

# Elections and the Political Parties

In the early 1960s two American academics<sup>1</sup> published the first systematic analysis of people's attitudes to political authority in Britain. The British, they concluded, had at the time, a uniquely balanced attitude to authority – a force which had helped promote a stable democracy. Crucial factors in the emergence of this political culture have been the development of the franchise, the electoral system and representative political parties. This chapter will examine these three elements in relation to the changing social composition of British society.

## ELECTIONS

### 1 HISTORY

According to a survey carried out by Butler and Stokes<sup>2</sup> less than 3% of the British population are members of political parties and just over 3,000 hold official political office. However, in general elections prior to 2001, on average 70% of the population turned out to vote. In the 2001 election, that dropped to 59%, perhaps revealing a deeper malaise at the heart of the body politic. At present every British subject over the age of eighteen years has a vote (although peers of the realm, long-term prisoners, lunatics and those found guilty of electoral corruption are barred from exercising that right). However, the move to universal adult suffrage has a long history which began deep in the nineteenth century.

Before 1832, the exercise of both the franchise and political power was based on the ownership of land; however, as the economic structure changed, so this ancient settlement came under increasing pressure. In 1832 popular pressure reached a climax and the government passed the great Reform Bill which increased the electorate by just over 50%. The Act began the process of enfranchisement and seat redistribution while keeping the system firmly rooted in the ownership of land.

The next great statute appeared in 1867 when the vote was extended to all male householders with one year's residence in urban areas, although the concept of

1. ALMOND G. and VERBA S., *The Civic Culture*, 1963.

2. [www.surrey.ac.uk/surveys](http://www.surrey.ac.uk/surveys)



property ownership still underpinned this new edifice. Two further Acts extended democracy by establishing the secret ballot (1872), then by giving the vote to all male householders (1884-85). In 1918 women were brought into the electorate when the coalition government headed by the Liberal Lloyd George granted the vote to all women over the age of 30 whose husbands occupied premises or land to the annual value of £5. All men over the age of 21 were also enfranchised.

This Act was further modified in 1928 when women were finally given voting parity with men. The following post-war period also saw significant changes. In 1948, plural voting (the system by which those with two resident addresses could vote twice) was ended, while in 1969, the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 years of age.

## 2 ELECTIONS TODAY

The United Kingdom today has 650 constituencies each having an average electorate of roughly 72,000. England returns 533 MPs, Scotland 59, Wales 40 and Northern Ireland 18. In general elections prior to 2001, turnout averaged 70%, however, in 2001 that dropped to 59%. More recent elections have seen turnout gradually rise from 61% in 2005, to 65% in 2010 and 66% in 2015.

Again this system has a catalogue of antecedents. Relatively equal electoral districts are a feature of the late 20th century. During the 19th century, inequitable distribution was widespread but, as the century evolved, electoral districts became more evenly balanced. It was not until the middle of the 20th century that more formal attempts were made to establish parity. In 1948, the Boundaries Commission was set up to regularly review constituencies and, as a result, many of the glaring anomalies were eradicated.

The Fixed-term Parliaments Act of 2011 introduced fixed-term elections to the Westminster parliament: beginning in 2015, parliamentary elections must be held every five years, which removes the Prime Minister's power to call an early election.

After the election the party with the most MPs forms the government, the number of

votes cast plays only a secondary role. Thus, in each constituency the candidate with the highest number of votes is declared the MP for that area and the party with the highest number of MPs throughout the country is deemed to have won the election. This produces some obvious anomalies. In some constituencies candidates are often elected on a minority vote (the combined votes of the losing candidates being larger than the victor's vote). Sometimes, it may be that the party with the most votes in the country may not be the party with the most MPs. In 1951, for example, the Labour Party outvoted the Conservative Party but lost the election.

If, however, a party does not have enough MPs to outweigh the combined strength of the other parties but is still the largest single party, then they either have to do deals with smaller parties, or go once again to the electorate. There was a wide expectation that this would be the case as a result of the 1992 general election while in fact the Conservatives won an unexpected victory. A further problem with this first-past-the-post system is that parties can have a large majority in Parliament, and therefore a strong mandate to govern, but be opposed electorally by a majority of the population. The Thatcher governments of the late 1980s are an example of this.



In order to stand as a candidate in a General election, a £500 deposit is required when submitting nomination papers. This deposit is lost if that candidate receives fewer than 5% of the votes cast. A candidate's agent is responsible for the election expenses which must not exceed £8,700 plus 6p per elector in towns and cities and 9p per elector in rural areas. The names of all candidates appear on the ballot paper and voting is done in secret.

Inevitably this system has come under increasing scrutiny and criticism. Small parties in particular, feel hard done by and find it impossible to gain the sort of representation which adequately reflects their electoral support. The Liberal Democrats have found it impossible to make a major electoral breakthrough despite polling large percentages of the vote in the country as a whole.

Demands for reform of the electoral system have a long history but in more recent years the debate has become more prominent. Below is a summary of the arguments for and against the present system.

#### *Weaknesses of the system*

1. No account is taken of the size of majorities in the constituencies. Thus in 1987 a Labour majority of 17,000 in Bolton was cancelled out by a Conservative majority of 7 in Reading.
2. When there are only two candidates, the winner requires only a simple majority and, similarly, if there are multiple candidates the victor need not get more votes than the other two or several combined.
3. Some parties, notably the Liberal Democrats, polled over 25% of the vote in 1983 but only managed to get a handful of seats. Consequently it can be argued that the system fails to represent opinion as a whole.
4. The system usually leads to a decisive victory of one large party over the other

one thus freezing politics into a two party mould.

5. Votes cast for the losing MP become irrelevant.

#### *Strengths of the system*

1. The system usually leads to a clear victor; parties are therefore able to fight elections on a clear platform and be elected on it.
2. It encourages positive voting, with people voting for their choice and not against a party or candidate.
3. Tactical voting is rare and the system removes much of the pre- and post-election horse-trading that is a feature of other systems.
4. The system encourages political stability with very few governments falling from office during their term.
5. Each MP represents a particular constituency and is accountable to the population of that area. He/She therefore has a dual role, firstly as a member of a party or government, and secondly, as a more neutral local representative.
6. There are very few coalition governments; elected governments can therefore give strong and effective leadership.
7. Lastly, the system ensures electoral accountability by allowing parties and governments to be judged on their electoral pledges, rather than negotiate away these promises under pressure from coalition partners.

#### *Possible alternatives*

1. The Additional Member system

This system is used in West Germany whereby a certain number of seats are elected according to the first-past-the-post system (248). The others (249) are elected proportionally through a candidates list. On the ballot paper, voters make two choices, one for the constituency member and the other from the can-



candidate's list. It is the percentage of votes gained by the parties on the second ballot which determines the total number of seats allocated.

#### 2. The Hansard Society

This commission investigated the possibility of electoral reform and came up with the following recommendations:

- a. Three-quarters of all House of Commons seats should be elected according to the old system.
- b. The remainder should be elected according to the additional member system and chosen from a list.
- c. Parties with less than 5% of the vote would get no seats.

#### 3. Single Transferable Vote system.

Here voters register their preferences for candidates in rank order. Candidates who get a quota number of first preferences get elected and candidates with the least number of votes are knocked out, their votes being transferred to the next choice.

The nearest the country came to electoral reform was in 2011, when as part of their Coalition deal with the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats obtained a referendum on the introduction of the Alternative Vote system (a form of proportional representation). It was held in May 2011, but the proposed change was decisively rejected by 68% to 32%.

## POLITICAL PARTIES

### 1 HISTORY

Three political parties have dominated British political life since 1918. The Conservative and Labour Parties have alternated in government since 1945, while the Liberal Party was the main opposition group to the Conservatives up to the outbreak of the First World War. During the 1980s the Liberals and the newly formed Social Democratic Party (its main members were ex-Labour cabinet ministers who defected from Labour after acrimonious ideological wranglings with the left wing of the Party in 1981) almost broke the two party stranglehold which had gripped British politics since the end of the Second World War.

The concept of two-party politics is rooted in British political history. The party system has its origin in Parliament and therefore gained in importance as that institution gradually won its struggle for independence. Once this had been established (officially in 1688), it followed that

the parties in Parliament would assume more constitutional importance. By the end of the 17th century the concept of party had turned into an instrument of government and, as a result, the dividing line between the parties became blurred often turning on the question of support for the government of the time. Put simply, party allegiance in Britain up to the middle of the 19th century did not have to rely on principle; it could be, and often was, dictated by personal prejudice, family connections and financial interest. Also the very limited franchise which continued right up to the middle of the 19th century, meant that parties did not have to develop a mass base.

The two-party system grew up around the Whig and Tory Parties (the term is still in common use to describe the present-day Conservative Party). The term Whig was originally applied to a group of Scottish rebels, while "a Tory" was a term used



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to unfavourably describe an Irish or Popish outlaw. Through the course of political history both parties gradually evolved into the Liberals (Whigs) and Conservatives (Tories) although the philosophical links are at best tenuous.

By the end of the 18th century the concept of party had developed to such a point that Edmund Burke, a prominent Whig MP, was able to define it thus: "a body of men united for promoting, by their joint endeavour, the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are well agreed."

In this definition the national interest is both equated and identified with party. As with many of Burke's statements this contention is misleading for the legacy of faction continued to haunt British politics well into the 19th century.

The term "opposition", which today denotes the largest alternative grouping in Parliament, was not officially in use until 1826 when the phrase His Majesty's opposition was used.

The major parties once established in the mid-19th century began to serve two functions. On the one hand, they were increasingly seen as a means of mobilizing electoral support, while on the other, they were the means by which popular demands and grievances could be channelled and eventually translated into official policy. These two purposes, although complementary, often involved major clashes of interest and ideology. Let us examine these interests and ideologies in relation to the organization of the main political parties in Britain today.

## 2 THE PARTIES TODAY

2013 marked an historic low in terms of membership of political parties in the UK with only 0.8% of the electorate holding membership of affiliation; a fact that reflected increasing apathy after the expenses scandal in 2009. However, since the beginning of 2014 this trend has been reversed and now more than 4% claim membership which is at its highest level since 1987. Recent surveys have also seen general identification with particular parties rise with 41% identifying with a specific party and its policies. Even though the concept of two-party politics (Conservatives vs. Labour) is still firmly rooted in British political history, it is coming under strain today: the rise of the nationalist parties, especially in Scotland, and the emergence of UKIP have begun to test the duopoly of power.

### The Conservative and Unionist Party

#### Organization

Organizationally the Conservative Party has three inter-linked parts: the Party in the constituencies, the professional organization based at Central Office and the Parliamentary Party of MPs. The latter is still the most powerful body. The leader is chosen by a secret ballot of all MPs, and even this is a recent invention, being brought in in 1964. Up to that time, leaders were chosen by an inner-cabal and were effectively foisted on the party. The rules now require a candidate to gain a majority plus 15% of those eligible to vote; if such a figure is not achieved then a second or even a third ballot is necessary. On these ballots a simple majority is required over the losing candidates; if this does not occur then a final ballot is fought out between the two



most popular candidates. In 1975, a further provision allowed for the leader to be challenged every autumn. Thus the overall structure bears the hallmark of Conservative preference for hierarchical institutions and, in many respects, it is a system that mirrors the elitist past of the Party. Each gathering at the Annual Conference bears witness to this structure with debates being carefully managed and voting virtually non-existent. Even the manifesto, which forms the basis of the Party's electoral programme, is drawn up by the leadership. Above all the leader enjoys widespread power of appointment and sinecure, thus giving him/her total control over the direction and management of the Party.

### *Ideology*

Being one of the oldest political parties in existence, the ideological content of British conservatism is elusive. Historically, the Party has always adopted a flexible, open approach to doctrine, preferring to adapt or adjust to trends rather than provide ideological commitment. Modern Conservatives trace their roots back to Sir Robert Peel in the 1830s and to Disraeli in the 1870s. Both played a major role in defining and conceptualizing conservatism with the latter being particularly important for his allying of the Party with the national interest. Many present-day Conservatives see themselves as being part of this flexible continuum and often contrast themselves with their more ideological opponents.

Despite its enigmatic appearance, two strands of thought both with long traditions can be discerned within conservative thinking. Firstly, as S. Beer<sup>3</sup> has pointed out, the Tories always saw a strong state, the establishment of authority and the maintenance of law and order as the basis for society. Thus they were able to adapt to large-scale changes while still accepting these basic tenets. Secondly, after 1918, the party began to

accept the notion of free enterprise capitalism, favouring the market as a leading force for the organization of the economy and society. However, up until the 1980s, this belief was always tempered with either a paternalistic regard for those who failed to succeed under the system or a need to intervene in the economy to balance what Edward Heath called "the unacceptable face of capitalism".

To summarize, before Margaret Thatcher, the ideology of the Conservative Party could be described as centre-right cohering under Disraeli's idea of the Tories as a "One Nation" party. Margaret Thatcher changed that orientation by presenting herself as a "conviction" politician, who would govern through ideology rather than pragmatism and consensus. She has been described as a New Right ideologue whose ideas, despite being in the minority during her accession to power in 1979, became elevated to the mainstream by the time of her downfall in 1990. New Labour now accepts much of the Thatcherite doctrine, in particular, the discipline of the free market, low direct taxation, fiscal prudence, low public spending, low levels of regulation, privatization, strong state, and an interventionist foreign policy. She was helped in establishing such ideas by her phenomenal election successes and by the massive transformation in Britain's social and economic fabric.

For the Conservatives, the 1990s were a dismal decade: from John Major's surprise election victory of 1992, to the Tory rout of 1997, it was downhill all the way. The party was torn apart by the internal wrangles between Europhiles and Eurosceptics, and after 18 years in office, it had run out of steam anyway. After John Major's resignation in the wake of his party's defeat, a succession of stopgap leaders followed (William Hague, Iain Duncan-Smith, and Michael Howard), who all failed to turn the electoral fortunes of the Tory party. The Conservatives only

3. BEER S., *Modern British Politics*, 1965.



became electable again when the youthful David Cameron – he was not even 40 yet – was elected as the new leader in 2005, with a modernizing agenda to detach the party from its image as the “nasty party”, with which it had been stuck since the Thatcher era. This rebranding was only partially successful: the party failed to win a majority of seats at the 2010 election, and had to settle for a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, with David Cameron as Prime Minister. At least the Tories were back in Number 10.

### Membership

Since the 1980s, and despite recent electoral success, membership has steadily declined, from close on two million thirty years ago, to around 400,000 in 1997, to fewer than 150,000 members in 2016. As most of the members are middle-aged, the finger of criticism has been pointed at the Party's outdated image, and its lack of female and ethnic minority representation. Progress has been made on that front, with 11 Tory MPs from an ethnic minority background in the 2010 intake, but there is still plenty of scope for improvement.

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## The Labour Party

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Phillip Williams's<sup>4</sup> biography of Hugh Gaitskell explained the growth of the Labour Party in the following way: “The Labour Party was built up from below in protest against a Parliament unresponsive to working class concerns... it took the form of an elaborately structured federal constitution, on which the Party born in 1906, had to be awkwardly grafted.”

The Labour Party is in essence a federation of trade unions, constituency parties and socialist societies, all of which are affiliated to the Party. The bulk of these affiliations comes from its historical creators, the trade unions. Ernest

Bevin, the one time Minister for Labour during the Second World War and later Labour Foreign Secretary, claimed that the Labour Party had been born “out of the bowels of the Trades Union Congress (TUC)”.<sup>5</sup>

The Labour Party dates its official beginning from the foundation in 1900 of the Labour Representation Committee, which was established to promote the election to Parliament of working class men committed to a socialist programme of reform. In fact it was the widening of the franchise that prepared the ground for the development of the Labour Party in the final decades of the 19th century. However, among its antecedents, it included the socialist pioneer Robert Owen who attempted to develop a co-operative movement and a socialist alternative in industry in the 1820s and 1830s, and the Chartist movement, which was a mass movement for political, social and economic reform in the period between 1836 and 1850.

During the last quarter of the 19th century, various socialist organizations sprang up including the radical left-wing Social Democratic Federation and the more reformist Fabian Society which included in its ranks a small but powerful group of middle-class intellectuals such as George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, and Sidney and Beatrice Webb. In 1893, the Independent Labour Party was formed in Bradford after various groups and trade unions met to develop a unified approach. This Party was led by Keir Hardie, one of the first working class MPs. Finally in 1899 the TUC was persuaded to take part in a special conference of all representative groups of the Labour movement. The conference finally met a year later and accepted the proposal for the creation of a distinct Labour group in Parliament. In 1906 the Labour Representation Committee took on the name of the Labour Party after getting 29 MPs officially returned to Parliament.

4. WILLIAMS P., *Hugh Gaitskell*, 1982.

5. BULLOCK A., *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin*, 1960.



From its inception, the party was sponsored by the Trade Union movement and consequently the unions have played, and still play, a major role in the affairs of the present-day Labour Party.

The Conference has traditionally been seen as what Attlee (Labour Prime Minister from 1945-1951) called the "Parliament of the Movement",<sup>6</sup> but technically it is not a sovereign body. It does, however, elect the members of the National Executive Committee which is the supreme organ of the Party. Before the electoral changes to the Party's constitution in 1981, the leader was always elected by the parliamentary party. However, with increasing demand for accountability from the rank and file and with the perceived failures of successive Labour governments, the left wing of the Party launched an attack resulting in various high ranking figures leaving the Party to set up the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1981. The new electoral arrangements meant the creation of an electoral college to choose the leader. In this set-up, the constituency parties had 30% of the vote, the MPs a further 30% and the Trade Union movement, through its block vote, 40% of the vote. A challenge for the leadership can be mounted annually and the first candidate to be elected and re-elected under this system was Neil Kinnock. Following his resignation from the leadership after Labour's defeat at the 1992 general election, Labour was briefly led by John Smith, until his sudden death in 1994. He was replaced by Tony Blair.

In contrast to the Tories, the 1990s for Labour can be described as an unstoppable march back to power: the party recovered very quickly from its surprise defeat at the polls in 1992, and even the death of its leader, John Smith, in 1994, could not stop its advance. The new leader, Tony Blair, a lawyer in his early forties, embarked the

Party on a course of further modernization that led it to shed the marxist-inspired Clause Four of its constitution in 1995. Blair was clearly heading for the centre-ground of politics in order to win the votes of middle England, a strategy that was amply vindicated by the electoral triumph of 1997. But in the process, much to the discontent of the old guard of the Party, Labour had been turned into New Labour, a party which to many seemed to have more in common with American Democrats than with the European socialist parties. Many "Old Labourites" are keen to point out the extent to which New Labour at times takes up Conservative policies, with Tony Blair's emphasis on the concepts of flexibility and employability, or the drastic cuts being planned in some social security benefits. Yet, on the other hand, supporters of New Labour point out that by signing the Social Chapter of the Maastricht Treaty and promising the introduction of a minimum wage, Tony Blair has demonstrated his commitment to true Labour values, and that modernization need not be equated with betrayal.

### *Ideology*

The Labour Party has always been perceived as a more ideological unit than the Conservative Party. Most members would regard themselves as socialists in some form or other. However, the philosophical underpinnings of this critique of society are multifarious and individualistic. Tony Benn,<sup>7</sup> a leading radical figure on the left of the Party in the late 1970s and 1980s, sees the British Labour movement as being inextricably tied to a particular set of historical forces and events. He links the Labour Party to such diverse forces as the levellers of the 17th century, the Bible, Karl Marx and the Trade Union movement. The Party also has a strong middle-class intellectual link.

6. ATTLEE C., *The Labour Party in Perspective*, 1937.

7. BENN T., *Arguments For Socialism*, 1979.



The Fabian Society were important in the last decade of the 19th century and the early years of the last century in giving the Labour movement intellectual clarity and force. However, the means of achieving the social transformation of society, as advocated by many of its thinkers, has been a cause of considerable debate. In 1918, the Party committed itself constitutionally in the famous Clause Four, to the collective ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. Despite this radical rhetoric, the Party in power has followed a distinctly reformist, moderate line. Critics such as Milliband,<sup>8</sup> depicted the Labour Party as continually sacrificing the working class and its principles on the altar of parliamentary respectability. Clause Four was finally dropped from the party's constitution in 1995, as part of Tony Blair's drive to turn Labour into a more openly centrist party.

During the Thatcher years, labourism came under its most concerted attack and, following the haemorrhage to the SDP, the Party almost lost its electoral base to the new Alliance of the centre parties. Many traditional Labour voters amongst the manual and skilled working classes deserted the Party and, as Crewe<sup>9</sup> pointed out, these groups of voters now regarded Conservative policies and objectives as being more in line with their own interests and values. The 1983 election was a catastrophe, with support falling to its lowest share ever.

The "New Labour" Party that emerged after Tony Blair's election as leader represents an attempt to rebuild and broaden electoral support in what is perceived as a changing society with looser political affiliations. Business leaders were actively courted and the Trade Union movement was marginalized. Given that the unions had been the traditional paymasters of

the Party, its total budget fell by over 50% – reflecting the decline in affiliated membership to just less than 3 million. New Labour therefore began the task of inviting wealthy multi-millionaires such as Bernie Ecclestone, the Formula One millionaire, and Lord Sainsbury, chair of the supermarket chain, to become major donors. The Party also sought support from traditional Conservative newspapers, such as *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* and developed a new ideology based on fiscal orthodoxy, limited public spending, low inflation, a strong work ethic as well as embracing free market orthodoxies. Equal opportunity and a "New Deal" designed to promote self-reliance through work was preferred to the traditional Labour doctrine of equality of outcome and re-distribution of wealth. "New Labour" has become the watchword for "Third Way" politics where meritocratic ideas are embedded in a commitment to social improvement, upward mobility and social inclusion. This "big tent" view of politics is part ideology and part pragmatism.

For the project to succeed electorally, the image of the party had to be changed and internal discipline was tightened in order to control the traditional public dissent and rivalry that had plagued the Party. For some, New Labour represents the betrayal of traditional socialist values; an end to both the long-term commitment to greater social equality through the re-distribution of wealth, as well as the nationalization of the commanding heights of the economy. It is also seen as marking the end of traditional party politics where ideologies created "clear blue water" between the competing parties. Instead, claim some commentators, we now have two or more parties with broadly the same agendas, the distinctions becoming ever more blurred as each jockeys for position as the party best able to manage and run the

8. MILLIBAND R., *Parliamentary Socialism*, 1961.

9. CREWE I., "The disturbing truth behind Labour's rout", *The Guardian*, 13 June, 1983.



economy and public service. Possibly the best analogy that can be made is with the American system of politics where often the dividing line between the Republicans and the Democrats is difficult to discern. As a result, the internal battles within both parties may seem more significant. In the Labour Party, for that is still its official name, the battle between Old and New Labour has raised its head at key moments, for instance, fault lines over public spending, the Private Finance Initiative, privatization, education, and the health system continue as many in the party remain dissatisfied with the ease with which New Labour has embraced a right-wing agenda. After 13 years in office, Labour was defeated at the 2010 general election, with the loss of 91 seats. The leadership contest that followed was widely predicted to be a shoo-in for the former foreign secretary, David Miliband, but he was defeated at the last minute by his own brother Ed, who had rallied the support of the party's left wing and of major trade unions. As the new leader of the Opposition, Ed Miliband had difficulty projecting the image of a plausible Prime Minister, which made another hung Parliament the likeliest outcome of the 2015 election.

### Membership

Despite two election defeats in 2010 and 2015 the membership has rocketed, making it the largest political party by membership in Europe. In 2016 it had 545,000 registered members, and yet it languishes badly in the opinion polls.

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## The Liberal Democrats

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Chris Cook in his *Short History of the Liberal Party* called the Liberal Party "the Cinderella of modern British politics" for during the post-war period it endured "repeated division and decline".

Indeed there were times during the 1950s and 1960s when the Party was threatened with slipping into complete oblivion. Yet, during the 19th century it was one of the major political forces, spawning such political giants as Gladstone, Asquith and Lloyd George. It was born around 1859 when a group of radicals and Whigs met to oust the Tory government of Derby and Disraeli. From then on, the Party alternately dominated British politics up to the middle of the First World War. Its subsequent decline was brought about by damaging splits. George Dangerfield in his brilliant analysis of the decline of the Liberals during the Edwardian period saw the *Strange Death of Liberal England* as being the result of new social forces and challenges that spelt the end of Victorian liberal consensus. These 20th-century challenges forced the Liberals into damaging coalitions and ideological splits that eventually led to their demise.

The post-war years were made of a succession of false dawns and renewed disappointments, as the Liberal Party found it almost impossible to make a major electoral breakthrough under the first-past-the-post system. It tried to reinvent itself in the early 1980s, as the SDP-Liberal Alliance, a political outfit that associated the Liberals with the Social Democratic Party, a small group made of defectors from Labour. The two parties eventually merged to become the Liberal Democrats in 1988. Under the leadership first of Paddy Ashdown, then of Charles Kennedy, the party enjoyed a resurrection of sorts at the polls, and was set on an upward trend, with 46 Lib Dem MPs in 1997, 52 in 2001, and 62 in 2005. Yet the real breakthrough came unexpectedly in 2010, when in spite of losing 5 seats, the Lib Dems held the balance of power in the hung Parliament that resulted from the election. The Party leader, Nick Clegg, became Deputy Prime Minister as a result of the deal struck with the Tories to set up a Coalition government. For the first time since Winston Churchill's war-



time ministry, Liberals were back in government. Ideologically, the Lib Dems stand out among British parties for their commitment to the European Union, as well as for a concern for civil liberties and human rights which at times placed them to the left of Labour.

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## UKIP

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UKIP, (the United Kingdom Independence Party) started life in the early 1990s as a single-issue, anti-EU party. It did not make much impact for a long while, until, under the leadership of Nigel Farage (whose first stint as leader was from 2006 to 2009), it moved into the political mainstream by offering a complete range of policies on national issues. Its strong anti-EU and anti-immigration stance has made it a right-wing alternative to the Tory party. While Farage spent much of the 1990s and early 2000s targeting disillusioned social conservatives on the right wing of the spectrum, from 2010 onward he was spending just as much time bringing to UKIP blue-collar workers who had used to vote for Labour. He oversaw a string of victories, engineering a breakthrough at local elections in 2013, winning the European Parliament elections and two parliamentary by-elections in 2014 before attracting no fewer than four million voters at

the 2015 general election; yet because of the workings of the first-past-the-post system, UKIP failed to capture more than a single seat. This was a disappointment for UKIP, but no leader in the party's history before Farage had managed to deliver a similar impact.

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## The Nationalist Parties

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The nationalist parties retain a small but powerful voice in general elections but are more oriented towards their new devolved parliaments. In elections to the Scottish Parliament the nationalists are the official opposition to Labour while in Wales there is a coalition cabinet because, although Labour remained the largest Party, no overall majority was secured. These devolved assembly elections are operated on a variant of proportional representation with listed candidates. In Northern Ireland, party politics remains firmly sectarian. On the Protestant side, the Democratic Unionists, led by the veteran politician and clergyman Ian Paisley, have now displaced the more moderate Ulster Unionists as the dominant Protestant party. In the same way, the Catholic electorate now favours Sinn Féin, the political arm of the IRA, over the SDLP, a moderate Catholic party. This new polarization bodes ill for the future of the peace process.

### FURTHER READING

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