn from history not to make the old mistakes, and that leaves us free to make new ones instead." In our time, it is the academic students of Politics, or, as they call themselves, political scientists, who have taken over the role once enjoyed by the Oracles and then by the historians. At any rate, political scientists do not seem to have been much more successful than the Oracles or the historians, and certainly, the political scientists were amongst the losers of the Election of 2017, which confirmed there are no iron laws of politics.

Consider the supposed iron laws which have been shown to be no longer iron laws. The first was the apathy of the young, who it was said were simply not interested in politics. The second was the unimportance of the electoral campaign. At the beginning of the 2017 campaign, the Conservatives were 22% ahead in the polls. In the Election, they had a lead of just 2%. Theresa May had no doubt called the Election after looking at the opinion polls, but they were of just as little use as the Oracle at Delphi. Opinion polls give a snapshot of the present; they cannot be used to predict the future. The third iron law was that elections are won on the centre ground, and that a Labour Party firmly on the left could not make electoral gains. The fourth iron law was the



party ahead in voter surveys on the issues of economic competence would win the election. The fifth law was that the party whose leader is thought to be the best candidate for Prime Minister would win the election. The Conservatives were ahead both on economic competence and on the best Prime Minister. Much good it did them. The sixth law, in which I was complicit, was that Britain was inevitably moving from a two-party system to a multi-party system, and in fact, as we have seen, the 2017 Election yielded the largest two-party vote since 1970. The seventh iron law was that social class is the most fundamental determinant of voting behaviour and that politics is based mainly on class. Instead, Labour made large gains in middle-class areas and university seats, while the Conservatives did best in the manufacturing areas of the East Midlands among the less privileged.

There are, no doubt, other supposed iron laws which I have not noticed. All these iron laws predicted a massive Conservative victory, which I must confess I believed myself would occur. A Conservative victory was, as it were, over-determined, but it did not happen. The truth is that Politics can never be a predictive science, and we all make ourselves foolish when we seek to make predictions. In addition, despite the very sophisticated work being done by students of elections, I do not believe we can ever have firm knowledge of why it is that people vote in the way that they do. That perhaps is fortunate, for, if we did know, it would be open to ill-wishers to manipulate the way we vote by using that predictive knowledge to our detriment. That is why I have tried in these lectures to look at the development of the British party system through a historical perspective and I have throughout tried to bear in mind the quip to the effect that “The trend is your friend until the end when it bends”.

So, if asked what are the electoral and political trends of the future, or even what might happen in the next election, I can only answer, in the words of the great jazz trumpeter, the late Humphrey Lyttelton, who was once asked, “Where is modern jazz going?” He replied: “If I knew that, I’d be there already!”

I confess I find all this very comforting, for it does show that we do, after all, have free will, and do not have to do what political scientists and others tell us we must do.

I conclude by referring to another Election which caused a surprise, that of June 1970, an Election in which the Conservatives won, even though, a week before the Election, the polls had put Labour 12% ahead. At the time, the philosopher, Isaiah Berlin, wrote to an American correspondent: “I am naturally cock-a-hoop about the refutation of the pollsters. Anything that upsets careful predictions, the general assumption that vast, impersonal forces are guiding our faltering footsteps in directions unknown to us but known only to American scientists, pleased me immensely. There is no limit in my pleasure in the unforeseen and fortuitous.” In my view, it is an insight into the unforeseen and the fortuitous that makes the study of Politics and History so fascinating.

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