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# UK ELECTIONS 2015: WHEN BRAVEHEART CONQUERS WESTMINSTER

Elaborado por Sandrina Antunes, Universidade do Minho (Portugal)

- a) **Introduction**
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## ***a) Introduction***

The pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP) spent Britain's general election campaign pledging to shake up Westminster. Throughout the campaign, Nicola Sturgeon stood for a self-confident, well prepared and a very popular political party in Scotland. Moreover, political expectations have run high as opinion polls started to forecast a position in government at Westminster. Even if opinion polls proved to be inaccurate, the SNP's breakthrough has been defined as an "electoral tsunami" that has obliterated Scottish Labour by winning 56 of Scotland's 59 seats. For Alex Salmond - the party formers' leader -, it is time to cel-

brate, as this electoral success will allow Scotland to have a "resounding" and "united" voice at the House of Commons. Although the SNP will not be part of a coalition government, it is certainly prepared to conquer Westminster in order to push for further constitutional changes, using their reinforced presence to go beyond the Smith Commission's proposals. In this working paper, we will summarize the key arguments put forward by major political parties during the campaign; we will discuss the final results and we will try to anticipate the SNP's political strategy for the near future.

## ***b) The UK election's campaign in a few words***

The party manifestos of these elections have concentrated their attention on 6 major issues: economy, fiscality, welfare, immigration, Europe and defence. The highest political competition stood between the Conservative Party and the Labour Party with David Cameron and Ed Miliband standing out as the most predominant political figures of these parties, respectively. Very distinctively, the Liberal Democrat Party was the absent figure of these elections with Nick Clegg holding a relative low prediction of 10 seats.

As opinion polls and commentators predicted that the outcome would be close to call – with 285 seats predicted for the Conservatives and 262 seats for Labour with the Conservatives falling short of a majority by 38 seats -, the SNP emerged as a "possible" solution to avoid a "hung parliament" <sup>1</sup>situation with a prediction of 58 seats. On the regional side, these elections have also been marked by the growing support for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which gained much popularity in England for its anti-European stance.

As for the contents of party manifestos, the Conservative Party has tried to forge the image of the party of the working class, making welfare and economy their main priority. In that respect, they have pledged to find an extra 8 billion pounds per year for the NHS and promised to provide more childcare protection. In this same line of thought, they have proposed to link the National Minimum Wage to Personal Income Tax

Allowance, meaning that no one under the minimum wage would pay income tax. The Conservatives have also set up an ambitious program for Europe, including Treaty changes and asking for British courts to regain powers. As for immigration, they have suggested a curb on migrant access to welfare and pledged for an in-out referendum on the UK's membership in the European Union to be held by the end of 2017.

Very seemingly, the Labour Party has also put economy at the heart of their party manifesto. Their main purpose was to tackle the UK deficit without hurting sensitive areas such as education and welfare (NHS). In order to do so, they have promised to higher the Minimum Wage to 8 pounds an hour by 2020; they have promised to improve fiscal benefits and to provide further social protection (extra 2.5billion funding raise for the NHS; 20.000 more nurses and 3000 midwives). Immigration policy has also been considered, pledging for two-year wait before EU migrants could claim out-of-work benefits.

As for UKIP, the party manifesto has attempted to remove the image of the single-issue party manifesto to broaden electoral support. Although the party of Nigel Farage has engaged into new policy areas such as economy, fiscality, defence and immigration, UKIP's commitment to leave the European Union - saving up to 10 billion pounds a year - lied at the heart of their manifesto.

In a distinctive manner, the SNP party manifesto has been presented as the alternative to austerity. Nicola Sturgeon's party pledged to fight austerity cuts and proposed instead return spending increases. For the SNP, this would free up money for jobs, economic growth and public services. On defence, the SNP has proposed to cancel the renewal of Trident Nuclear weapons system in order to save more than 3 billion pounds, which could be invested in education, healthcare and child-

care. Finally, Europe has also reemerged as a key argument to oppose David Cameron's intention to hold a referendum on the exit of the United Kingdom (commonly referred to as *Brixit*).

As we can tell from this short description, policy propositions varied "in degrees" from party to party but electoral issues were consensual across parties. Economy, welfare and Europe were the most relevant and contentious issues of these elections.

### c) *The final results*

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of May, final results were surprisingly impressive as opinion polls proved to be totally inaccurate. David Cameron's party has managed to secure a majority of 331 seats (against 316 seats initially predicted); Labour 232 (against 239 predicted); Liberal Democrats 8 (against 10 predicted); UKIP 1 (against 2 seats predicted) and the SNP 56 (against 58 predicted). As a consequence of these unexpected results, Ed Miliband, Nick Clegg and Nigel Farage stood down as leaders of their parties whereas the SNP started to celebrate this historical achievement even if this electoral breakthrough did not come as a surprise.

Indeed, since Christmas of last year, opinion polls were unanimously pointing to the SNP's electoral success in these elections. Moreover, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April (What Scotland Thinks<sup>2</sup>), opinion polls were putting the SNP on 45% of the voting intentions - some 25 percentage points above its 2010 result and 56 projected seats whereas Labour was falling down in Scotland with 28% of the voting intentions with a projected seat shares of just 10 seats, compared to the 41 seats won in 2010. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of May, on the lasted and final poll of polls numbers slightly changed with 49% of the intention votes for the SNP and 26% for Labour.

Two reasons could be pointed out in order to make sense of the SNP's electoral breakthrough as well as Labour's electoral downfall. The first reason has to do with internal changes occurred within the Labour Party with predominant political figures such as Gordon Brown with a strong connection with Scotland leaving the party and new political figures emerging, such as Ed Miliband, struggling to have resonance among Scottish voters. The second reason has to do with last

year's independence referendum, where Labour plead for the "No" vote, leaving Scottish people much unsatisfied - 30%<sup>3</sup> - with the political outcomes of the Smith Process (What Scotland Thinks).

In other words, the SNP has captured the support of many of the 45% who voted *Yes* last September – according to a recent Panelbase survey for the Sunday Times, 80% of yes voters now back the SNP. In spite of its eight years in office, the SNP seems refreshed, aided by the popularity of its new leader, Nicola Sturgeon<sup>4</sup>. Already by some margin the largest party in Scotland before the referendum with just over 25,000 members, the SNP has seen its membership surge, reaching over 100,000 members by the end of March 2015 (What Scotland Thinks).

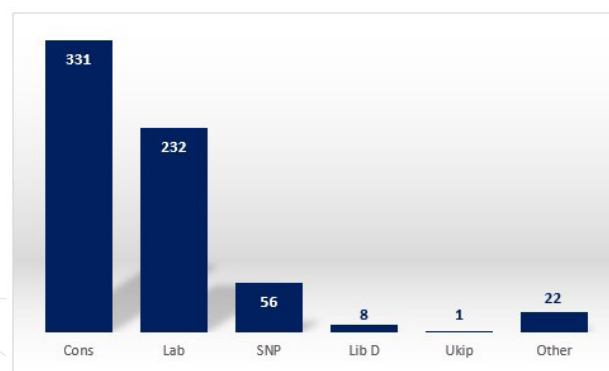
Added to that, for Nicola McEwen (2015), while there is a strong correlation between the SNP between the SNP support and support for independence, the SNP appears to have made inroads into Labour's traditional ideological ground. Indeed, the same Panelbase poll found that 55% of respondents felt that the SNP were "strongly in favour" of a more equal society, compared to just 14% who felt the same about Labour. The latter includes just over a third who intended to vote Labour in May. In that sense, it would be appropriate to argue that the strategic move towards a "genuine" progressive social democratic party – as claimed by the SNP - has paid off.

Although the SNP did not manage to secure a position in government as the Conservatives unexpectedly reached a majority government with 331 seats (+ 24 seats compared to 2010 and a 12 seat majority in parliament) and 36, 9% of the votes; Labour has been wiped

out by the SNP in Scotland losing 26 seats compared to 2010 and holding 30,4% of the votes. By the end of the day, we could posit that the SNP has not “won it all” but it has gained 50 additional seats compared to 2010 general elections (see chart nº 1).

**Chart nº1: 2015 UK Election Results**

(Number of seats)



Source: BBC news<sup>5</sup>

#### ***d) Conclusion: what's next for the SNP?***

Now that Nicola Sturgeon comfortably sits in power, she is using her party's new strength in Westminster to push for control of corporation tax and national insurance (paid by employees and employers), with which it could be possible to boost Scotland's finances. Her party claims this could even pave the way for full fiscal autonomy—though it concedes, vaguely, that this could take “a number of years” to implement. Throughout the party it is assumed that Scotland will eventually break from the United Kingdom but two camps are emerging: one that wants another referendum at once, and another that thinks that the party should spend the next years consolidating its position before asking for a mandate for a new referendum at elections to the Scottish Parliament in 2020.

For the time being, the SNP is fully aware that the political strategy will have to be defined in accordance to a (minority) political party in opposition. To put it simply, if during the campaign, the arguments put forward were presented hoping for a position in government, a consolidated majority conservative government in Westminster will certainly ask for a more subtle and constructive approach. However, whilst the Conserv-

ative will be likely to comply with the terms of agreement reached under the Smith Commission (2014); the SNP will not hesitate to use the flag of “legitimacy” on a strategic attempt to mitigate what the Conservatives will put on the table of negotiation.

According to Paul Cairney (interview May 2015), the SNP will probably rely on three major tactics: first, they will react on what it will be put on the table by the Conservative party, opposing namely the forecast of 20 billion cuts in Welfare; second, they will use the European Union referendum to make it clear that Scotland will not follow the UK's decision in case of a *Brixit*, which, in other words, could be used as a pretext to launch a second independence referendum in Scotland; third, the SNP will try to maximize policy and political conflict in Westminster in order to make their claim of political independence look more legitimate. To conclude, we could argue that the consolidation of a majority conservative party has tempered the SNP's political ambition but David Cameron will (still) have a hard time finding a balanced solution for both national (Cairney 2015) and European dimension (Keating 2015) of Scottish constitutional challenge.

***Sandrina Ferreira Antunes***

Universidade do Minho, Portugal

## References

### 1. Articles

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### 2. Party Manifestos

Conservative Party. 2015. “*Strong Leadership. A clear economic plan. A brighter, more secure future.*”

Labour Party. 2015. “*Britain can be better.*”

Liberal Democrat Party. 2015. “*Stronger Economy. Fairer Society. Opportunity for Everyone.*”

Scottish National Party. 2015. “*Stronger for Scotland.*”

UKIP Party. 2015. “*Believe in Britain.*”

### 3. Newspapers

“Scotland election results: SNP celebrates ‘electoral tsunami’ as Labour obliterated”, in *The Independent*, 7th of May 2015.

“SNP tsunami swamps Scotland and destroys Labour”, in *The Telegraph*, 8th of May 2015.

### 4. Official documents

SMITH COMMISSION. 2014. “*The Smith Commission: report of the Smith Commission for further devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament.*”

### 5. Interview

Interview to Paul Cairney (Center on Constitutional Change, Edinburgh, Scotland), “*The SNP and Westminster*”, 14<sup>th</sup> of May 2015.

## Endnotes

1 In a parliamentary system of government, a **hung parliament** is a colloquial expression to describe a state of a parliament when no single political party has an absolute majority of seats in parliament.

2 <http://whatscotlandthinks.org/> .

3 <http://whatscotlandthinks.org/questions/do-the-smith-commission-proposals-go-too-far-are-about-right-or-dont-go-far-eno> .

4 In May 2015, 70% of Scottish people were satisfied with Nicola Sturgeon as First Minister. See “What Scotland Thinks” in <http://whatscotlandthinks.org/questions/are-you-satisfied-or-dissatisfied-with-nicola-sturgeon-as-deputy-first-minister#line> .

5 In <http://www.bbc.com/news/election/2015/results> .