

Despite Anti-EU Rhetoric, Election Shows U.K.'s Continental Drift

Brian Fox, Matthias Matthijs | Wednesday, April 15, 2015

The iconic 1957 Times headline “Heavy Fog in Channel – Continent Cut Off” once aptly captured the United Kingdom’s sense of its unique place in the world. In the British popular imagination, the U.K.’s cultural differences from the rest of Europe extend to its politics. Whereas politics on the continent is based on what Britons see as messy compromises, shifting alliances and hidden coalition deals sealed before the votes are even counted, British parliamentary democracy, embedded in a winner-take-all electoral system, rests on the clarity and legitimacy of a binary choice. When disgruntled, voters can simply “throw the bums out” and elect the shadow Cabinet-in-waiting. But that old comparison fails to reflect how British politics has taken a distinctly Continental turn in recent years, even as British politicians stoke anti-European Union sentiment and voters look increasingly inward.

Ahead of next month’s uncertain parliamentary elections, at the very moment the U.K. seems to be pulling away from Brussels, its political scene now resembles that of Spain, France or Belgium more than Canada or the United States. Alternating one-party governments, long the defining characteristic of modern British politics, seem to be a thing of the past, and multi-party governments look set to become the new normal in British politics. The upcoming election promises yet another hung Parliament, even though 62 percent of voters would prefer a single party to govern, compared to only 29 percent who want to see another coalition, [according to recent polling](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/mar/26/election-coalition-single-party-survey) (<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/mar/26/election-coalition-single-party-survey>). But this time, it will be even harder to form a workable majority in Westminster, as the Liberal Democrats—the preferred coalition partner of both the Conservative and Labour parties—are expected to do badly. That is bound to further the U.K.’s Continental drift, which is particularly striking in three domains: economic policy, institutional matters and foreign policy.



British Prime Minister David Cameron unveils the Conservative Party manifesto, Swindon, England, April 14, 2015 (AP photo by Peter Macdiarmid).

The 2008-2009 economic crash hit British politics so hard because it was a crisis not only of deregulated finance, but also of the ideas that had enabled and fueled it. Neoliberalism, which touts the rationality of free markets over meddling states, needed to be rescued by costly government interventions when the system broke down. Yet during the recession and the much-delayed recovery that followed the 2010 election, neither Prime Minister David Cameron's Conservative-led government nor the opposition Labour Party were able to provide a genuine and viable alternative to the beleaguered neoliberal policies of the past.

Both parties still offer different "varieties of austerity" that target the state rather than the profligacy of the financial sector, hurting aggregate demand. The Conservatives want to double down on austerity, promising more of the same. Labour, on the other hand, while criticizing the Cameron government for having gone too far in its austerity measures, pledges to balance the budget by the end of the next Parliament primarily through an austerity-lite program that in the end is not all that different from that of the Tories. It should not be a surprise, then, that many voters are looking elsewhere.

Resurgent nationalist parties are advancing their own alternatives and contributing to a sense that power may be devolving in the U.K. **At the recent—and only—party leaders' debate** (<http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/04/02/world/europe/ap-eu-britain-election-debate.html>), Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) head Nicola Sturgeon's anti-austerity stance was a breath of fresh air for many English voters. With a scant 4 percent of the popular vote, the SNP **are set to win around 50 seats in Scotland** (<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/04/10/uk-britain-election-poll-scotland-idUKKBN0N02FI20150410>), according to the latest polls. The right-wing U.K. Independence Party (UKIP), which appeals to the disaffected and predominantly white English working classes with populist anti-immigrant and anti-EU rhetoric, lacks the SNP's concentration of support and is likely to win only a handful of seats. But by polling around 15 percent in England overall, well ahead of the Liberal Democrats, UKIP has forced the Conservatives to also play the Euro-skeptic card. Add to this mix smaller parties like the Greens and the Welsh nationalist Plaid Cymru, and British politics starts to look like a combination of France, where Marine Le Pen's National Front **is gaining ground** (<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/14562/history-s-postscript-the-populist-threat-to-liberal-democracy>) thanks to similar voters as UKIP, and multiparty Belgium, where the New Flemish Alliance **has dominated politics in Flanders** (<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/14241/ruling-coalition-in-belgium-risks-alienating-french-speakers>) on a platform of devolution with the eventual goal of independence.

If the SNP, buoyed by the relatively close September 2014 referendum on Scottish independence,

does well next month, an unofficial alliance with Labour could produce a minority Left government, with more devolved powers to Scotland as a quid pro quo. That would be reminiscent of the hung Parliament of 1910, in which the Irish Party crowned a Liberal government in return for home rule. But in any possible deal with the SNP now, Labour should be careful what it wishes for. Just like Irish home rule eventually led to a divorce, it is not unthinkable that more powers for the Scots will set in motion a similar dynamic.

Also like much of the rest of Europe, economic crisis and battles over central political authority at home have drained British interest in foreign policy over the past five years. Cameron largely stayed out of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, letting Germany take the lead in forging Europe's response. Defense cuts have reduced the size of the U.K.'s armed forces from 175,000 serving personnel in 2010 to 145,000 today. As a bargaining chip to win over the SNP, Labour has suggested reducing the number of Trident submarines from four to three. The U.K. is turning away from the world, including Europe, [as the debate over a potential British exit from the EU](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139641/matthias-matthijs/david-camerons-dangerous-game) (<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139641/matthias-matthijs/david-camerons-dangerous-game>) has laid bare. More inward-looking British politics was evident in the leaders' debate earlier this month, which focused entirely on domestic issues.

But all that actually reveals how the U.K. is drifting more toward Europe, including in its foreign policy. Occupied by efforts to fix the euro's design flaws and an inability to revive growth or lower unemployment, Continental European powers, with the exception of a more assertive [but possibly overstretched France](http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/15433/france-doubles-down-on-battle-hardened-but-overstretched-military) (<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/15433/france-doubles-down-on-battle-hardened-but-overstretched-military>), have largely outsourced foreign policy, especially in the Middle East, to Washington. While British politicians and voters disdain the EU, the U.K. now shares Europe's tendency to let domestic troubles distract national leaders from their obligations on the world stage.

What does all this mean for the future of British parliamentary democracy? In many British eyes, multiparty coalitions lack the democratic legitimacy of single-party governments, given the policy compromises that come with cutting deals that aren't known to voters until after an election. But hung Parliaments will make such compromising and bargaining the new normal in London. That is a serious blow to the doctrine of democracy as a genuine choice, the bedrock of British politics' popular legitimacy. And the irony remains: An increasingly fractious and inward-looking U.K. is becoming much more like its Continental cousins, exactly at a time when the future of the British relationship with the EU is very much in doubt.

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