

United Kingdom General Election on 7 May

Keith Rankin, 23 April 2015

I enjoy listening to Dame Anne Leslie, long-time *Daily Mail* journalist, who pops up regularly on the UK Correspondent section of *Radio New Zealand's* Nine-to-Noon. She has an amazing gift for the consummate turn of phrase.

On [16 April](#) she was talking about the coming UK election in general, when commenting on the sole Green MP's desire to discontinue the Grand National horse steeplechase, she said: "Getting rid of it would be marginally less popular than defenestrating the Queen". Today, images of broken glass outside Buckingham Palace give way to visions of enforced exits from the upper levels of the Beehive, as our leader rapidly descends from the political heights.

The political leaders of the major parties in the United Kingdom also appear to have feet of clay at the moment – possibly a good protection against defenestration – but otherwise not great for their parties.

In the end I think the perverse 'winner' of this British election will be the FPP voting system that we in New Zealand abandoned for general elections 20 years ago. I also think that being at the present peak (albeit a weak peak) of the economic cycle will save David Cameron's Prime Ministership. Indeed I think there's a good chance that the Conservatives will win outright, though with less than 40% of the total vote, and probably with about 25% support of all those entitled to vote.

The UK general election will be like 650 simultaneous Northlands, with all of the opportunities for voters and parties to assess, in each of these 650 constituencies, who are the real contestants and how best to vote against the party or candidate that they dislike the most. My guess though is that British voters for the most part will vote tribally for their preferred party's candidate, even where s/he has no chance of being elected.

In the bad old FPP days in New Zealand, if the popular vote was 50:50 National would always win more seats. This was mainly because Labour voters were more ghettoised, meaning Labour would win fewer electorates but Labour MPs would have a significantly higher average winning margin than the average National winning margin. In addition, we sometimes had electoral boundaries that could only be called a 'gerrymander', and the Maori electorates took votes away from Labour in North Island provincial centres.

(On the 'gerrymander' matter, look at Wellington and Gisborne in the 1978 election which was won comfortably by National while Labour won more votes. In Wellington, inner city Labour suburbs were herded into 'Island Bay', allowing thin National majorities in the other three city electorates. Island Bay included the Te Aro part of central Wellington, while Wellington Central included much of the affluent western suburbs. The effective gerrymander nearly came unstuck for National in 1981, when those marginal Wellington seats swung to Labour, despite a tiny overall swing to National in the popular vote. On the matter of electorate boundaries it should be noted that National Party activists are consistently more numerate than Labour Party activists. Left activists see politics as a moral quest; right activists understand that it is a numbers game. Under MMP, fortunately, electorate boundaries play almost no role in determining the party composition of government.)

In the United Kingdom, at least in the 1990s and 2000s, it was Labour who would win a 50-50 election. The Tories would gain huge majorities in rural and southern England. In the cities Labour often won with smaller margins. So the average Labour winning margin tended to be lower than the average Tory winning margin.

This time there may be changes. Firstly neither Labour nor Conservative will win much in Scotland; losses there will cost Labour dearly. Then it seems likely that many Lib-Dem voters in 2010 will vote

Labour this time. But, in most of the seats currently held by the Liberal Democrats, Labour came third last time, and the drift of Lib-Dem voters to Labour will actually benefit the Tories (Conservatives). (If past Lib-Dem voters wise up, like New Zealand Labour voters have in Northland and national voters in Epsom, Labour supporters will vote for sitting Lib-Dem MPs, and past Lib-Dem voters will stay loyal in order to defeat the local Tory. My guess is that English voters will not wise up, and that this will help these Tories to win, exploiting split votes among their opponents.)

The next question is how many wasted votes will go to UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) candidates, and whether Labour or Tory will bleed more to UKIP. My feeling is that UKIP will gain more in those industrial cities which represent Labour's heartland, and that most past Tory voters contemplating UKIP will prefer a Conservative to a Labour government, and will vote accordingly for their local Tory. Further, Labour will probably suffer again from a low voter turnout.

The other reason that I think the Conservatives will prevail is that the basic economic statistics in the UK are significantly better than they were from 2010 to 2013. Economic improvement normally spells 'no change'. To many in the United Kingdom, their situation looks rather good compared to any country in the Eurozone. Just looking at France and Belgium, for example, the United Kingdom almost rocks by comparison.

My best guess is that the Conservatives will win this election outright, albeit with little more than a third of the total vote. By time the next United Kingdom election is due, in 2020, the 2015 winners might be wishing they had not won. The economic cycle will turn again, as it did from 2007 to 2010. Mr Cameron, has wisely indicated he will stand down as Tory leader before 2020. The discontented in 2020 will have to throw someone else out of 10 Downing Street.
