



the unexpected mandate

The 2015 election, the parties, the people – and the future

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Introduction

AFTER EACH OF THE LAST TWO GENERAL ELECTIONS I have written a detailed analysis of what happened and why. Both *Smell the Coffee* in 2005 and *Minority Verdict* in 2010 were based largely on evidence from opinion polls which had proved, from the Conservative point of view, depressingly accurate.

This time things look rather different. After all, the polls got it wrong, didn't they? All the final published surveys had Labour and the Conservatives within a point of each other; my own had the two parties tied on 33 per cent. Since the polls failed to detect that the Tories were heading for a decisive victory, what can they have to tell us that is of any use now?

I can certainly understand the *schadenfreude* felt towards the pollsters by those who believed all along that the Conservatives would do better than the polls were suggesting – and indeed by the Tories themselves, who probably got fed up with my lecturing them, even (or especially) when they knew I was right. But let's remember, specifically, what the polls got wrong. Voting intention surveys immediately before the election did not indicate anything like the outcome on the day. More specifically, since polls in Scotland proved very accurate despite the even more momentous shift in party allegiance north of the border, they understated the strength of the Conservatives in England and Wales and overstated that of Labour.

There are several possible reasons for this, including people making up (or changing) their minds very late, Labour voters not turning out in the numbers they told pollsters they would, interviewees not admitting to pollsters (or even themselves) which party they intended to vote for, and problems assembling truly representative polling samples in a more diverse and complex country. There must be further reasons why these things skewed the findings at the 2015 election despite not having done so in the previous four. As I noted in an article a year before the election, uncertainties as to whether methods that have worked in the past still apply 'are the questions that keep pollsters awake at night, and anyone in the business who tells you they know the answers is privately hoping for the best'.

Accordingly, I undertake this analysis with an appropriate measure of humility. But the question of who is going to tick which box is only one part – albeit rather an important part, especially given the attention paid to it and its potential to shape coverage and debate – of what opinion research tells us about the country’s attitude to politics.

The central insight of *Smell the Coffee* was the critical importance of a party’s brand – the overall way in which the voters see it. That remains true today. Everything parties do and say is seen and heard through the prism of what people already think of that party, and the context in which it finds itself. Campaigning techniques like the use of big data to micro-target particular kinds of voter can be very effective, but they necessarily operate at the margins: they help to mobilise existing supporters and to identify and win over those who are less sure but may be open to persuasion.

In other words, such tools allow parties to maximise their performance given the prevailing circumstances. That is not to dismiss them – when things are tight they can make the difference between one result and another. But it is the bigger picture that dictates whether the campaign professionals are aiming to realise the true value of their assets or make the best of a bad job.

Most of the work of Lord Ashcroft Polls has been devoted to understanding that bigger picture. It has concentrated on the longer-term strategic and brand questions whose horizons stretch beyond a single electoral cycle. My research has involved hundreds of thousands of telephone and online interviews with all kinds of British voters, as well as hundreds of face-to-face discussions in which groups of people all over the country talked about politics in their own words. I have looked in detail at what people thought about the parties: the attractions of each and the weaknesses they had to overcome; the qualities of the leaders; and the critical policy issues, such as the economy, crime, immigration, Europe and the NHS.

This will not be a forensic re-examination of every poll and news event. Instead, I will look back over that research to explore the challenge that faced each of the parties as the coalition agreement was signed, and how (or whether) they dealt with those challenges in the years that followed. This will help to explain the voters’ verdict that surprised so many. More importantly, in describing how the bigger picture evolved over the last five years, the evidence I have amassed sets the scene for the parliament to come and the general election of 2020.

One question I have asked myself since the election is this: if we had known what we knew about people's attitudes to the parties, leaders and issues, but had no voting intention polls, what would we have expected the result to be? Or, to put it another way, would we have been as surprised by the outcome as many of us were?

At the time, the voting intention polls made sense. We knew people thought the Conservatives were more competent, but that Labour were ahead on values and should have the advantage of large numbers of anti-Tory former Lib Dems. But aside from the collected answers to the question 'Which party would you vote for in an election tomorrow?', what the research told us was consistent with the result that came to pass.

Perhaps we should not have been so shocked that a party of government that seemed to know what it was doing was returned to office against an unconvincing opposition that had not noticeably changed for the better since voters kicked it out five years earlier.

It is a reminder for all of us to take a broader view, and focus less on the daily margins in the horse race. One way and another, after this election it is the pollsters and commentators, as much as parties and politicians, who need to smell the coffee.

I

The Conservatives: Job Done?

IN THE CONCLUSION OF *MINORITY VERDICT*, I summed up why the Conservatives fell short of outright victory in 2010. Why did the party fail to win an overall majority against a government so unpopular that it could muster no more than 29 per cent of the vote, only one point better than Michael Foot's Labour Party in 1983?

Because we did not demonstrate that we were the change people wanted ... When we asked people to vote for change we did not fully convey to them what sort of change we had in mind or how we would achieve it ... We took it for granted, wrongly, that we would be the default choice for voters who deserted Labour ... The fact that we did not complete the transformation of the brand meant that Labour scares about our plans, drawing on caricature folk memories of previous Conservative governments, had more resonance than they would otherwise have done ... Ultimately, we did not make as much progress as we should have done in reassuring nervous former Labour voters that we had changed and we were on their side.

I went on to argue that the party had a chance

to complete the rehabilitation of the Conservative brand that is essential if we are to achieve an overall majority at future elections ... Many of those who voted Conservative did so with varying degrees of doubt or even trepidation, and many more thought about doing so but found their reservations too strong ... It is only in government, then, that the Conservative Party can show doubtful voters that it really is on the side of ordinary people, that it is competent to run the economy, that it can be trusted with the NHS, that it is a change for the better.

A year later, I published the first in my series of *Project Blueprint* research. Following the referendum in which the country decisively rejected switching to the Alternative Vote system for general elections, political comment was dominated by the state of relations

between Tories and Liberal Democrats in government. I argued that what really mattered was not so much the coalition between the parties but ‘how to create the coalition of voters who will elect a Conservative government with an overall majority at the next general election’.

That a Conservative majority was indeed the result of the following election was a remarkable achievement by any measure. But does that mean the doubts people had about the Tories that I described in *Minority Verdict* have been put to rest?

During the 2015 election campaign, I observed of the static polls that parties cannot change in four weeks what they have been unable to change in five years. How much, then, had voters’ views of the Conservative Party changed since they had declined to give it a majority at the previous time of asking?

In my first round of *Project Blueprint* research, published on the first anniversary of the coalition, I asked people who had voted Conservative in 2010 what had been behind their decision. The single biggest reason was that the Tories ‘seemed more likely to get the economy back on track’; this just pipped ‘it was time for a change from Labour, and the Conservatives were the most obvious alternative’. The perception that the party seemed more willing to reform welfare and cut the deficit also scored highly, followed by the expectation that it would do more to control immigration.

Overall, Tory voters were evenly divided between those who made their decision mainly because they had a positive view of the Conservatives and those who were driven more by negative views of Gordon Brown and Labour. Nearly two thirds of those who had voted Tory for the first time said negative reasons had been more important.

A year into the parliament, the Conservative share in the polls was similar to the 37 per cent they achieved in 2010. But this disguised a good deal of churn – some had moved away, while the party had won over others who had not voted Tory at the election. This latter group was distinguished by two things: they thought the Conservatives had the best approach to the economy, and they gave high approval ratings to David Cameron as Prime Minister. These would remain the central features of the Conservative Party’s appeal.

Fixing the economy after the recession and financial crisis was the government’s key mission, and was the main reason many people had voted Conservative. But a significant number of the party’s existing and potential supporters were puzzled by the apparently narrow focus on the deficit. For both those who had voted Tory and those who had considered doing so but decided against, ‘cutting the deficit and the debt’

seemed more important to the Conservative Party than it was to them, while ‘getting the economy growing and creating jobs’ was a higher priority for them than it seemed to the Tories. The rising cost of living, meanwhile, was the biggest single economic concern, with petrol, energy and food prices regularly mentioned spontaneously by voters in my research. This was one area in which the Conservatives, who seemed to focus on the big picture rather than the day-to-day concerns of ordinary people, were thought less sympathetic than Labour (though whether Labour were in a position to do anything about it was, as I will explore in the next chapter, a different question).

While people understood that debt needed to be kept under control to save Britain from the kind of financial chaos that was engulfing Greece, they thought the government seemed to see all areas of policy as a means to the end of cutting the deficit. They were less sure about the end to which deficit reduction was the means. It seemed largely an abstract problem, so people were uncertain how they or the country would benefit when it was solved.

The cuts, however, felt rather more tangible. It was notable in my research that when people talked about them they did not just mean reductions in government spending: anything that was eroding their standard of living, from stagnant private sector wages to higher prices and problems getting bank credit, came under the heading of ‘cuts’.

But at the height of the Eurozone crisis, the issues seemed so vast and complex that people found themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to trust that the government knew what it was doing. And, largely, they did: Cameron and Osborne seemed competent and ready to make tough decisions. If the complaint was that cuts were going too far and too fast, people could also see that the alternative was to cut less and more slowly, which unavoidably meant borrowing more and for longer – a potentially dangerous mistake. The government was helped by the absence of any credible alternative plan from Labour, whose opposition to cuts seemed to many to be a denial of reality. Indeed, as I found at the end of 2011 in my research for *The ChEx Factor: Economic Leadership in Hard Times*, people were more likely to think the economy would be in an even worse position had Labour still been in office than to think that things would be better.

The air of competence necessary for a party to be trusted to run the economy was undermined by the 2012 Budget. Over the previous two years the government had committed a series of U-turns on policies ranging from unannounced school inspections

and the sale of state-owned forests to benefit changes and the scrapping of the post of Chief Coroner – each relatively minor in itself but building up a cumulative impression that policies were too often insufficiently thought through. The ‘Omnishambles’ Budget added several items to the list, including the imposition of VAT on static caravans, the capping of tax relief on charitable donations, and the notorious ‘pasty tax’, a new levy on warm baked goods. Opposition parties and the media claimed that this symbolised how out of touch the Tories were with the kind of ordinary people who bought pasties. According to my own research for the third phase of *Project Blueprint* in the summer of 2012, the more damaging point was the absurdity of a supposedly competent government embroiling itself in a row about such a trivial commodity. From the spring of 2012, Labour opened up double-digit leads in voting intention, and the Tories’ advantage on being trusted to manage the economy narrowed and even, on some measures, disappeared altogether.

The 2012 Budget also featured the announcement that the 50p top rate of income tax, imposed on earnings over £150,000 at the end of Labour’s term, would be cut to 45p. Though the Conservatives argued that the higher rate was raising little revenue and acted as a disincentive that was harming the economy – and that the best off would actually pay more in tax overall as a result of other measures in the Budget – the decision was seized on as confirmation that the Conservatives were for the rich. In fact, this was never the most damaging charge against the party – as its history of election successes had shown, it was fine to be for the rich as long as you were for other people too. The real problem was the continuing perception that the Tories were primarily interested in those who had already made it.

It has been an abiding belief in Conservative circles that there are millions of people in Britain who are Tory in all respects except their voting habits. They work hard, they want to get on, own their own home, perhaps build a business, but inexplicably they vote for the wrong party. In my 2012 research paper *Blue Collar Tories?*, I identified a group of voters – I called them ‘Suspicious Strivers’ – who held what Tories like to think of as Conservative values but did not feel the party was really for them. Instead, they saw the Conservatives as being for people who had already achieved material success; less so for those who did the right thing but had little to show for it. These crucial swing voters felt their position was precarious. Even those who were reasonably comfortable felt they were one redundancy, interest rate rise or tax credit rule change away from real difficulty.

In their lives, anxiety was as much a force as aspiration, and they were not sure

they could rely on the Tories if they found themselves in trouble. What they wanted as much as anything was reassurance – that doing the right thing would be worth their while, and that if they needed help, deserving cases would be given priority. Another group, which I dubbed ‘Entitlement Anxiety’, felt that an unfair system seemed to reward others (who worked less hard than they did) but not them. Both groups leaned towards Labour.

In his biography of George Osborne, *The Austerity Chancellor*, Janan Ganesh records that the lack of emphasis on aspiration in the early stages of the Tories’ modernising project was not an oversight or a consequence of the need to use unexpected themes to win attention, but a deliberate decision. Osborne and Cameron doubted their ability, given their backgrounds, to talk convincingly about improving the life chances of poorer people.

This began to change from the 2012 Conservative Party conference. Cameron said Britain found itself in a ‘global race’, and confronted claims that the Tories were for the wealthy few: ‘They call us the party of the better-off ... No: we are the party of the want-to-be-better-off, those who strive to make a better life for themselves and their families.’ He also introduced the idea of the ‘aspiration nation’, which became the theme of the 2013 Budget.

But as the economy began to recover, and with it the Conservatives’ reputation for overall economic management, the question for voters who had struggled during the recession became how the upturn would benefit them – if indeed they would feel it at all. In my research at the start of 2014, I found undecided voters saying, albeit sometimes grudgingly, that the government had not done too badly overall considering the situation it had found itself in. ‘But none of this’, I observed,

changed that fact that, for many of them, life was hard and showed no signs of getting any easier despite the recovery they kept hearing so much about. As far as the Tories’ hardworking people are concerned, where – to use a phrase from the archive of the party’s lexicon – are the proceeds of growth?

By the final conference season before the election, I found in phase five of my *Project Blueprint* research that while nine in ten Conservative voters said they were already feeling some of the benefits of the recovery or that they expected to at some point, four in ten of the electorate as a whole (including the same proportion of 2010 Tories who now said they would vote for someone else) said they were not feeling any benefits, and nor did

they expect to. UKIP supporters were the most likely group to think that any recovery would pass them by.

At the same time, while the majority of voters thought austerity was no longer necessary or had never been needed in the first place, three quarters of Tories accepted the need for further cuts. The task for Cameron and the Conservatives, then, was to create a ‘coalition of the willing’ – a big enough group of voters prepared to accept continued austerity because they believed the results would be worth waiting for. This presented the tricky task of explaining why cuts were still needed if things were, as they claimed, looking up.

Despite these qualms, I found 59 per cent of all voters saying they most trusted Cameron and Osborne to manage the economy in the best interests of Britain, compared to 41 per cent for Miliband and Balls. And on this measure, and others like it, the Conservatives held their lead throughout the parliament.

At different points the Tories may have seemed insufficiently in tune with concerns about the cost of living, or overly obsessed with the deficit compared to growth, and many people wondered when they would begin to experience for themselves the fruits of the rumoured recovery. For most of the parliament, I found people more likely to say they expected the economic situation to worsen in the following few years than to say it would improve. But overall, the Tories seemed to have a plan, and to be willing to make the hard decisions needed to implement it. And however slow the progress felt to many people, they knew that electing a government was not a referendum but a choice – and the alternative was not convincing.

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If economic management was one pillar of the Conservatives’ claim to be the party of competence, the other was David Cameron himself. Voters had seen him as the best available Prime Minister since Gordon Brown cancelled plans for an early election in October 2007, and they continued to do so throughout his first term in office.

A year after the election, I found that both those who had voted Conservative, and those who had thought about doing so but decided against, were more likely to have a positive view of him than a negative one. They also gave him higher ratings than the government as a whole, another feature of his leadership that persisted. Indeed, he remained the only leader to achieve consistently higher approval ratings than his party.

Despite regular dissent on his own benches and from Tory commentators, Cameron also regularly scored higher among Conservative voters than Miliband did among Labour supporters or Nick Clegg among Lib Dems.

After his first year in No. 10, Cameron seemed to the public to be professional, human and a refreshing improvement on his predecessor as PM. He was also given credit for getting to grips with a tough job, especially on the economy and public finances. In the early days of coalition, however, some Conservatives worried that he did not seem fully in command, leading to concerns that he might not prove a sufficiently strong leader. This impression did not last long – the bigger complaint from most voters was that Nick Clegg had been eclipsed.

I looked further into these questions in my 2011 research paper *The Leadership Factor*. Crucially, and uniquely, Cameron was a net attractor of supporters to his party: the only leader who was a ‘draw’ rather than a ‘drag’. People considering the Tories who had voted for other parties at the election had a more favourable view of him than of the Conservative Party generally. People would vote Conservative because of Cameron, while many of those who chose Labour would do so despite Miliband. Though Labour was ahead in the polls at the time, I noted that ‘as the election nears the leadership factor will only grow in importance as people decide who they want in charge’.

To wavering voters, Cameron’s opponents seemed weak or out of their depth, while the Tory leader appeared competent, determined, well up to the job, and focused on his agenda. Though for some this focus tipped over into ruthlessness, Labour’s attempts at the time to characterise him as a right-wing leader who had abandoned the centre ground he had campaigned on missed the point. As far as most people were concerned, he was trying to sort out the mess he had inherited, even if he was over-doing it; only the most hostile thought he was personally motivated by ideology.

A less attractive side to Cameron’s character, for some, was that he seemed rather arrogant or smug, and somewhat detached from the lives of ordinary people. This had been a persistent criticism of Cameron since he became the Tory leader, perhaps inevitably given his affluent upbringing and Eton education. It was even sometimes echoed on his own side: the Mid-Bedfordshire MP Nadine Dorries described Cameron and his Chancellor as ‘two public school boys who don’t know what it’s like to go to the supermarket and have to put things back on the shelves because they can’t afford it for their children’s lunch boxes’.

Looking back over the research, though, Cameron's privileged background only really counted against him among those already least inclined to vote Conservative. More damaging was the impression of inauthenticity he sometimes gave. As someone remarked in my early research, 'he tries to show he's one of us, but he's not'.

That Cameron's 'poshness' has not proven more politically damaging has been a disappointment for Labour. Why did it not resonate more with voters? There are perhaps three main reasons. The first was that as far as many voters were concerned, there was nothing to choose between Cameron, Clegg and Miliband in terms of their upbringing, education and early career. No doubt to the exasperation of Labour, during the 2015 campaign people would often observe in my focus groups that all the party leaders had been to public school.

The second is that whatever the differences in social class, people related to Cameron more naturally than they did to his opponents. He seemed to lead as normal a family life as anyone could in his position, while Miliband seemed rather wonkish and strange. Nigel Farage was either a refreshing straight-talker or a dangerous rabble rouser, according to taste, but the question of him being in a position of responsibility never really arose. For all Nick Clegg's flaws as a politician, people tended to like him personally. But Cameron was the only leader who seemed to combine relatability with the oomph needed to run the country.

This leads to the third reason: that when it came to the attributes needed to do the job, Cameron retained a commanding lead over his rivals. This included potential rivals on his own side. As concerns grew in the Conservative Party about the threat from UKIP, it was sometimes suggested that Boris Johnson could be the man to restore Tory fortunes. But my 2013 research into the Boris phenomenon, *Are You Serious? Boris, the Tories and the Voters* put this claim into perspective.

The Mayor of London was widely popular. But set against Johnson, Miliband and Clegg, Cameron remained the most popular choice of Prime Minister, not least among Conservative voters, who preferred the thought of him in No. 10 by 81 per cent to 18 per cent. Cameron was thought more likely to do a good job when it came to representing Britain at international negotiations, making the right decisions even when they were unpopular, leading a team and doing the job of PM overall.

Indeed, Cameron held a clear lead over Miliband on all these measures, as well as having a well-defined idea of what he wanted to achieve, when I asked the question intermittently over the two years that followed. Miliband was ahead on only one measure

– ‘understanding ordinary people’. Voters’ views of the leaders remained remarkably consistent. Throughout the parliament, YouGov asked at least twice a month which of the three would make the best Prime Minister. At the end of September 2010, 40 per cent chose Cameron and 24 per cent chose Miliband. At the end of April 2015, 40 per cent chose Cameron and 26 per cent chose Miliband. Over the five years, the proportion choosing Cameron never fell below 30 per cent (in April 2012, when he still led Miliband by eleven points) and the number choosing Miliband never rose above 28 per cent (in February 2014, when he was still nine points behind).

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Why was it not obvious that the clear Conservative lead on overall management of the economy, together with the continuing preference for David Cameron as Prime Minister, would translate into a decisive victory for the Tories?

During the campaign, Andrew Cooper of the polling firm Populus surveyed people who preferred Cameron to Miliband and thought the Tories would do a better job than Labour on the economy but still said they planned to vote something other than Conservative. These ‘Yes Yes Nos’ represented nearly one in five of those likely to vote. Some of them said they could ‘just never bring myself’ to vote for the party; some cited local factors; some said that they didn’t actively want Cameron, even if they preferred him to Miliband; quite a number said there were ‘other issues that are more important in determining who I vote for, and on which I don’t trust Cameron or the Conservatives’ (and many of these planned to vote UKIP); and others thought that ‘overall, I don’t think people like me are likely to benefit from a recovering economy under the Conservatives’.

A large chunk of the ‘Yes Yes Nos’, representing some 2 per cent of all voters, conceded that they didn’t want to vote Tory ‘but in the end I may well end up doing so’ because Labour and Miliband would be even worse. So there was room for a late swing, and even some late conversions inside the voting booth. But there was good reason to believe that, even though no party had ever lost when ahead on both leadership and the economy, the Tories might struggle to hold on to office in 2015 despite these twin advantages.

It is also worth remembering that the Conservatives had led on both factors at the last election too. By May 2010, Cameron had been seen as a better prime ministerial

prospect than Gordon Brown for two and a half years, and the Tories had been thought more likely to do a good job running the economy since early 2009. Yet these things had not been enough to secure outright victory. As I discussed in *Minority Verdict*, much of this was down to the question of what the Conservative Party's priorities were and whose side it was on.

In my first round of *Project Blueprint* research, conducted in the spring of 2011, three quarters of those who had considered voting Conservative but decided against it said the NHS was a high priority for them, but only 42 per cent thought it was a high priority for the Conservative Party.

The 'Tories' commitment to the NHS had long been a reservation for voters sceptical of the party. By campaigning heavily on the issue in opposition, emphasising David Cameron's personal experience of the NHS, the Conservatives largely managed to neutralise it in political terms. But in office, the party was not able to sustain its newfound credibility on issue as it had been able to do with the economy.

A year after the coalition was formed, I found Labour twelve points ahead of the Tories on health, a margin that had widened to 24 points in April 2015. The coalition's NHS reforms, introduced during the government's first year, did not help. As I found in the first round of *Project Blueprint*, most people were sceptical about the reforms, particularly since the changes were largely opposed by healthcare professionals. But the main problem was that in the absence of a clear explanation of how the reforms would benefit patients, people fell back on their old assumptions about Tory motivations. In my 2015 research project *The People, the Parties and the NHS*, I asked people what they thought had been the reason behind the coalition's health reforms. The single biggest response was 'to save money'. More thought they were 'part of a plan to privatise the NHS' than to cut bureaucracy or give more choice and control to patients.

Questions about the NHS and the 'Tories' perceived policy priorities are closely tied to how people see the overall motives and character of the Conservative Party. In the early months of the coalition, the Conservatives established a clear lead on making tough decisions for the long term, being competent and capable, and doing what they said they would do. Even those who had considered voting Conservative but decided against it were much more likely to say these things were true of the Tories than of Labour or the Lib Dems. But when it came to standing for fairness, equal opportunity and wanting to help ordinary people get on in life, these 'considerers' thought the Conservatives lagged well behind.

This question of the kind of people the Tories were, and who they were for, had been a constant theme in my research for a decade. In the opposition years, when I was in charge of the party's polling, we could consistently find undecided voters thinking the Conservatives were best represented by a picture of a posh family standing outside an enormous house. This did not change once the party was in government. During the 2015 campaign, my focus groups were asked to picture the Conservative Party as a house. Inevitably it would be comfortably but expensively furnished, and home to a chocolate Labrador ('a posh dog'), but the most telling point was that 'you can't get to the door because there is an intercom at the gate' and 'once inside you have to wipe your feet'.

Ultimately, questions of leadership and economic competence played a decisive part in the election outcome. If, in the final judgement, the contrast between the parties on these attributes outweighed everything else, it is clear that for many people the question of motivation and values needed to be overcome before they would vote Conservative. Though they may have been trumped in the circumstances of this election by other things, these concerns have not gone away and they remain a sticking point for many voters. To put it more simply, many people will have voted Conservative despite what they regard as Tory values, not because of them.

During the mid-term doldrums of 2012, I proposed four tests that the Tories should apply to everything they planned to say or do. They were: Does it show the right priorities for the country? Does it show strong leadership? Does it show the party is on the side of the right people (and, if necessary, make the right enemies)? And does it offer some reassurance about the Conservative Party's character and motives? These tests will apply as much over the next five years as the last.

II

Labour: The Unclimbed Mountain

AFTER LABOUR'S DEAFEAT IN 2010, I conducted some research among voters who had supported the party at previous elections but switched their allegiance in the contest just gone. They were clear why Labour lost: Gordon Brown had not been a good Prime Minister, Labour did not seem to have the right answers to important questions, and the government had run out of steam. Three quarters of those questioned said the Labour government had been largely to blame for the country's economic problems, seven in ten said the coalition's cuts were unavoidable, and two thirds thought Labour would need to change quite fundamentally before they would consider voting for the party again. Acknowledging or even apologising for the government's mistakes would be an important first step.

A parallel exercise involving party members and Labour-supporting members of affiliated trade unions revealed that the Labour movement itself saw things rather differently. They thought they had lost because people did not appreciate what Labour had achieved; that voters had been influenced by the right-wing media; and that while Labour's policies had been right, they had not been well communicated. More than three quarters thought their party had not deserved to lose, and most rejected the idea that the Labour government had been largely to blame for the economic situation. They thought the swing voters they had lost (and needed to win back) were ignorant, credulous and selfish. More than half thought the coalition would prove so unpopular that Labour would probably win the 2015 election without having to change very much.

This explains a lot about the progress Labour made, or did not make, in the five years that followed. The Labour Party did not want to change, or to face up to the reasons voters lost confidence in it as a party of government. More importantly, it did not think it needed to do so. That autumn, I noted that Ed Miliband's victory in the leadership election was a symptom of these attitudes, and the 'collective refusal to come to terms with what has just happened'. But I did not believe, as some Conservatives did, that this meant the following election was already in the bag for the Tories. Having been

elected by the unions, and being known to be well to the left of mainstream opinion, surely Miliband would go out of his way to defy people's assumptions? I argued that he must know that following the instincts of the Labour movement, rather than voters, would move his party further from victory. I did not think that the Tories could expect him 'to leap obligingly into every trap'.

Yet Labour showed no signs of penitence. Its mantra in the early years of the coalition was that cuts in public spending were going too far, too fast. This was echoed by some voters, particularly those for whom austerity had come a bit too close to home. But few thought the economy would be in a better position had Labour remained in office – indeed, my 2011 research paper *The ChEx Factor: Economic Leadership in Hard Times* found people were more likely to think things would be worse than better if Labour were still in charge. Rather than blaming the coalition for the economic situation, they were much more likely to blame the last Labour government, along with the banks, and people borrowing more than they could afford (even though they were roundly fed up with hearing that line from ministers).

In my first round of *Project Blueprint* research looking at the coalition of voters the Conservatives needed to build a majority, I noted that 'Labour's core support plus left-leaning former Lib Dems could theoretically give Ed Miliband close to 40 per cent of the vote without needing to get out of bed'. That seemed to be the case in the autumn of 2012, by which time a combination of economic gloom and the Omnishambolic Budget had handed Labour a sustained double-digit poll lead.

I investigated the scale and strength of Labour's support in *Project Red Alert*. People who had switched to Labour since 2010 were able to recite a litany of things that had changed over the previous two and a half years (though, tellingly, the Labour Party itself was never on this list). Even so, many of these 'joiners' had doubts. Apart from the complaint that the party had not made clear what they would do to improve things (the usual grumble about opposition parties), the biggest fears about another Labour government were that it would spend and borrow more than the country could afford, and that the party had not learned the right lessons since it was last in office.

At the same time, one group of joiners affected by austerity saw a Labour vote as the best means of restoring what they had lost, while another harboured doubts as to whether the party could yet be trusted with the public finances. In other words, some hoped another Labour government would bring back the days of lavish spending, and some feared that it would. I concluded that this meant Labour's vote share, and thus its

lead, were soft – which made it a gamble for Miliband not to try to reach out any further or do more to reassure those for whom economic responsibility was the biggest hurdle.

All most people had heard from Labour was that it was against whatever the coalition happened to be doing. This included welfare reform, one government policy people spontaneously praised. In focus groups before the 2010 election, participants who were asked to choose an image to represent Labour would very often select a picture of a slob lying on a sofa to symbolise what they saw as the party's indulgence of people living on benefits when they could be at work. This impression lasted well beyond 2010 and was reinforced by what appeared to be Labour's wholesale opposition to benefit changes.

By the same token, though many voters were disappointed with the Conservatives' failure to deliver their promise to cut immigration to the tens of thousands, Labour had done nothing to change their view that – since they had been responsible for mass immigration in government – whatever progress had been made might be reversed if they had another chance.

Concern grew in Labour circles that the leadership was pursuing what became known as the '35 per cent strategy': that with the constituency boundaries unreformed, all Labour needed to do was hold on to most of the supporters it already had. Two years before the election, a number of Blairites including John Reid and Alan Milburn spoke out about the dangers of this approach, arguing that Labour needed to do more than articulate grievance and that, as Tony Blair himself put it, the party needed to show leadership and move out of its 'comfort zone'.

But rather than confront the doubts people had, many in Labour seemed to prefer to change the subject or, as they put it, 'frame the debate' in a way that played to the party's strengths. In the early years, this included campaigning on issues like media regulation, on the basis of which Labour figures often claimed to be setting the political agenda – even moving the centre ground of politics – but which did nothing to help achieve the party's real task. Worse, the failure to address the biggest reservation people had about electing another Labour government meant their message was blunted in areas that should have worked to the party's advantage.

In economic policy, Labour's most resonant theme was the cost of living. This was undoubtedly people's biggest concern about the economic situation, as it affected them personally, with prices rising faster than incomes almost throughout the parliament. In my research, people would regularly mention unprompted the cost of food, petrol and

home energy bills. Being central to the question of understanding people's everyday concerns, this was also an area in which Labour maintained a consistent poll lead.

Labour made this a major campaign theme. Soon after the 2010 election, the party began to talk about falling living standards among what it called the 'squeezed middle', a theme that continued in various forms in subsequent years. In his 2013 conference speech, Ed Miliband talked about the broken link between the wealth of the country and family finances. He suggested that while it was once the case that a rising tide would lift all boats, 'now the tide just seems to lift the yachts'.

But when it came to policy, Labour struggled to capitalise on these doubts. In the same speech, Miliband announced that a Labour government would freeze gas and electricity prices until the start of 2017. This was meant to embody the party's grasp of living costs and its support of ordinary people against corporate interests. In the fourth phase of my *Project Blueprint* research, which identified the connection between national and personal prosperity as a critical election issue, I found the proposal had some superficial appeal. Yet people could see that it was plagued with practical drawbacks – surely the energy companies would simply hike prices before the law came in, and again as soon as it expired? Though voters still put Labour comfortably ahead on 'tackling the cost of living', Tories had the edge when it came to 'practical policies that would work in the long run'. Swing voters in particular put the Conservatives ahead on overall competence and willingness to take tough decisions for the long term. Although people were more likely to be pessimistic than optimistic about the economy, they trusted Cameron and Osborne over Miliband and Balls by a fourteen-point margin.

As well as stifling its own economic theme, the fact that Labour allowed doubts about fiscal responsibility to continue meant the party struggled to make headway on the policy area it likes to think of as its own: the NHS. Though the Conservatives managed to narrow the gap during the opposition years, the coalition's handling of NHS reform allowed Labour to re-establish runaway leads on the issue within Cameron's first year as Prime Minister. Doubts about the Tories' commitment to the NHS were closely tied to perceptions of its character as a party, and Labour consequently sought to put the issue at the top of the agenda as the election approached. Indeed, when undecided voters in my campaign focus groups were asked to sum up Labour's main message, 'save the NHS' was usually the answer.

Yet this research also suggested that Labour's promise of 20,000 new nurses, 8,000 new GPs and 5,000 new home care workers did more to highlight the party's

weaknesses than its strengths. A policy designed to confirm Labour's credentials as champions of public services simply raised again the question of whether it could be trusted with the money.

This suspicion became an integral part of how people saw the party. Asked in my focus groups to describe it as a house, wavering voters said it would be a property for ordinary working people but it would have a 50-inch plasma TV and that although the furniture is nice, 'it's all on HP'.

Then there was Ed Miliband himself. Tory strategists initially focused on his left-wing credentials, highlighting the role of the trade unions in his leadership victory. After branding him 'Red Ed', there was a shift towards portraying him as 'the Michael Dukakis of British politics' – part of a metropolitan elite with no understanding of mainstream concerns. In fact, the public formed its own view of the Labour leader with no help from his opponents, as they always do.

Nearly a year after he took charge, I found in my research paper *The Leadership Factor* that Miliband had yet to make much of an impression on most people. But their spontaneous verdict, usually delivered apologetically, as though they would use a kinder word if they could think of one, was very often 'weird'. Several things contributed to this assessment: that he had stood against his brother (by far the best-known thing about him); that he married the mother of his two children only after becoming Labour leader; and that he seemed to have an odd way of speaking.

The early research found that people thought he had been lucky to win since he had clearly not been the most able candidate, and that in the post, he now seemed out of his depth. These doubts about his competence persisted. Throughout the parliament I found he lagged behind David Cameron on important attributes like being able to represent Britain abroad, leading a team, taking difficult decisions even when they were unpopular, having a clear idea of what he wanted to achieve, and doing the job of Prime Minister overall.

Consequently, Miliband never came close to overtaking Cameron as people's preferred PM. My polling regularly found only just under one third of voters saying they were satisfied with Cameron's performance as PM – but a similar proportion would say they were dissatisfied but preferred him to the alternative. Only around three in ten would say they were dissatisfied and would rather see Miliband in No. 10, and no more than three quarters of Labour voters would say that (though this figure rose later in the

campaign as those deciding to vote Labour reconciled themselves to the choice of Prime Minister their decision implied).

The only score on which Miliband had the advantage was on ‘understanding ordinary people’, but this seemed to be a reflection of his party’s brand rather than his own. Indeed, as far as most voters were concerned there seemed to be little to choose between the established party leaders: all three had gone straight into the political world from Oxford or Cambridge, having all (an exasperating misconception for Labour) been to public school. The idea of Miliband as a member of a separate, prosperous political class was confirmed weeks before the election when he was photographed in what turned out to be the second kitchen of his London house.

The notion that Labour had chosen ‘the wrong brother’ pursued Miliband throughout his leadership. Even in final weeks of the 2015 campaign, nearly five years after he was elected, it was often one of the first things people said when his name was mentioned. In my qualitative research we regularly asked people to imagine the leaders in different situations, or even as different things, to understand better how people saw them. For example: whom would Miliband bring if you invited him to dinner? ‘Two advisers’. What would he do on an unexpectedly free Friday night? Pore over the latest poll results or ‘play with the train set in his loft’. What sort of car would he be? ‘A Ford Focus, average. Actually no, a Ford Focus is reliable.’ What sort of drink would he be? ‘Crème de Menthe. The sort of thing nobody would order.’

Doubts about the idea of Ed Miliband as Prime Minister contributed to English voters’ fears of a minority Labour government coming to a deal, formal or otherwise, with the Scottish National Party. It was not just that people resented the anticipated SNP demands for more money for Scotland (when their constituents already enjoyed free prescriptions, university tuition and other benefits unavailable to English taxpayers), or for a bigger say in the running of a country they did not want to be part of (though there was plenty of all that). It was that Nicola Sturgeon was a strong and canny leader who would probably get the better of Prime Minister Miliband.

The causes of Labour’s predicament in Scotland could fill a book of their own – and of course Conservatives would still have won a majority had Labour held all its seats north of the border – but the SNP landslide was one of the most remarkable aspects of the 2015 campaign. In my research, I explored why so many people were ready to abandon a party that had been part of the fabric of their community for generations.

Three main reasons emerged. First, compared to the SNP, Scottish Labour

seemed like a ‘branch office’ of the London headquarters as opposed to a distinctively Scottish party. Second, many people thought that by campaigning alongside Tories and Lib Dems during the referendum – with what they saw as a very negative and scaremongering message – Labour had shown itself to be part of a complacent establishment. And third, since the Blair years Labour had become indistinguishable from the Conservatives – or, as someone memorably put it, ‘it’s just a different shade of shite’. The SNP now seemed to its newfound supporters to be the true party of the left.

As for what a large SNP contingent could achieve at Westminster, specific expectations were hard to come by. The answer was usually some combination of ‘standing up for Scotland’ and ‘making sure our voice is heard’. Perhaps above all, potential supporters hoped the SNP would keep a Labour-led administration honest and make sure it got its priorities right.

In Britain as a whole, though always behind on leadership and overall economic management, Labour was sustained in the polls by the perception that it cared more about helping ordinary people and was ultimately more well-meaning than the Tories. Throughout the coalition, Labour consistently polled ahead of the Tories on fairness, sharing the concerns of ordinary people, and having its heart in the right place. During the campaign, while Conservatives emphasised the choice between Cameron and Miliband in Downing Street, Labour sought to exploit its advantage on these attributes with a party election broadcast featuring actor Martin Freeman. The star of *The Hobbit* and *The Office* declared that the election was not just a choice between two economic plans but a choice about values. Having been brought up to believe in things like ‘community, compassion, decency’, he was choosing Labour.

I found in my focus groups that this message was best received by those already most inclined to vote for the party. It was less effective for those who had harder questions, particularly about how all this compassion and decency would be paid for. As one of our participants put it, ‘it’s all well and good to say we’re nicer people and we care about you more, but I want someone who can sort out the country’.

This, we can now see, was an important part of Labour’s downfall. If, in Ed Miliband, the Labour Party chose ‘the wrong brother’, he was not just the wrong front man for an otherwise winning approach; he was the brother who led them down the wrong path. A party cannot change in a five-week campaign what it has been unable or unwilling to change in five years. Having suffered a bad defeat in 2010, Labour needed to show it understood why people were nervous about putting it back in power, and do

everything it could to reassure doubters. Miliband's last conference speech, in which he forgot to mention the deficit, came to symbolise Labour's cavalier approach to the public finances. But the truth is that had he remembered, it would have been too late. The problem was not that the subject slipped his mind one afternoon in September 2014; it was that he had ignored it for the preceding four years.

During his time as leader, Miliband apologised for not sufficiently regulating the banks, for allowing financial services to become too big a part of the economy, for the proliferation of targets in public services, and for being photographed holding a copy of *The Sun*. But as for spending and borrowing too much – what many of his party's potential supporters regarded as the biggest failure of the Labour era – he not only declined to apologise, he refused to admit it had ever happened. As a result, he was unable to persuade voters to let Labour put its values into practice.

Too many in the Labour Party thought they would win the 2015 election almost by default. In fact, they had a mountain to climb. The mountain is still there, and if they want to win they will still need to reach the summit. Next time, however, they will be starting from even lower down the slope.

III

The Liberal Democrats: Downfall

THE 2015 ELECTION WAS THE MOST DISASTROUS in the history of the Liberal Democrats or any of its predecessor parties. Indeed, it was the most catastrophic result for any party in the modern history of British politics. In 2010, fifty-seven Lib Dem MPs were elected; now there are eight. Only just over a quarter of those who voted for the party five years ago did so again in 2015. Nearly a third voted Labour, a fifth voted Conservative, and a tenth voted UKIP. Former Lib Dems accounted for two fifths of the Green vote.

In such circumstances it seems kinder simply to pay one's respects and stay away. But for a party of government to lose more than seventeen in every twenty of its seats is such an extraordinary phenomenon that is worth examining. Why did the Lib Dems collapse so spectacularly? Was an implosion on such a scale inevitable once the coalition deal was signed? And if not, how could it have been avoided?

Before 2010, the party's biggest strength was the reputation of its MPs and councillors in their local strongholds, and that it was neither the Tories nor Labour. In my research project *What Future For The Liberal Democrats?*, conducted in 2010, I found that for just over four in ten of those who had voted Lib Dem, the main reason had been that they did a good job locally; a quarter of them voted to stop another party from winning, or as a way of voting against both the bigger parties. Qualitatively, many said it had been time for a change from Labour but they were not sure they wanted (or were quite sure they didn't want) the Tories. The characteristics they most associated with the Lib Dems were fairness and honesty.

There were also two big weaknesses: the assumption that since the party would never win an election outright it represented a wasted vote, and the feeling that although Lib Dems seemed like terribly nice people, their policies probably didn't really add up. Among those in my research who had considered voting Lib Dem but decided not to, majorities agreed with both these propositions.

At this stage, a few months into the parliament, those who had voted Lib Dem were split down the middle over whether the party had been right to enter coalition with the Tories. Half agreed that ‘the Liberal Democrats have shown they don’t really have any principles, they are just going along with what the Conservatives want in return for some jobs in government’; yet almost two thirds said they would still have voted for the party if they had known what it would end up doing. At the same time, nearly two thirds thought that ‘overall, the government is different and better than would be the case without the Liberal Democrats’. In the focus groups, these people often said (though without being able to give specific examples) that the party had probably had a ‘tempering’ effect on the Tories or ‘softened the blow’ of spending cuts.

Like a brand-new car that loses a chunk of its value the moment it is driven off the forecourt, the hitherto untarnished Lib Dems were bound to lose sections of their varied followers as soon as they entered government. This was not simply because whichever of the two main parties they chose to support in coalition, they would automatically upset a swathe of voters who preferred the other one. It was also because so many voted Lib Dem precisely because they did not expect the party to sully itself with office. These people, the research showed, were the most displeased by the decision to enter a Conservative-led coalition, and took a more hostile view of it, and subsequently of the party, than Lib Dem voters as a whole.

More broadly, many Lib Dem supporters noted that the coalition partners, especially Cameron and Clegg, were working together harmoniously. But the harmony troubled them. For those who were uncomfortable with coalition policies, it was hard to discern whether Lib Dems were arguing vociferously behind closed doors, winning the best deal they could and presenting a united front in public, or (as they often suspected) whether they had no real influence – either because they were being ignored or because they were offering little or no resistance.

Still, most Lib Dem voters agreed that the party had shown it was ‘prepared to take real responsibility, not just oppose from the sidelines’, that it was ‘making an important contribution to the government of Britain’, and that Lib Dems ‘behave more responsibly than most politicians’.

All this presented Lib Dems with a strategic choice. The most sensible option, I suggested, was to build on these perceptions and create a reputation as a grown-up party. Since it would never be able to please everyone, it should choose to address the voters who wanted it to be a serious force. (I also warned that ‘it may not be possible for Lib

Dems to return to pre-coalition levels of support in time for the next general election’, which was, as it turned out, somewhat to understate the case). The alternative, for which many disgruntled Lib Dem voters yearned, was for the party to show a bit more fighting spirit – and do so publicly – when it came to negotiating with the Tories.

The temptation, I warned, would be for the Lib Dems to try to have it both ways: ‘to be both a responsible party of government capable of dealing with harsh realities and uncomfortable truths, and a party of opposition-in-office, always ready to disavow the difficult and the unpopular’.

This tension was played out in glorious technicolor on the question of university tuition fees. In December 2010, only twenty-one Lib Dem MPs kept their unambiguous pledge to vote against any increase; eight abstained and twenty-eight voted in favour, including Clegg, who had himself signed the NUS pledge not to do so just weeks before the election. The dilemma sent the party into turmoil, with Lib Dem ministers openly debating whether or not to support their own government’s policy. The reversal dogged the party for the rest of the parliament and became, for many of their former voters, emblematic of the party’s political treachery.

Clegg’s 2012 apology over this episode was set to music and became one of the social media highlights of the parliament. However, he stressed that he was not saying sorry the decision to raise the cap on fees, but for making ‘a promise we were not absolutely sure we could deliver’. This goes to the heart of the party’s travails. It was not that the leadership was (necessarily) making bad decisions as part of the coalition, but that there were no good decisions for it to make. Having simultaneously campaigned as the left-wing alternative to Labour, and the civilised, moderate alternative to Tories, as well as the most obvious choice for those who wanted ‘none of the above’, the party created contradictory expectations that it could not possibly have met. Entering office did not so much cause the Lib Dems’ weakness as expose it.

However, the leadership had to play the hand it had been dealt (or dealt itself). Throughout the coalition, my research found many voters, including Conservatives, saying they were glad Clegg’s party was there to keep the lid on the Tories’ worst excesses. But few could remember any specific achievements. The pupil premium, for which the party liked to claim credit even though it was also in the 2010 Conservative manifesto, went largely unnoticed. Free school meals for younger primary school children, whether they needed them or not, was popular among some voters (specifically, parents of younger primary school children). Raising the income tax threshold also went

down well, but few saw it as a distinctively Lib Dem initiative. The two major legislative issues on which the party spent much of its negotiating capital were a referendum on the Alternative Vote and proposals to reform the House of Lords. Not only had voters long forgotten both by the time of the 2015 election, they had barely noticed them at the time.

Having lost half their 24 per cent 2010 vote share within four months of the election, the Lib Dems began to drift more gently down in the polls, flat-lining at around 10 per cent for the next three years. By early 2014, the party seemed to have concluded that the answer was a 'differentiation strategy' aimed at distancing itself from the Tories. Nick Clegg raised the prospect of going into coalition with Labour after the election, saying he had observed Ed Miliband becoming more open to the possibility while the Conservatives had become more ideological in office. Danny Alexander warned in a newspaper article that George Osborne could cut the top rate of tax to 40p only 'over my dead body'. Schools Minister David Laws let it be known that he was furious with Michael Gove for removing Baroness Morgan as head of Ofsted. At the party's spring conference, Nick Clegg told his activists to ask on the doorsteps: 'Do you really think the Tories will make Britain fairer?'

Lord Oakeshott, who subsequently left the party after a botched coup attempt against the leader, described this as the 'enemy within' strategy. Rather than agitate from within government, he advised the Lib Dems to leave the coalition six months to a year before the election to allow the party to reassert its independence.

In the event, and in defiance of many people's expectations on both sides, the coalition lasted its full term and (at least as far as the outside world was concerned) with very little further discord. We will never know, but I strongly doubted that provoking public rows with government colleagues, let alone flouncing out altogether, would bring much of an upturn in the Lib Dems' fortunes. My 2013 research into the party's predicament, provocatively but not entirely facetiously titled *What Are the Liberal Democrats For?*, asked how Clegg should set about reassembling his fragmented coalition of support. I concluded that the differentiation and divorce strategies would be unlikely to do the trick with the two groups of defectors it would be intended to impress.

For 'none of the above' voters, the Lib Dems had made themselves very much 'one of the above' as soon as they entered government. These supporters had gone and were not coming back. But what about former supporters who would rather have seen the party in coalition with Labour? This group of voters identified with the Lib Dems and thought they had the luxury of voting against Gordon Brown without helping to

elect a Conservative government. Imagine their surprise and delight when Clegg walked into Downing Street with Cameron. By 2015, as far as they were concerned, the Lib Dems were the party that had propped up a Tory PM and nodded through austerity. Whether they had taken the edge off an administration that would have been even worse but for their presence was neither here nor there. They did not intend to make the same mistake twice. They would prefer to hear that in a future hung parliament the Lib Dems would only be prepared to deal with Labour – something the party could surely not promise without alienating other existing and potential supporters, and which was certainly impossible for Clegg.

As their dwindling national poll share showed no signs of recovery, Lib Dems pinned ever more hope on local factors. The party's victory in the 2013 Eastleigh by-election had given it reason to believe that where it was strong on the ground, particularly with an established local government presence, it could defy the national trend. The Lib Dems' private polling confirmed this view. In early 2015 they released a series of constituency surveys, on the basis of which they claimed to be on course to hold enough seats to play a part in another coalition. I had my doubts about this research. Not only did the surveys name local candidates – a controversial if defensible practice – they began by asking the interviewee whether they had a favourable view of the local MP and his or her opponents, before moving on to voting intention. I thought this approach put too much emphasis on the local MP's reputation, which, I argued, was just one of the many things people consider when deciding where to place their cross.

In my own constituency polls, I asked two questions: the standard 'Which party would you vote for in an election tomorrow?', plus a further question asking the respondent to think particularly about 'your own constituency and the candidates likely to stand there'. The idea was to find out whether these local factors, including the identity of the MP, were having a real impact, but without skewing the result. The Lib Dems always did better in the second question than the first, in many cases taking the lead in seats where the standard question alone would have had them behind. Indeed, my polls found Lib Dems doing much better in their own seats than national polls would imply. Of the forty-five Lib Dem seats I surveyed in the year before the election, on the basis of the localised voting intention question I found them behind in just twenty-six. Yet on the day, they held on to just two of this selection. Of course, the polls were snapshots not predictions, but the consistency of the pattern suggests that even the reminder of local circumstances may have been enough to over-egg the incumbency

factor on which Lib Dems so heavily relied. This time, local hero status was trumped by views of the Lib Dems as a whole, its place in the bigger picture and the choice at hand.

At his 2015 manifesto launch, Clegg declared that his party would ‘add a heart to a Conservative government and a brain to a Labour one’. But by then, even those who took a benign view of the party did not think it had what it took to be a big influence at national level. (When undecided voters in my focus groups were asked what animal Clegg reminded them of, the answer was ‘the Chihuahua in David Cameron’s handbag’.) The voters delivered their verdict accordingly, and what remains of the party is left to wonder where it all went wrong. The Lib Dems could probably have used their brief slice of power to greater effect. Possibly, they could have tempted back some on their disaffected left, albeit by destroying such reputation as they had for being a responsible party of government.

Ultimately, however, the party’s problems did not stem from its decision to join the coalition, or from what it did in office, but from what it did to get there. In opposition, it had been all things to all voters: an impossible trick to sustain in government. The story of party’s fate is a parable that shows political opportunism will catch up with you in the end.

Clegg did the right thing by joining the coalition. He knew the decision would take a toll on his party, but also that turning down power would prove that a vote for the Lib Dems would be a vote wasted – as well as denying the country the stable government it needed. He conducted himself with dignity and fortitude through what must have been a trying five years. For what it’s worth, if I lived in Sheffield Hallam I would probably have voted to keep him in the House of Commons. Whether he is glad still to be there is another question.

IV

UKIP: Whose Army?

AT THE 2010 GENERAL ELECTION, the United Kingdom Independence Party won 3.1 per cent of the vote. Within two years it had pulled level in the polls with the Liberal Democrats, and by the autumn of 2012 was regularly scoring into double figures, with four or even five times the share it had won at the ballot box. UKIP came second in two parliamentary by-elections, in Rotherham and Middlesbrough, prompting Nigel Farage to declare that his party was ‘the new third force in British politics’.

Polls showed UKIP’s support was coming disproportionately from former Tories. More than one in ten of those who voted Conservative at the election now said they would back UKIP. The data behind my research paper *They’re Thinking What We’re Thinking: Understanding the UKIP Temptation*, based on a poll of 20,000 people, showed that half of all those saying they would consider voting UKIP had backed the Tories in 2010.

The ‘UKIP threat’ and how to counter it became something of an obsession for many Conservatives. It was clear that it would not simply be a question of taking a tougher stance on immigration and Europe, not least because lurching to the right would come at a cost. As my *Project Blueprint* research had found, there were as many potential Conservatives who had voted Lib Dem at the general election as there were 2010 Tories who now said they would vote UKIP. Equally, putting more emphasis on these issues risked playing into UKIP’s hands by shifting the debate onto their chosen territory.

More importantly, UKIP’s appeal related more to its general outlook than any specific policy. It was true that those who were drawn to the party were more preoccupied than most with immigration, and would complain about issues such as Britain’s contribution to the EU or the international aid budget. But their overarching view was that Britain was changing for the worse. They were pessimistic, even fearful, and did not think mainstream politicians were willing or able to keep their promises or change things for the better. As I noted in my paper:

[Their complaints] are often part of a greater dissatisfaction with the way they see things going in Britain: schools, they say, can't hold nativity plays or harvest festivals any more; you can't fly a flag of St George any more; you can't call Christmas Christmas any more; you won't be promoted in the police force unless you're from a minority; you can't wear an England shirt on the bus; you won't get social housing unless you're an immigrant; you can't speak up about these things because you'll be called a racist; you can't even smack your children. All of these examples, real and imagined, were mentioned in focus groups by UKIP voters and considerers to make the point that the mainstream political parties are so in thrall to the prevailing culture of political correctness that they have ceased to represent the silent majority.

Despite the party's founding purpose, and indeed its name, little more than a quarter of those saying they were considering voting UKIP put resolving Britain's future relations with the EU among the top three issues facing the country. Only 7 per cent said it was the single most important issue. Economic growth and jobs, welfare reform, immigration and the deficit were all more important to them.

That being the case, I argued, whatever the merits of a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU, which many Conservatives were demanding, nobody should expect such a move to scupper UKIP. And so it didn't. David Cameron's speech promising an in/out referendum took place in January 2013. At this time, UKIP was battling with the Lib Dems for third place in the polls, with both scoring around 10 per cent. By the spring, UKIP had moved ahead, regularly recording poll shares in the mid- or even high teens. In the 2013 local elections, UKIP won 23 per cent of the vote, nine points ahead of the Lib Dems and just two points behind the Conservatives. One hundred and forty-seven UKIP councillors were elected, 139 of them gains. Four months after Cameron's referendum promise, Nigel Farage declared that UKIP had taken the 'first substantial step to being a party that can credibly win seats at Westminster'.

For its potential supporters, the biggest attraction to UKIP was that the party would 'say things that need to be said but others are scared to say'. Analysis of my large-scale poll found that the biggest predictor of whether a voter would consider UKIP was agreement that the party is 'on the side of people like me'. This set the context for their views about immigration, which they often expounded at length.

Many complained that migrants from within the EU and outside had changed the character of their local area beyond recognition. Recession and austerity brought their

complaints into sharper focus and heightened their resentment: they themselves worked long hours for stagnant incomes as the cost of living rose, and had in many cases lost out on tax credits or other benefits; immigrants, meanwhile, seemed to them to be entitled to extra financial help and priority access to public services, as well as depressing wages for people like themselves.

My 2013 paper *Small Island: Public Opinion and the Politics of Immigration* found that more than nine in ten of those who said they would vote UKIP in an election tomorrow thought that immigration had brought more disadvantages than advantages to Britain. By far their biggest concern was the idea of immigrants ‘claiming benefits and using public services when they have contributed nothing in return’. More than half said they or someone in their family had found it harder to get work or were paid less because of competition from immigrants, and that the character of their local area had changed for the worse in recent years because of the scale of immigration. More than one third claimed someone in their family had been ‘denied access to housing or other public services because priority seems to be given to immigrants’. In each case these proportions were higher than they were among other parties’ supporters.

Few thought things would get any better with undiluted majority Tory government. Only one in three UKIP supporters thought Britain ‘would have a firmer policy on immigration, with smaller numbers entering the country than is the case today’ if the Conservatives were in government alone; most thought the policy would be much the same. However, this did not reflect discontent with the Conservative Party specifically so much as politics generally, and the ability of governments to achieve what they want. The controversial Home Office ad vans bearing the legend ‘In the UK illegally? Go home or face arrest’ were a case in point. My research found that of all voters, UKIP supporters were the most strongly in favour of this initiative. They were also the least likely to think it would work.

UKIP supporters’ views on immigration were part of a wider pattern of pessimism and insecurity, and often a feeling of exclusion. They were generally less likely than most to be optimistic about the economy over the next few years and, crucially, less inclined to think they would gain personally if things did improve. At the end of 2013, in my research for the fourth phase of *Project Blueprint*, I found most voters saying either that they were feeling some of the benefits of an economic recovery or, more often, that they were not feeling them yet but expected to do so at some point. However, UKIP

voters were more pessimistic. The majority said they were not experiencing the benefit of any recovery and did not expect to do so.

If these things mattered more than Europe to potential UKIP supporters, that is not to say they regarded the EU with anything other than hostility. The European Parliament elections of 2014 provided the ideal opportunity to ‘give Europe a slap’, as someone who took part in my research put it. Indeed, many voters regarded this event as something closer to the Eurovision Song Contest than a proper election (to quote another focus group participant), and took the chance to give the government *nul points* at the same time. UKIP triumphed with 27 per cent of the vote and twenty-four MEPs – the first time for more than a century that neither Labour nor the Conservatives had won a national election.

Westminster by-elections also provided a string of opportunities for UKIP to capitalise on mid-term discontent with politics in general and the government in particular. The party equalled its performances in Rotherham and Middlesbrough with second places in Eastleigh, South Shields, Wythenshawe & Sale East, Newark and Heywood & Middleton, before breaking through with victories in Clacton in October 2014 and Rochester & Strood the following month.

The question for UKIP therefore became one of converting mid-term local, Euro and by-election support into general election votes. My research suggested this would not be easy. After the Eastleigh by-election I found 83 per cent of those who had voted UKIP saying they had done so to ‘send a message that I’m unhappy with the party I usually support nationally’, and three quarters wanting to register that they were ‘unhappy with all the main parties at the moment’. In a poll of 4,000 people who had voted in the European elections, I found eight in ten of those who had backed UKIP saying the party had the best policies on Europe, but six in ten also saying they were expressing discontent with their usual party or making a general protest. Only half said they expected to stay with the party at the general election; one in five said they would probably vote Conservative; most of the rest said they did not know what they would do.

In Clacton and Rochester, the single biggest reasons for voting UKIP were that they thought the party had the best local candidate – the sitting MPs Douglas Carswell and Mark Reckless respectively – but a majority of UKIP supporters in both seats also said they were recording their dissatisfaction with established parties. In the Rochester poll, I also asked people how they expected to vote in the general election; even then, the Conservatives had the edge, and duly won the seat back on 7 May 2015.

In early 2015, it started to become clear that UKIP was going to struggle to match its successes of the previous year. In my campaign focus groups, people usually said they were glad UKIP was around to ensure a hearing for issues that the other parties might prefer to ignore. But the downside, which we heard again and again from January until the election, was that the party seemed to have nothing to say about anything other than Europe and, especially, immigration. This alone put them outside consideration in an election to choose a government, even for most of those who liked much of what they had to say.

The fact that a series of UKIP candidates and councillors were recorded making what were sometimes quite breathtakingly offensive remarks led some to suspect that the party's common-sense exterior hid a more sinister underlying agenda, or at least some rather unsavoury individuals. Most did not think this applied to Nigel Farage himself, who was generally regarded as entertaining and straight-talking, even if he did seem to thrive in the limelight and to enjoy generating the controversy that intensified it. But some were not so sure about his good intentions, often citing his remarks that he had felt uncomfortable when foreign languages had been more prevalent than English on trains from London to Kent, and that someone would be right to be concerned if a group of Romanian men moved in next door. The question of whether Farage was benign or belligerent was illustrated further in the groups when people were asked to think of the leaders in different ways. If he were an animal he would be a peacock or a weasel; if a car, a Ford Capri with tinted windows or a four-by-four with illegal bull-bars; if a cartoon character, Andy Capp or Cruella de Vil.

My campaign focus groups were also revealing on how voters saw the party more generally. If UKIP were a house, it would have 'a wrought-iron fence all round to keep everyone out'. The ageing residents would spend their time 'talking about how things were in their day' and would not get on with their neighbours 'because they are a different colour'. The timer on the stereo would be set to play the national anthem every day at noon.

In the Ashcroft National Poll at the beginning of the campaign proper, I found UKIP in the lead when it came to articulating 'things that need to be said that other parties are scared to say'. However, doubts remained over whether the party was 'reasonable and sensible'. Fewer than one in five thought UKIP was 'competent and capable'. In my final pre-election survey, I found 33 per cent saying they would like to

see the party have a major say in the event of a hung parliament, compared to 48 per cent for the Greens and 54 per cent for the Lib Dems.

Between the autumn of its by-election victories and the general election, UKIP's poll share drifted down from the high teens to an average of 13 per cent, which is exactly the vote share the party received at the general election. Others can decide whether this merits Nigel Farage's description of his party as the 'People's Army', but my post-vote poll at least tells us what, on the day, the army looked like. Thirty-seven per cent of those who voted UKIP in 2015 had voted Conservative in 2010; 12 per cent had voted Labour and 16 per cent had voted Lib Dem. More than half said they had not felt any benefits from an economic recovery and did not expect to, compared to 36 per cent of voters overall and just 11 per cent of Tories. Fifty-five per cent of UKIP voters were men, a higher proportion than in any other party's coalition of voters. Twenty-seven per cent were in social group DE, compared to 24 per cent of Labour voters and 19 per cent of voters as a whole. More than six in ten had ended their formal education at secondary school, more than was the case for any other party.

Unlike Labour voters, most of those who voted UKIP agreed that 'if you work hard, it is possible to be successful in Britain today no matter what your background'. But seven in ten said that for most children growing up in Britain today, life would be worse than it was for their parents; nine in ten said changes in society over the last few years had been mostly for the worse; and seven in ten said that overall, life in Britain was worse today than it was thirty years ago (their rate of agreement with these last two statements was higher than in any other political or demographic group).

Nigel Farage and his party made themselves part of the story of the 2015 election. But the established parties know they were partially responsible for UKIP's rise. Many Labour voters felt abandoned by their party's apparent refusal, over an extended period, to take seriously the issues about which they were concerned, including immigration. When some Conservative voters looked to UKIP because they felt left behind by the Tories' (necessary) modernisation, they felt their old party's response was to abuse rather than reassure them. And the Lib Dems provided large numbers of recruits by virtue of joining the government and ruling themselves out as the premier party of perpetual opposition.

Ultimately, UKIP was unable to convince a sufficient number of voters that it represented a worthwhile vote when the government of the country was at stake. It seemed to have little to say outside their preoccupation with Europe and immigration – a

point which mattered particularly now that voters had become used to the idea that a smaller party could end up in government. My research consistently found that potential Tory–UKIP defectors overwhelmingly preferred David Cameron to Ed Miliband as Prime Minister, and that their preferred election result was a Conservative government. The question was whether they would believe it mattered if they got one or not. On the day, many of them decided it did.

It would be wrong, though, to say that UKIP's 3.9 million voters wanted only to make an empty protest. As one of our focus group participants put it, it was not just about getting UKIP into government, but about 'getting them seats and a voice. They can build on that.' They certainly have an opportunity to do so. Though the party won only one seat, it came second in 120. It won more than a quarter of the vote in thirteen, and more than 30 per cent in six. Having become the third party in England and Wales, UKIP could learn the secret of the Lib Dems' (albeit abruptly terminated) success by establishing themselves as a local force. This is a matter of consistent campaigning and, above all, organisation, which Farage himself would admit has never been the party's strongest suit.

Labour's identity crisis and the near extinction of the Lib Dems present UKIP with an opportunity. To prosper, the party needs to be disciplined and professional, and to be known more for what it is for than for what it is against. To that extent, UKIP's future is in its own hands.

V

2020 Vision

ON THE DAY OF THE GENERAL ELECTION, I surveyed over 12,000 people after they had voted. Their answers reveal stark differences between the respective coalitions of voters assembled by the Conservatives and Labour.

Thirty-eight per cent of men voted Conservative, as did 37 per cent of women. One third of Conservative voters were aged 65 or over, and more than half were aged 55 or above. Nearly half of Tory voters were from social group AB, compared to 40 per cent of voters overall. More than eight in ten owned their own home, and more than half owned it outright without a mortgage. Two thirds of those still employed worked in the private sector.

Three in ten men voted Labour, as did one third of women. Nearly a quarter of Labour voters were from social group DE, and just over six in ten owned their own home. Of those still in employment, nearly four in ten Labour voters worked in the public sector. David Cameron's much vaunted 'gender problem' turned out to be that he was more popular among men than Ed Miliband – or, at worst, that Miliband was less unpopular among women than among men.

The Conservatives won 30 per cent of the vote or less among voters in social groups C2DE; those aged 18 to 44; those in Scotland, Wales and the north of England; and members of ethnic minorities. Labour won fewer than three in ten votes among ABC1s, those aged 45 and above, white voters, and voters in Scotland and the south of England.

More telling than the demographics and voting histories of each party's supporters are their differences in attitude. For Conservatives, the three most important issues facing the country were getting the economy growing and creating jobs, cutting the deficit and the debt, and controlling immigration; for Labour voters they were improving the NHS, creating jobs and growth, and tackling the cost of living. When it came to issues for 'you and your family', both chose the NHS and jobs and growth, but Tories,

unlike Labour voters, were as likely to mention the deficit as they were to choose living costs.

Nearly nine in ten Conservative voters, compared to less than half of Labour voters, said either that they were already feeling some of the benefits of economic recovery, or that they were expecting to at some point. Eighty-four per cent of Tories agreed that austerity and cuts to government spending would need to continue over the next five years; fewer than one in five Labour voters accepted the need for further public spending restraint.

Voters who said that trusting their party's motives and values had been the most important factor in their voting decision were evenly divided between the Tories and Labour. But those who said they had voted because their party's leader would make the best Prime Minister, and those who said they were choosing the most competent government, went for the Conservatives by margins of more than fifty points.

Conservative and Labour voters had very different attitudes to the role of the state, or what they expected from government. Three quarters of Conservatives thought that 'if some people earn a great deal of money through their own ability and hard work, that is a good thing and they should be allowed to enjoy it', while three quarters of Labour voters thought 'the government should do more to ensure that wealth in Britain is shared out more equally by imposing much higher taxes on those with the highest incomes'. More than seven in ten Labour voters thought 'people have a right to things like decent housing, healthcare, education and enough to live on, and the government should make sure everyone has them', but more than three quarters of Conservatives thought 'people are too ready to talk about their rights – they have a responsibility to provide for themselves and should not expect the government to do so for them'.

Conservatives tended to think life in Britain was good, and characterised by opportunity; Labour voters disagreed. Seven in ten Tories thought that 'overall, life in Britain today is better than it was thirty years ago'. Most Labour voters thought life in Britain today was worse. While a majority of Conservative voters agreed that 'if you work hard it is possible to be very successful in Britain no matter what your background', most Labour voters thought that 'in Britain today, people from some backgrounds will never have a chance to be successful no matter how hard they work'.

Moreover, Conservatives were optimistic about the future, both for themselves and for the country; again, Labour voters were not. Two thirds of Tories thought that 'the way society and the economy are changing will bring more opportunities for me to improve

my standard of living than threats to it'. Three quarters of Labour voters thought these changes meant 'there will be more threats to my standard of living in future than opportunities to improve it'. Most Conservatives thought that 'for most children growing up in Britain today, life will be better than it was for their parents'. Two thirds of Labour voters thought it would be worse.

Not surprisingly, Conservative voters were more likely than Labour to have a positive view of globalisation and, especially, capitalism, which fewer than three in ten Labour voters thought had been a force for good. But while most Labour voters had a favourable view of multiculturalism, social liberalism, feminism and the green movement, only a minority of Tories agreed in each case – indeed, the Tories won less than a third of the vote among people who believed these things to have been a force for good. Nearly half of Labour voters thought immigration had on balance been a good thing; fewer than three in ten Conservatives said the same.

These portraits of the kinds of people each party did or did not attract, and what they thought, offer a good starting point for thinking about where the parties are at the beginning of the new parliament, and where they need to be at the end.

First, Labour. In *Project Red Alert*, my 2012 analysis of Labour's electoral challenge, I concluded that unless Ed Miliband managed to reassure wavering potential supporters that he would be responsible with the economy and the public finances, he would risk relying on 'a precarious coalition of the disaffected and the dependent' who wanted austerity ended or even reversed.

As the details above show, this is more or less what happened. In some respects Labour ended the parliament as little more than a party of protest; unfortunately, they were not the only one. The outlook of Labour voters was in some respects strikingly similar to that of UKIP supporters. In both groups, just over half said they did not expect to benefit from any economic recovery. They were equally likely to agree that for most children growing up in Britain today life would be worse than it was for their parents, and that the way the economy and society were changing would bring more threats than opportunities. Indeed, Labour voters were notably less likely than UKIP voters to think that people who work hard can be successful in Britain whatever their background. It is not surprising, or at all discreditable, that the Labour Party should have won the votes of people who were finding life hard and feared for the future; the problem was its failure to attract very many others. Optimists voted Conservative.

Analysis by Labour MPs Gloria de Piero and Jon Ashworth found that the party lost support among suburban professionals and families with young children, and did no better among people on modest incomes in small towns and housing estates. My own post-vote poll showed that Labour won only 31 per cent of C2 skilled manual workers, four points behind the Tories and down from 50 per cent in 1997. Overall, Labour's vote fell for an unprecedented fourth general election in a row.

As so often, the party could have learned something from Tony Blair, the only Labour leader to win a general election since 1974. He observed in his memoir, *A Journey*, that progressive parties needed to understand that once people were 'on the ladder of opportunity, they didn't want more state help; they wanted choice, freedom to earn more and spend it ... I wanted Labour people to be ambitious and compassionate at the same time, and feel neither guilty about the first nor anxious about the second'. The 2015 Labour campaign, with its heavy focus on the minimum wage, zero-hour contracts and the NHS, lacked that balance. Labour spoke proudly of the 4 million conversations its activists would hold on the doorsteps of Britain, but all the conversations were about the same thing.

The other mistake that Blair would not have made was to risk losing an election because people feared a Labour government would be profligate with the public finances. Indeed, he went out of his way to reassure people every day on Labour's perennial weaknesses, even when he was twenty points ahead in the polls. The same applies to the doubts people had in recent years about Labour's tepid enthusiasm for (or outright opposition to) welfare reform and firmer immigration controls, however overzealous the Tories might sometimes have appeared on the former or how disappointing their delivery on the latter.

Labour succeeds when it combines its traditional virtues of compassion and fairness with competence and responsibility, and when it not only understands but supports and encourages the desire of ordinary people – including those who are already comfortable – to maintain and improve their standard of living. Convincingly redefining itself in such a way will be a huge task for the Labour Party. In doing so, it needs to start from scratch. After its 2010 defeat, Labour thought it needed to win an argument about the past in order to establish credibility for the present and the future. But trying to 'nail the lie' that the previous government had been in any way responsible for Britain's deficit, let alone the wider economic situation, was as ineffective as the Tories' post-1997 reminders of the 'golden economic legacy' bequeathed by the Major government to New

Labour. In both cases, the vanquished party was telling the voters they had made a mistake. It is not an argument that can ever be won: the electorate does not hold out the right of appeal against its verdict. It is extremely hard for a party to concede and move on, but that is what Labour must do now. Harder still, it must do so with sincerity.

The mammoth task facing Labour will no doubt bring extra comfort and joy to a victorious Conservative Party. The Tories have good reason to be pleased with themselves. Having gained ninety-seven seats in 2010, they picked up a further twenty-four, as well as half a million extra voters, in 2015. They have won an election against the odds, and feel, with some justification, that their campaign and their record in office have been vindicated. But just as I have been keen in the past to help ensure the wrong lessons are not learned from disappointment, it is just as important not to draw the wrong conclusions from success.

Having been a senior figure in the Conservative campaign team of 1992, Cameron himself recalls more clearly than most the sweetness of unexpected triumph. He also knows what happened next. Having amassed 14 million votes in defiance of the polls, many Tories came to believe that there was a formidable and enduring (if taciturn) bloc of Conservative voters who shared their values. This conviction persisted despite the evident withering of support during that parliament; it even remained an article of faith for some that the Tories were somehow more in tune with the people after the people had elected New Labour.

Though the Conservatives have been liberated from coalition with the Liberal Democrats, they have not been altogether liberated from coalition politics. Avoiding a re-run of the mid-1990s will require them to understand the coalition of voters that has elected this administration, and just as crucially, to remember that this coalition of voters cannot be taken for granted. The same groups will not necessarily come together in the same way again. The evidence from my post-vote poll is that Conservative voters in 2015 valued competence and leadership. The economy was their priority but they were by no means indifferent to public services. They wanted the government to continue with its economic plan, from which they expected to benefit if they had not done so already. They accepted the need for further austerity (or, perhaps, were in a position where they could afford to be sanguine about it). They were positive and optimistic about Britain and their own prospects. At the same time, they did not share some of the social attitudes that most non-Tories took for granted.

Keeping this coalition together means that the government must first and foremost do the job it was elected to do: to deliver, as the Conservative manifesto put it, ‘strong leadership; a clear economic plan; a brighter, more secure future’. That is the job the Conservatives have the mandate to finish. Naturally, the economy will not be the only item on the agenda. The EU referendum, to choose only the most obvious example, could easily dominate proceedings. It is a vital question and the debate will be vigorous; negotiations with other member states will inevitably absorb much government energy, and much of the Prime Minister’s own time. But perceived priorities matter. Tories must bear in mind that the whole issue of Europe fascinates them to a much greater degree than it does the voters. While the referendum will inevitably divide the party, they must at all costs keep it civil. What did wavering 1992 voters who plumped for John Major’s promise of opportunity for all and feared Labour’s ‘double whammy’ think when, a year later, the Conservative Party tore itself to shreds over the Maastricht Treaty? And what would happen if the coalition of voters that elected the Tories in 2015, expecting competence and leadership and steady progress on the economy, were treated to a repeat performance?

The Conservatives also need to consider that at the next election the electorate will be different, and in 2025 it will be different still. According to my post-vote poll, nearly three in ten ethnic minority voters supported the Tories, compared to just 16 per cent in 2010. This development is not irreversible and further progress is certainly not guaranteed. As I found in my major 2012 research paper *Degrees of Separation: Ethnic Minority Voters and the Conservative Party*, suspicions about the Tories in minority communities run deep, and those who gave the party the benefit of the doubt in 2015 could easily think again if their reservations are realised or if they judge that Labour has earned back their allegiance.

Similarly, the Tories should build on the parts of their voting coalition that go with the grain of modern Britain. For them to win in the future, that coalition will need to expand, not just consolidate. Growing by seeking out those who are, for example, suspicious of multiculturalism, feminism and social liberalism (as are a disproportionately large share of current Conservative voters) would be misconceived, since it would simply mean taking a larger share of a shrinking market.

The biggest mistake the Conservative Party could make about the 2015 result would be to conclude that its old brand problem – the long-running perception that Tories are more concerned about the rich than they are about ordinary people – has

disappeared. *Minority Verdict*, my account of the 2010 election, explained how these perceptions were at the heart of the party's failure to win an outright majority, and, as I found in *Project Blueprint*, the Tories were no more regarded as standing for fairness or being 'on the side of people like me' at the end of the parliament than they were at the beginning.

But if the Conservatives won, does that matter? Yes, it does, for two reasons. First, an election is a choice, not a referendum. In 2015, the contrast between the parties in competence and leadership, and perhaps the possibility of a minority Miliband government beholden to the SNP, outweighed questions of character and motive. But the Tories cannot rely on that being the case next time, let alone every time. Labour will not always be as hopeless as it seems right now, and people still think the party's heart is in the right place. As the 1992 saga reminds us, a complacent Conservative Party will always be vulnerable to a Labour leader who knows what he or she is doing.

Secondly, it is clear that these doubts about values are a barrier many people still have to overcome before they will vote Conservative. It may be that people were shy about admitting that they planned to do so, or that they avoided taking part in surveys so they wouldn't have to. If that is the case, rather than making the dangerous assumption that Conservative support is always higher than it looks in the polls, the Tories should ask what these people thought they had to be shy about.

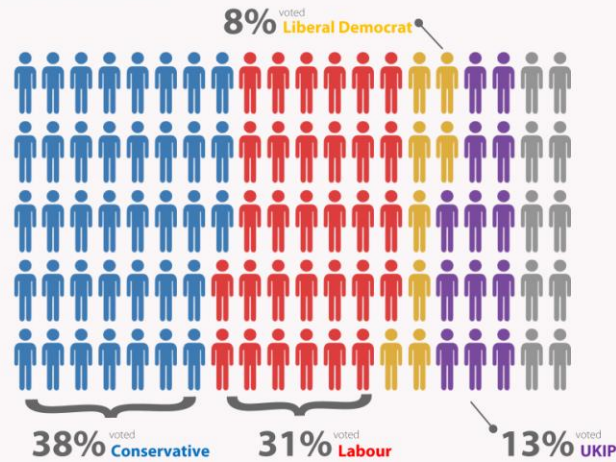
The Conservative majority gives the party an unexpected opportunity to connect with those who still think the Tories are not for people like them. There will be plenty of tests, too, like remaining focused on voters' priorities, conducting the EU referendum debate in a civilised manner, and going about welfare reform and further spending cuts in a way that does not seem gratuitous. Cameron began on the right note the morning after the election, promising on the steps of No. 10 to govern 'as a party of one nation, one United Kingdom', and to ensure the recovery 'reaches all parts of our country, from north to south, east to west'.

This, then, is the race to 2020. Can the Labour Party reach beyond its core support into the moderate, comfortable, quietly ambitious mainstream that propelled it into office less than twenty years ago? And can the Conservative Party stay focused on what matters, hold together its winning coalition and become an appealing proposition for the voters of the future?

To put it another way, can Labour embrace aspiration, competence and responsibility faster than the Conservatives can come to terms with the twenty-first century?

GENERAL ELECTION 2015

How Britain voted...



A nation divided demographically

Conservative

gained less than or equal to 30% of the vote among...

C2DEs

18-44 year olds

Black, Minority and Ethnic voters

Scotland

North (31%)



Labour

gained less than or equal to 30% of the vote among...

ABC1s

45+ year olds

White voters

London and South

Scotland

Voters attitudes

Voters agree that...



60%

If you work hard it's possible to be very successful in Britain whatever your background



56%

Life in Britain today is better than 30 years ago

but disagree that...



65%

Changes in Britain over the last few years have mainly been for the better



58%

The way the economy and society are changing there will be more than threats to my living standards in the future



57%

For most children growing up in Britain today life will be better than it was for their parents



53%

People are too ready to talk about rights; they have a responsibility to provide for themselves



51%

People earning a great deal of money through their ability & hard work is a good thing & they should be allowed to enjoy it

A nation divided by attitude

Conservative

gained less than 33% of the vote among those who believed...



Feminism



Multiculturalism



Immigration



The Green Movement



Social Liberalism

...were each a force for good

Labour

gained less than 33% of the vote among those who believed...

Capitalism



Internet



Globalisation



Lord Ashcroft Polls

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