

Blog: Forget Rose Gardens. Think proportional representation and another election

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Forget Rose Gardens. The aftermath of this Election is going to be very messy indeed. We'll have another Election before the year is out. And the winner might be a new voting system a lot sooner than any of us might have expected.

Consider this. The Conservatives have more MPs than Labour after the election, but can't command a majority. They won't have enough seats to pass the Queen's Speech, even with the Lib Dems and the Democratic Unionists. Some current projections put them at around 280 seats, with Labour at 273. With 26 Lib Dems and eight Unionists, the Tories would be short of a majority by 9 seats. Meanwhile, Labour with as many as 273 seats could cobble together a majority – by a whisker – with the SNP, which could win 50 seats north of the border.

All of this could spin on a sixpence if just a couple of seats move in any direction. But Labour's routes to power are clearer.

However, the incumbent Prime Minister is always given the first attempt at forming a government. My guess is that, if the Conservatives have more seats than Labour, whether or not he has enough seats to govern Cameron will seek to "own the moment". He will use a word that we will be hearing a lot more of in the weeks to come; legitimacy. The Tory-supporting press and the establishment will seek to undermine the possibility of a Labour government by shouting that it would have no legitimacy. So, Cameron will make a huge gamble.

The price he will pay is to pave the way for legislation in the first days of an admittedly very wobbly Conservative-led government for a reform to the voting system that ushers in proportional representation (PR). Cameron's will be a call to the nation, to defend the Union from those who seek to break it up. The prospect of PR will delight the Lib Dems, and the smaller parties, and enough on the Labour benches could support this. Under those circumstances, this statesmanlike "non partisan" approach might just do the trick. A General Election in late summer could put five or more points on the Tories' lead and, with PR, give them a little more than they had at May 7th. It would wipe away Labour's constituency boundary advantage at a stroke. It won't stop the need for deals to be done, but casts Cameron as Britain's saviour, gives him enough seats to form a coalition – or a better working majority – and he's in for five years.

The alternative, with Miliband in the box seat, might logically go the same way. Whilst he could command a majority with SNP and other minority parties, it is quite likely that the Lib Dems will be his best allies

after May 7th. Clear that he doesn't want to be held to ransom by the SNP for every decision he makes, Miliband also makes a calculation. With the Lib Dems, Plaid Cymru, the SDLP in Northern Ireland and the Greens, Miliband reckons he could get the votes for a Queen's Speech that has electoral reform as its centrepiece. The SNP won't vote with the Tories – ever – and will therefore support his PR-led legislative programme, safe in the knowledge that their position in Scotland is secure.

For Labour, despite their projected massive losses in Scotland this time round, they actually have 22% support. Under first past the post, this gives them one seat – or possibly three. Under PR, it could give them 10 to 15 seats and secure Miliband in Number 10 after a second Election.

So, either way, Tory or Labour, voting reform could be the game changer for them. For an exasperated public, and one which has an inherent dislike of uncertainty, PR would be – for once – the least worst option. It wouldn't bring back one party government as deals will become the order of the day, but it would have a sense of fairness and provide legitimacy not just to whoever wins the largest share of vote. But more than that, it might make voting worthwhile everywhere.

What happens after that, with an even more kaleidoscopic politics than we currently have, is part of the next chapter. A Rose Garden it won't be, but it won't half bring the interest back into politics.

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