

# Foreword

Every single election since 1992 has been eminently predictable. Everyone knew Labour would win in 1997, 2001 and 2005. In 2010 it was pretty clear Gordon Brown would lose, although commentators were split on whether Cameron could actually win. The 2015 election is the most difficult to predict for twenty years, and therefore it should not only be incredibly exciting, but turnout should be high. But even that is difficult to predict at a time when people are more disillusioned with politics and politicians than at any point in my lifetime.

There are many things that make this election unpredictable. Here are just a few:

- We are for the first time experiencing four-party politics.
- No one knows what will happen to the UKIP vote. Will it hold up? Where is it coming from?
- No one knows where former Lib Dem voters will go, or if they may return to the Lib Dems.
- Can Labour win when the polls show they are behind on economic competence and on leadership quality?
- How big will the stay-at-home vote be?

For David Cameron this election is s\*\*\* or bust. If he doesn't win an outright majority his position as leader of the Conservative Party may well be untenable. It is almost inconceivable that his own MPs would rubberstamp a renewal of the coalition, even if it were the only way to form a majority government. Last time it was possible to argue for

it to enable Britain to withstand the economic crisis. That argument is unlikely to be valid in 2015 barring unforeseeable circumstances. There is also a visceral dislike on the Tory benches for the Lib Dems, which wasn't so apparent last time. Tories are fed up with the way the Lib Dems have tried to claim credit for every coalition success, but blame any failures on the 'wicked Tories'. But how on earth can the Tories win an overall majority, when all the polls, including Lord Ashcroft's monthly poll of marginal seats, show that Labour is doing better in the marginal than elsewhere?

There is only one answer to that question and it is this. No one knows what will happen to the Lib Dem and UKIP votes, and how big the stay-at-home vote will be. In theory, most of the former Lib Dem vote should go to Labour, but that's not how it is working out in practice. Some of it goes to UKIP and some of it goes to the Tories – it is slightly dependent on where in the country you live.

Since the European elections, the UKIP vote has remained fairly constant. It is entirely reasonable to assume that it will remain at 14–18 per cent right up until the election. They may well win a few seats, and the devil in me hopes they do, as they would certainly liven up politics a bit in the House of Commons, but the more pertinent thing is that they could stop both the Conservatives and Labour winning seats. Just as UKIP may stop the Tories winning or retaining marginal seats in the south of England, I believe they will do the same to Labour in the north. The key to a Tory majority is how these two things balance each other out, if they do at all. If you look at some of Robert Waller's regional profiles, and Dan Hamilton's constituency profiles, it is extremely difficult to make any rational judgement as to what the UKIP effect will actually be.

In 2010 the Lib Dems lost five seats, winning fifty-seven all told. I must admit that I had tipped them to win seventy or eighty and I remember uttering these words, live on LBC's election night show when the BBC exit poll came in: 'If the Lib Dems win fifty-nine seats I'll run down Whitehall naked.' Danny Alexander, when he came on

the show some time later, said he would join me if that turned out to be true. Neither of us has delivered on that pledge. My excuse is that they won fifty-seven, not fifty-nine, and I'm sticking to it! You can see my detailed predictions, seat by seat, for the Lib Dems later in this book, but this time I am predicting they could well lose at least half their seats, with the majority going to the Conservatives. The consolation for the Lib Dems is that my track record in predicting their results isn't exactly stellar.

At each of the last two elections we've been told that they would be the 'internet elections'. On both occasions the pundits were wrong. Jag Singh has a fascinating chapter later in the book on the likely impact of the internet in this election. Last time, blogging was in its heyday, but did it really have any effect on the result? Very little. Twitter was in its infancy, but even now, I don't think Twitter will have much impact beyond turning a drama into a crisis for any hapless candidate who commits a so-called gaffe. YouTube, together with *The Guardian* and the *Telegraph*, have bid to do an election debate with the party leaders, but I can't see what's in it for the politicians to do a debate which wouldn't get anywhere near the likely audience for a TV debate. David Cameron reckons the debates sucked the air out of the last campaign and he was right, but that's not a reason to scrap them. At the time of writing, Labour and the Lib Dems have signed up to repeat the debates in the same format as last time, whereas the Conservatives say they won't enter into talks until the autumn, following the party conferences. Their election strategist Lynton Crosby is said to want to pull Cameron from the debates as he sees no advantage in him taking part. You can see the logic, but politically it's impossible. If Cameron refused to take part I imagine there would be many people who wouldn't vote for him on principle. No one respects a politician they think of as 'frit'.

I'd like to see one debate take place in mid-March between the five main political leaders, a second one in early April between Clegg, Cameron and Miliband, and a final one in the last week of April

between the only two men who could realistically be Prime Minister – Cameron and Miliband. In reality I suspect we'll get a repeat of the format from 2010.

Politics should really be about policy, but I suspect we're going to get three of the most non-committal manifestos in the history of elections. The Tories will make a big thing of their European referendum promise (such as it is), Labour will concentrate on their energy price freeze (such as it is) and the Liberal Democrats will, well, will anyone take any notice? Their failure to honour their student tuition fees promise has all but rendered any election promise they make this time valueless. Well, that's what their opponents will say with every opportunity that comes their way.

Even though the election is only eight months away at the time of writing, I would be hard pushed to write a list of ten likely manifesto promises for each party. When UKIP's policy platform is clearer than the other three parties, you know they have a problem.

This won't be an election about policy. It will be about slogans. I despair of the number of times politicians utter the phrases 'cost of living crisis', 'long-term economic plan' or 'hard-working families' on my radio show. In fact I despair so much I have banned them on my radio show. This will be the most 'on-message election' ever, and woe betide any candidate who strays from the party line.

Whatever happens though, it's going to be one hell of a ride.

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