

HANGING PARLIAMENT

John Keane

Last month's hung election in Britain confirms a basic rule of modern politics: whenever markets fail representative democracy falters. Not just in Britain but throughout the European Union the near-collapse of the credit and banking system is producing deep public disaffection with parties, politicians and parliaments. In Iceland a whole government was sacked by angry voters. Trust in government and business among Irish citizens has dipped to an all-time low. A sharp swing to the right in bankrupt Hungary has fuelled the growth of a sizeable neo-fascist party. Rioting and petrol bombs have meanwhile rocked the streets of Greece. Even heartland member states like France and Germany are feeling the pinch.

The drama at Westminster mirrors the trend. It is the third hung parliament delivered by an election since the advent of the universal franchise in 1928. Each was triggered by market failure. The present political crisis, for that's what it is, is unique, partly because of the discrediting of 'third way' social democracy as a viable political alternative to free market capitalism in strong state form. Riding high on a bubbling economy, three New Labour governments held office for thirteen years. Much of historic importance was achieved during this time, including a parliament for Scotland and mayoral elections in London. Yet aside from showcase support for the national health service these governments generally neglected the social in social democracy. By default and sometimes by design they fed the greed of the rich, presided over a sharp jump in chronic poverty and triggered middle-class anxieties about the future. They helped turn Britain into an hour glass-shaped society.

Public faith in New Labour was sapped by an unelected Prime Minister whose media performances often resembled a cow on ice – and by still-smiling Mr Tony B. Liar, who dragged the country to war under false pretences. New Labour's love of political triangulation, symbolised by the Brown government's reduction of capital gains tax to 10%, won it few friends. Then came the great market failure: the nervous breakdown of the self-regulated financial system in the autumn of 2008 was followed (the timing was not accidental) by a big squeeze on the whole political class. Its reputation was dirtied by a string of very petty, very British parliamentary expenses scandals centred on 'flipping' (bogus invoices for second houses and flats) and MP's claims for such items as fox-proof floating duck islands, cake tins, tree trimming and shopping bags costing 25 pence.

The malarkey ensured that the act of calling a general election in a polity without fixed-term parliaments was risky, not just for the incumbent government of Gordon Brown, but for all parties. Remember the rule: failing markets destabilise democracy. So it happened that on May 6th 2010 the normal pattern - sequenced thumping victories for figures like Harold Wilson and Margaret Thatcher - was decisively rejected by voters. Bridling their enthusiasm they held their noses. In an eerie expression of collective wisdom, pencil in hand, standing alone in classrooms,

churches and community centres, many millions of individual citizens cleverly voted against the whole political establishment.

It was as if they decided to say bugger to Buggins. More than a few deliberately set out to hang parliament and in this short-term aim they succeeded magnificently. Two-thirds of them voted (up marginally from 2005 but way down from the 84 per cent who voted in the 1950 general election). Very few spoiled their ballots, or voted for the Monster Raving Loony Party. Many complained loudly of ‘disenfranchisement’ and some staged sit-ins when dozens of badly run polling stations locked their doors at 10 pm, leaving voters stranded in the streets. In the wee hours of the overnight count Labour’s Ed Miliband complained that ‘the people have spoken and we don’t quite know what they have said’. Next morning the journalist Simon Jenkins pronounced that the ‘British electorate has spoken but has choked on its words’. They were misjudgements, for the clear collective intention was to put all politicians on trial - to Europeanise Britain by forcing political leaders of different persuasions to talk to each other in fresh ways about how to govern the country amidst the worst market failure for nearly a century.

What prompted voters’ quiet rebellion? The prevailing mood of suspicion suffused with sullenness has much to do with the fact that many citizens, faced with a choice between disaster and the unpalatable, wisely refused to vote for any party promising savage cuts in the state budget, even though the amputations now look inevitable, thanks to a record deficit of 12% of GDP, the worst level in the European Union, half of it caused by bailing out failed banks. Yet the roots of their refusal run deeper. Take political party involvement, which has been plummeting for decades. Current Tory Party membership stands at around 300,000, barely an eighth of its peak in Winston Churchill’s day, when over ten per cent of British citizens belonged to a political party. Today the figure is close to one per cent – a key reason why most Britons regard parties and politicians with something that stands between suspicion and contempt.

Their ambivalence is deepened by the entry of big money into the temple of democratic politics. The Tory party has often resembled a business franchise but a century ago the nascent Labour party introduced a different, cleaner funding formula: tiny donations, but many, through the trades unions, whose political wing was the party. The formula is now virtually dead; resembling a passage from *The Pickwick Papers*, Labour and Tory party funding has become ingloriously venal. The slow-burn election scandal featuring Lord Michael Ashcroft, the non-domiciled Tory peer who gave a million dollars to secure the re-election of the Howard government in 2004, reminded every British voter that politics is now the chum of big money.

This time round Ashcroft poured unspecified sums into marginal seats that the Tories needed to win. In electoral terms the tactic failed; and he ended up tagged as Lord Cashcroft. Big money meanwhile was pumped like petrol into the commercial media engines. Led by Rupert Murdoch’s *Times* and the *Sun*, every national daily newspaper except the *Guardian* and *The Independent* and the *Daily Mirror* championed a Tory government. Given the deep public unease about politicians and journalists that tactic also failed. It is true that at certain moments in the campaign public enthusiasm for normal pendulum-swing politics seemed to revive, as during the American-style leadership debates, the first ever to be held in Britain. The magnetic effect was short-

lived, even for the charismatic Nick Clegg, leader of the Liberal Democrats, now Deputy Prime Minister. Many voters saw right through the ‘television celebrity talent contest’ (the frank words of a senior Tory minister) while others had already moved on to blogs and tweets, which for the first time played a serious role in a British general election, especially among young, first-time voters. Unsurprisingly, they voted disproportionately for the Liberal Democrats, driven by the feeling that many institutions of the Westminster system are antiquated, unrepresentative and undemocratic.

They had a point. For if teams of independent election monitors had visited the British isles during this campaign they surely would have judged the contest to be free but unfair. They might have asked: what kind of democracy is this whose first-past-the-post electoral system handed the Tories 305 seats in the House of Commons (47% of the total) based on the support of just 23% of eligible voters? Why are there still so few women MPs (22%) compared with countries such as India, Sweden and Rwanda? Isn’t an unelected House of Lords stacked with party appointees bad for democracy? And what about the under-funded Election Commission whose Chair, Jenny Watson, had to come on television during the middle of the night to apologise for its outdated ‘Victorian’ procedures that belonged, she confessed, to an age ‘when only a few people had the vote’.

With a budget-slashing coalition Tory-Liberal government now a reality, tougher times are coming to Britain. A moment of sympathy should be spared for its good citizens – all those people who won the election but lost the result. More than a few of them sense that material living standards and the quality of public institutions are set sharply to decline. They know that as the hour-glass contours of inequality harden daily life for several millions will grow shabbier, nastier. Razor-sharp media scrutiny is bound to fuel their disaffection with government and party politics. How many of these good citizens will want to emigrate, or choose to drown their coming sorrows in Olympic spirit, or whether they will acquiesce in unpopular government decisions, or instead resist, as has happened in Iceland and Greece, is unclear. The leaders of the unexpected Con-Dem coalition of opposites are upbeat, of course. They promise a ‘new politics’, a ‘stable and durable’ government that will stand for ‘the national interest’ and take the country in an ‘historic new direction’. The real-world odds are strongly against such chalk talk. In the age of market failure the only political certainty in Britain is the coming uncertainty triggered by strange bedfellows and disputed outcomes.

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