

The BBC and devolution

The election coverage once again revealed the BBC's disdain for England. We had many programmes and representations of the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish viewpoint and their separate issues but nothing on England. England once again did not exist as a country of the Union in the BBC handling of questions, guests and subjects. The same has been true of their remorseless anti Brexit coverage. We often hear of special problems for Northern Ireland or Scotland over Brexit, but never hear why England wants it and voted for it. Either the BBC should concentrate on being the UK's national broadcaster on its main channels, or it must be fair to all four parts of our devolved country.

This matters. Let me remind the BBC that 84% of the population of the UK lives in England and pays their Licence fees. Many of us wish to hear English news and discussion of English matters yet we are denied this. Instead the BBC provides a BBC Wales and a BBC Scotland for those parts of the country, and doubles up by reproducing some of the Scottish and Welsh content and debate on BBC UK. It does neither for England.

When it came to the leader debates their attitude to devolution was a mess. They decided that they would give equal prominence to the SNP and the Welsh Nationalists, though neither of these parties could form a UK government or supply a Prime Minister because both only fielded candidates in a few Westminster seats. Yet they ignored the leaders of the main Ulster parties, who surely deserved attention if the Welsh and Scottish Nationalists got it? I could understand asking all party leaders to a big debate, or just inviting all party leaders who led parties fielding candidates in a majority of the Westminster seats. I could not see any justification for the choice of Leaders they did make.

What the BBC achieved by their seven way Leaders debate was an unruly shouting match between two parties that might provide a PM and form a government, three other national parties that were polling badly and two devolved regional parties out of the several who could have been invited who could clearly not provide a PM. The balance politically was by these means skewed heavily to the left of the voting patterns of the electors, with just two leaders representing the half of the electorate with Conservative and Eurosceptic leanings, and with five representing the other half. It meant there were far more pro EU representatives, out of line with the referendum results.

I made no complaints or remarks at the time. Media is a bit like the weather to candidates. You have to accept much of it and just make sure you have an umbrella handy, as they are out to rain on you. Now after the event I would suggest the BBC rethinks its whole approach to reporting devolution, and to choosing which people and issues to select for main election broadcasts. If they want to play up devolution then give England a voice and a role. Maybe it would be better to stick to the UK as the BBC's country in a General Election, and do more to discuss the national issues and matters common to

the whole country. The more non English lop sided devolution the BBC goes in for, the more it appears to be on the side of independence movements which are currently waning in popularity.

Let's end austerity

Many readers will know that I was critical of Mr Osborne's austerity policy. It was always more based on increased tax revenues than on cutting spending, but it ground on with the rhetoric of cuts. The growth in spending on overseas aid, EU contributions, pensions and welfare placed more of a strain on some other important programmes. Today I want us to end the rhetoric of austerity, and to ensure decent levels of funding for those important parts of the public sector that are finding it difficult to manage.

It is true that total spending on the NHS and on schools went up, but the cumulative impact of low real increases in areas under pressure of numbers now requires more of an increase. I have been arguing for some time for more cash for schools in Wokingham and West Berkshire, and other similarly placed fast growth areas with low current levels of per pupil funding. I have also argued for more money for social care, to relieve more of the pressures on NHS hospital beds and provide more back up for the elderly and infirm in their own homes. I expect more money to be forthcoming. We could start to spend the saved net contributions to the EU, which should materialise in twenty months time.

I see no need to impose new taxes or raise individual tax rates to do this. The budget deficit is now under good control. What we need instead is a combination of tax and other economic policies that help lift the growth rate a bit, which in turn will bring in more revenue. There are as I have often argued tax rates that could be lowered to foster more tax collection. Treasury orthodoxy seems to think that even a few hundred million pounds extra spending, a small sum in relation to the total budget, needs to be offset by specified tax increases. Whilst accepting that some taxes collect more at lower rates, they still do not have working accurate models to show just how much CGT, Stamp Duty and other similar taxes can increase with a sensible rate. Given the huge inaccuracies in the Treasury forecasts of tax revenue their precision over sums that need to be raised are within the rounding error or may simply be wrong. What we need to ensure is a livelier rate of tax revenue growth, which can best come from lower rates where taxes are easily avoidable, and from a range of policies that can spur a better economic performance. These include policies to promote better public sector productivity performance, more productive investment, embracing the digital revolution in the public sector as well as stimulating it in the private sector, and improving transport and broadband infrastructure.

Total votes cast under recent leaders

The Conservatives under Mrs May polled 13.667 m votes this time. This is more than Labour under Tony Blair at his peak in 1997 when he polled 13.518m, and more than he polled in 2001 when he had a landslide in seats – he polled just 10.724 m.votes

Theresa May's leadership at 13.667 m was well ahead of the Conservatives led by David Cameron who managed 11.34 m in 2015 and just 10.73 m in 2010 despite the banking crash under Labour.

It also is massively better than John Major in 1997 after his ERM European disaster, when he polled just 9.6m.

William Hague took the prize for the worst Conservative performance of the last half century with only 8.357m.votes. Michael Howard lifted it modestly in 2005 to 8.784 m.

How to govern in the new Parliament

The least bad option from here is for Mrs May to lead a Conservative government, commanding her 317 MPs. Assuming the 7 Sinn Fein MPs do not attend as before, and allowing for 1 Speaker and 3 Deputy Speakers, a party needs 320 MPs to have a majority. On most votes therefore Mrs May commanding 317 will win, as the Opposition MPs rarely all turn up and rarely all vote the same way.

There are discussions with the DUP. It seems likely the DUP will often want to support government proposals with or without an Agreement. It may be possible to reach an Agreement that effectively creates a 327 vote base for the big votes. This will not include any Conservative changes of attitude and voting behaviour towards moral and conscience issues like civil partnerships and abortion. Even without an Agreement the DUP should be willing to vote through the legislation for Brexit, and to support the government should another Opposition party bring a motion of No confidence. The government is not talking of a coalition. On Brexit there are also a few Labour Eurosceptic MPs who would never vote against it. The whole Labour party was elected on Thursday on a pledge to honour Brexit, so they have limited scope to vote against the Brexit legislation, the main Bill to be taken this year through the Commons.

I do not think another early election would solve anything. It is quite likely the voters would say they want a balanced Parliament with no overall single party majority. It is too soon for the two main parties to shift their

platform enough to make a difference. In order to be taken seriously by the EU and the wider world the UK government has to accept it has sought the mandate of the people four times in the last three years in the two constitutional referenda and in two General elections. It is high time Parliament and government now got around to implementing the wishes of the people as expressed in those democratic events. We are a democratic country with accountable politicians, not a permanent political debating society shifting our views without ever implementing them. My judgement is none of the main parties want an early election, and many voters do not favour it either.

Some, especially the BBC correspondents who seem to see themselves as makers more than reporters of news, say the Conservative party needs a Leadership election. I disagree, as do most of my Parliamentary colleagues. Whilst there are Conservatives sore at the failure to gain a majority, party members see no obvious single agreed successor and no obvious simple way of getting to a successor. Taking three months off governing now would send the wrong message to the EU and others. Theresa May has three great advantages. She did help the party win more votes than at any time since 1992, so she has the biggest personal mandate in the new Commons. She is well versed and prepped for the Brexit negotiations which must take centre stage imminently. She has more support than any rival amongst the MPs. As she says she wants to be Leader she should be supported.

It may be helpful to remind you of the rules regarding a leadership election for those who disagree with me. Unless the Leader resigns, it takes 15% of the MPs (now 48) to sign a letter requesting a vote of confidence in the Leader, and then requires 50% plus of the MPs to vote No confidence. (159 MPs). When we were pressing Mr Cameron to hold a referendum there were rumours that we would put in the then requisite number of letters. We had more than twice as many MPs wanting a referendum as we needed letters. We did not do so and saw no need to. Instead we kept him in touch with the build up of numbers for a referendum. We knew for many months we could not win the No confidence vote, so damaging him by demanding a contest without winning seemed a futile and bad idea. It was when we got to 120 MPs and said we were confident we could get to 150 that he reconsidered the Referendum and agreed to one. We did not have to explain the arithmetic to him or suggest some hotheads might seek to remove him. He was rightly not unduly worried if 45 MPs had a big disagreement with him, but knew 150 would be very dangerous.

The UK cannot allow a further delay in opening the formal negotiations on our future relationship with the EU. We have already had a long delay enforced by the Courts, and a further delay from the EU which has also spanned an election. People living here from the EU want certainty, UK citizens on the continent want certainty, businesses want certainty. That means engaging as soon as possible and getting some decisions.

How did I deal with the election? A candidate's story.

Given the range of strong reactions to the campaigns and the results, I am writing today about how I responded to the national campaign and tried to run a sensible local campaign.

In the months before the election was called the question of whether we needed an early election to bring the new PM her own mandate and extend the life of Parliament well beyond the Brexit talks came up just occasionally in private meetings amongst Conservative MPs, whips and Ministers. Some wanted an early election. I always expressed the view that there was no constitutional need given the precedents of Callaghan, Major and Brown, and no pressing political need given the size of the majority. I supported the PM's view that we would not hold one.

She surprised me after Easter by calling one. I listened carefully to her statement in Downing Street and was prepared to defend her decision. I could see the obvious advantages for the government and country assuming she won an increased majority in having the new PM with her own clear mandate, and the Brexit Bill as a Manifesto bill approved by the electorate in a General Election as well as by referendum. I was also aware that there was a risk of losing, but no point in talking about that once the announcement was made. The polls and general mood made losing look fairly unlikely. I thought the period of the election was too long given the limited nature of the messages main parties wish to get out these days, and given the imminence of the Brussels talks. I worried about how the time would be filled and how the media out of boredom would try to liven up issues and messages the two main parties were not highlighting.

When Parliament broke up there was an unreal mood created by opinion polls showing a huge gap between the Labour and Conservative votes. I and other Conservative MPs went back to our constituencies saying to each other we did not believe the polls could stay like that and were bound to tighten. Some Labour MPs were saying to us they did believe the polls, and went away fearing for their jobs.

When I saw the campaign theme and materials based around strong and stable leadership I felt the need to say something more to my electors, and to remind them that the local election was still about judging a local candidate to be MP, as well as choosing a national party to govern. That meant not using the template second leaflet of the Conservative party which left far too little space to set out what an individual candidate wants to do and how they see things, but creating one of our own. I wrote about the economy, taxes, planning, transport, schools and the other leading matters that constituents had told me in emails, letters, and conversations mattered to them. I explained briefly what I was doing, what I wanted to do next and where I was seeking change.

The Conservative national campaign went well until the day of the Manifesto launch. When I read the social care and winter fuel proposals I was extremely worried. I contacted the centre and explained the dangers. I wrote a blog piece saying that I intended to consult about these proposals, stressing to people that I understood this would be a government consultation post the election, and there were clearly many important details missing from the Manifesto sketch. I promised to voice constituents' worries and concerns during the consultation if that came to pass.

It seemed to take a long time for the modification to come through, saying there would be a social care cost cap. I with others asked for details of how much, and also pressed for clarification of what would constitute healthcare available free and what would constitute social care with a charge for those with money. I also wanted a figure for what was rich enough to lose the winter fuel payment. My email box was swelled with people worried or angry about the proposals. In some cases they did not understand that under the current cross party system if you move into a care home your own home is sold and the money freed used to pay the fees, nor did all appreciate that if you stayed living in your own home Councils charged for social care all the time you have assets other than your main home. I spent time writing individual emails setting out the current system as well as what might improve it.

It also became increasingly clear during the election that Mr Corbyn's offer of so much more public spending and free offers especially to school and College students was very attractive to young voters. There was no comparable Conservative offer to young people. Telling them his whole package was unaffordable, based on corporate taxes that would not materialise on the scale envisaged and extra borrowing of Latin American proportions was not going to win over the majority, who understandably liked the idea of no student fees and written off debts. I wrote a piece on how the Labour economic policy was full of danger as well as of some good intentions.

I spent the last few days in hope that there was sufficient momentum from the early campaign and sufficient doubts about the credibility of Labour's programme to give the Conservatives a modest majority. I was well aware there was no chance of a landslide, and thought it odd the seats the Conservatives were targetting which looked far too hard to win. Near to the poll I saw the enthusiasm of young voters and sensed the pro Labour mood. It was obvious the Lib Dems were going to be badly squeezed by Labour who had the better offer for young people. Their campaign to change the Brexit decision had bombed and they were trying to get on to other issues. I wrote about the two positives I could see in what was happening – the likely rejection of a second referendum on the EU by shunning the Lib Dems, and a move away from a second Independence referendum in Scotland by improved performance of the pro Union parties there.

I had tried to get the party to run on Prosperity, not austerity. I had wanted more prominence for tax reductions for workers and savers, more messages on promoting and strengthening the recovery, more about skills, training, education and better paid jobs. I was one of those urging the promise of more money for schools in the Manifesto which we did get, but we were outbid by Labour.