

winning back the 5 million – understanding the fragmentation of Labour's vote

By Paul Hunter



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Published by the Smith Institute

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Foreword

Paul Hackett, Director of the Smith Institute

The Smith Institute is actively engaged in the debate about where next for the centre-left in British politics. Our particular focus has been on understanding political change and shaping the policy response to the Government's cuts and reform agenda. We are hosting a series of 'policies for change' events with leading Labour MPs and progressive thinkers and have begun a programme of major research projects on key issues such as eradicating poverty, re-balancing the economy, welfare reform, and new ideas on the relationship between the state and markets.

This report by the Institute's head of research, Paul Hunter, forms part of our thought leadership work. It follows on from previous Smith Institute studies on the 2010 election, such as *The Politics of Tidy Britain* (by Chris Bryant MP), and *Who Governs Britain* (an in-house analysis on the background and policy interests of MPs). Now the post-election political dust has settled, we wanted to understand why Labour lost nearly 5 million votes since 1997 and to stimulate discussion on what its electoral strategy should be for the future.

Working from the latest electoral data and polling results, Paul has sought to contextualise Labour's performance at the last election(s), and assess how and why its vote fragmented. More importantly, Paul is seeking to provoke an intelligent conversation about what Labour and centre-left progressives can learn from voting behaviour in recent elections.

The report addresses the complexity of the 2010 election and challenges some of the emerging orthodoxies, not least the so-called 'Southern Discomfort' thesis that Labour lost key seats in the South; that the fragmentation of the Labour vote implies more hung parliaments; and that Labour must ruthlessly target its core vote. It also puts the spotlight on Labour's 'suburban discomfort', which partly explains its downfall.

I would like to thank Paul, and all those who have offered their advice on the report. Our aim is to stimulate debate and therefore we welcome any comments.

Executive summary

Executive summary

This report shows that Labour lost nearly five million votes since 1997. It seeks to identify where these votes were lost and Labour can win most, if not all, of them back. The main conclusions are that:

- Whilst Labour's vote has fallen and fragmented, all is far from lost. Regardless of AV, Labour can win an overall majority at the next election providing it learns from the past.
- The next election is likely to be a two horse race. Talk of another hung parliament may prove premature. It is the way seats divide up between the main parties that decides elections. Whilst votes for Labour and the Tories have fallen overall by a third, the two main parties share 87% of all the seats – only slightly down on the 1970s.
- If the Lib Dem vote collapses by half and Labour gain more than the Tories, a straight swing of 4-5% in contestable seats would give the Party a working majority.
- Labour should ignore calls for a 'southern centric' election strategy. There is little evidence to support the so-called 'southern discomfort' thesis that Labour lost key seats in the South. When seats are weighted for historical performance and size of the region, Labour lost worse in Eastern Region, West Midlands, East Midlands, London, and Yorkshire & Humber.
- Labour haemorrhaged support from C2 and DE voters but cannot win on the basis of its core 'working class' vote alone. In the 2010 election Labour gained more votes from ABC1s than C2DEs. The Party needs to win back more DE voters, but not at the cost of its AB vote.
- Labour's fall in support from 22-55 year olds (half of all those who vote) was twice what it was for all other age groups. Winning back people of working age is key to Labour's success.
- Closer analysis of the electoral map shows Labour failed to speak to voters in suburbia and suburban towns, many of which are swing seats. Labour should learn from Boris Johnson's success in attracting voters from suburbia.

Introduction

Introduction

The strategy that says wait for them to screw it up, simply be a strong opposition, is not a strategy that is going to work for us. We need to do hard thinking of our own.

Ed Miliband to the Labour National Policy Forum (2010)

Labour is at last beginning to come to terms with its worst election result since 1983 and has started to review its policy commitments and reinvent its political narrative. Although the inquest is over and the Party has a new leader and a new shadow cabinet, there are still important lessons to be learnt (and taken forward) from the loss of Labour's vote at the last three general elections. There are also certain myths around the southern vote, hung parliaments and a core vote strategy that need to be debunked.

Understanding why and where Labour lost is critical to how the Party wins again. The policy review process, for instance, cannot be conducted in isolation. It must be linked to a robust and intelligent electoral strategy, which in turn should be configured around what Labour has understood about its vote since 1997.

Labour may currently be ahead of the Conservatives in the polls, but this means little at this stage in the electoral cycle (shortly after the 1979 election Labour had a 24 point lead over the Tories). The Party will need to create a distinct long-term electoral strategy based on understanding where and why it lost. Relying on Tory or Lib Dem unpopularity to win again will not be enough.

Labour's policy reviews must recognise and in part reflect the electoral map of Britain. Although Labour must seek to lead the policy debate it cannot ignore public opinion. Success at the next election will depend on the extent to which the Labour team are able to join up an electoral strategy with policies that are attractive to voters in places where its support has declined most.

This paper seeks to offer an insight into why Labour lost 4.9m votes since 1997, and by so doing help inform the debate about what policies and election strategy are needed in the future. It is intended as a discussion paper, which places the spotlight on voting patterns and the distribution of marginal seats.

Chapter 1

Where did all Labour's vote go?

Where did all Labour's vote go?

On the 11th May 2010 David Cameron entered 10 Downing Street. Labour had sunk to its worst election result since the 'longest suicide note in history' in 1983, and barring that since the advent of universal suffrage. New Labour had been ousted after three successive election victories.

After 13 years New Labour looked decidedly tired. The electoral coalition it had built in the run up to the 1997 election disappeared with just 29% voting Labour, and a mere 19% of the total electorate turning out to put a cross next their local Labour candidate.

This is a stark picture, but Labour's vote in 1997 didn't disappear overnight instead it was eroded over time. And rather than being a straight swing to the Tories a far more complicated picture of fragmentation occurred. The death of New Labour was not strange, and where its vote went must be understood for future success.

The Labour vote since 1997

In 1997 Labour swept to an unprecedented victory, gaining a record 419 seats. However a steady slide occurred from then on. Whilst the 2001 election resulted in only six seats lost its percentage of the vote had dropped by two percentage points.

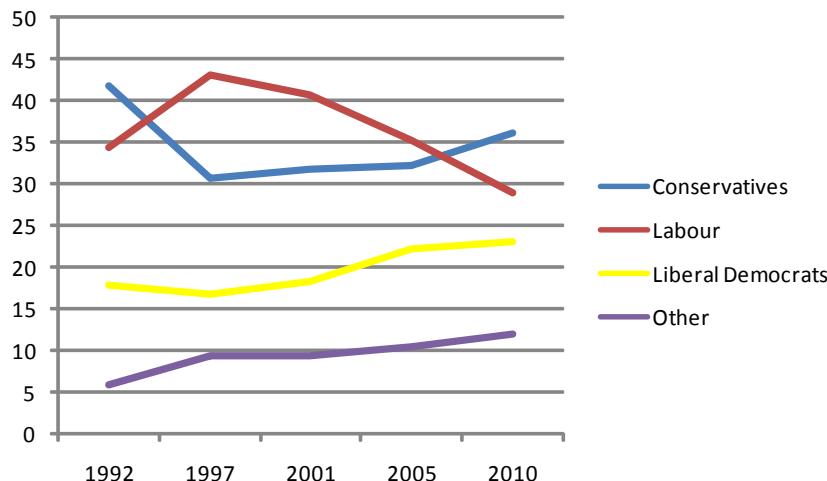
A more rapid slide occurred after, with results starting to hit Labour seats. In 2005 Labour's percentage of the vote dropped by a further 6 percentage points. This resulted in the loss of 57 seats; however Labour still had a healthy majority of 66.

In 2010 Labour suffered a further 6 percentage point drop. This further drop culminated in 93 seats lost, and with it the loss of government. But the loss of votes was not a uniform swing. It was due to a lower turnout and the fragmentation of its vote to the Tory, Lib Dem and other parties.

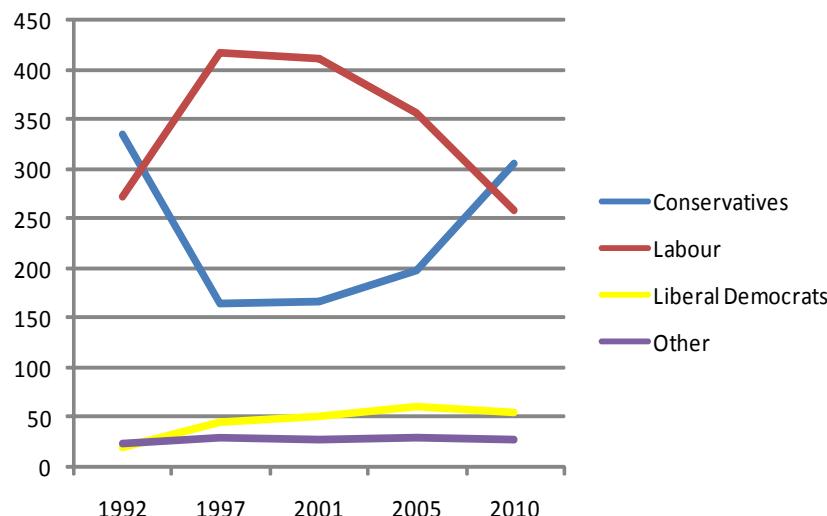
Who gained?

Between 1997 and 2010 Labour lost a staggering 4.9 million votes. Some of this loss can be explained by a drop in turnout (some 1.6 million fewer voted in 2010 than 1997). Traditionally the Conservatives would have gained where Labour lost but the biggest winners were the Lib Dems in absolute terms, and some of the fringe parties in the percentage rise of their vote.

The Lib Dems rise since 1997 has been dramatic, with over a six percentage point increase of the vote share and a 30% increase in their vote. More dramatic in percentage terms of

Figure 1: Percentage of the vote by party 1992-2010

Source: BBC

Figure 2: Seats by party 1992-2010

Source: BBC

their vote has been the rise of the 'fringe' parties, such as the Greens, the BNP and UKIP. Together they took over 1.5 million more votes in 2010 than 1997 (representing respectively a 4.5, 9 and 16 fold increase in their vote). They may still remain minor parties but their vote share has moved from a paltry 0.65% to a significant 6%.

Given the rise of smaller parties it is perhaps surprising that the support for nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales has remained relatively static. The SNP actually received substantially fewer votes in 2010 than 1997, but this could be explained by their tenure in Holyrood and lower turnout. Of course the difference between the SNP and Plaid Cymru and other smaller parties is the concentration of their vote. The nationalists have 2.2% of the UK vote combined and 9 seats, whilst the BNP and UKIP have 5% of the vote and no seats.

Labour lost 1.1 million votes to the Conservatives representing just over a 5 percentage point increase – hardly an astonishing accomplishment for the Conservatives over three elections and given Labour's growing unpopularity. Indeed if you view the Conservatives result from their starting base they increased their vote by just 11%. The election result was a rejection of Labour but hardly an endorsement of the Conservatives.

However, the Conservative vote has been deflated by the Lib Dems, UKIP and the BNP. Whilst some Lib Dem voters would never vote Tory that in years past a fair number of those leaving Labour would have turned to the Conservative Party rather than the Lib Dems. The same is probably true for the BNP. Perhaps more interesting still is the rise of UKIP and its impact on the Tories. The Tories almost certainly gained more from Labour than the figures suggest as they must have lost some of their core vote to UKIP.

Whilst the political map since 1997 demonstrates the collapse in Labour's vote it does so from a high-water mark. A better guide for Labour is arguably the 2005 election result, in regards to seats. That election may have seen Labour's majority reduced substantially, but it still commanded more seats than any other party. However, in terms of legitimacy it needs as high a percentage of the vote as possible.

If using a 2005 marker a quite different picture emerges when observing the shift between results in the 2005 and 2010 (see table 2). Whilst it could have been said that the fall between 1997 and 2010 was in part due to falling turnout, the 2010 election saw 2.5 million more people vote than 2005. The vote for minor parties whilst increasing did not do so to the extent it had from 1997 to 2005. Just as we saw by looking at the 1997-2010 results the impact of the nationalists in Wales and Scotland did not play an important role in Labour's demise. The Nats share of the vote fell slightly between 1997 and 2010 and

stagnated between 2005 and 2010. Indeed, they gained one more seat in 1997 than they did in 2010. For the minor parties, the Greens lost votes but gained a seat and played a very marginal role. The only real exceptions are the BNP and UKIP, with the latter undoubtedly hurting the Tories.

Table 1: United Kingdom voting patterns 1997–2010

	Number of Votes (1997)	Number of Votes (2010)	Number of votes lost/gained (1997–2010)	Percentage of vote (1997)	Percent-age of vote (2010)	Percent-point change (1997–2010)	Percent-age change (1997–2010)
Labour	13,518,167	8,606,517	-4,911,650	43.21%	28.99%	-14.22%	63.67%
Conservative Party	9,600,943	10,703,654	1,102,711	30.69%	36.05%	5.37%	111.49%
Liberal Democrats	5,242,947	6,836,248	1,593,301	16.76%	23.03%	6.27%	130.39%
Scottish National Party	621,550	491,386	-130,164	1.99%	1.66%	-0.33%	79.06%
Plaid Cymru	161,030	165,394	4,364	0.51%	0.56%	0.04%	102.71%
UKIP	105,722	919,471	813,749	0.34%	3.10%	2.76%	869.71%
Green Party	63,991	285,612	221,621	0.20%	0.96%	0.76%	446.33%
BNP	35,832	564,321	528,489	0.11%	1.90%	1.79%	1574.91%
Other	1,936,102	1,115,001	-821,101	6.19%	3.76%	-2.43%	57.59%
Turnout	31,286,284	29,687,604	-1,598,680				

Source: Calculated from House of Commons and Electoral Commission data

Instead, Labour's lost support went largely to the Conservatives and to a lesser extent the Lib Dems. The Conservatives saw their vote increase by almost 2 million and the Liberal Democrats gained 850,000 votes. Whilst these figures may be slightly inflated because of the higher turnout (the Lib Dems percentage of the vote only increased by 1%) they show where Labour lost ground from 2005 to 2010. Perhaps more importantly than where the votes went is the seats where Labour needs to win, which is examined later.

Conclusion

Between 1997 and 2010 Labour lost a third of its vote. In days gone past this would have resulted in huge gains for the Conservative. However, this vote has been fractured. If Labour wants to return to power it will need to beat the Conservatives but to do so almost certainly doesn't mean just gaining votes from the Tories but repairing its fractured electoral

coalition. As outlined later, talk of eternal hung parliaments because of this fracturing may be premature given the current and perhaps lasting unpopularity of the Lib Dems.

Any simple shift to the left to gain votes from the Lib Dems and win back Labour's core vote does not add up. Whilst the Lib Dems gained most in votes from 1997 to 2010 (1.6 million votes) in the same period some 2.5 million votes went firmly rightwards (to the Tories, UKIP and BNP). Labour must both repair the fracture of the 1997 vote but learn from where it lost seats in 2010.

The voting picture shows where votes went and any electoral strategy must take this into account. However, this perspective does not tell us who deserted Labour only where they went. The following two chapters will look at which groups left Labour, starting with the argument that Labour lost because it lost the 'southern vote'.

Table 2: United Kingdom voting patterns 2005–2010

	Number of Votes (2005)	Number of Votes (2010)	Number of votes lost/gained (2005–2010)	Percentage of vote (2005)	Percentage of vote (2010)	Percentage point change (2005–2010)	Percentage change (2005–2010)
Labour	9,552,436	8,606,517	-945919	35.19%	28.99%	-6.20%	90.10%
Conservative Party	8,784,915	10,703,654	1918739	32.36%	36.05%	3.70%	121.84%
Liberal Democrats	5,985,454	6,836,248	850794	22.05%	23.03%	0.98%	114.21%
Scottish National Party	412,267	491,386	79119	1.52%	1.66%	0.14%	119.19%
Plaid Cymru	174,838	165,394	-9444	0.64%	0.56%	-0.09%	94.60%
UKIP	605,973	919,471	313498	2.23%	3.10%	0.87%	151.73%
Green Party	283,414	285,612	2198	1.04%	0.96%	-0.08%	100.78%
BNP	192,745	564,321	371576	0.71%	1.90%	1.19%	292.78%
Other	1156468	1,115,001	-41467	4.26%	3.76%	-0.50%	96.41%
Turnout	27,148,510	29,687,604	2,539,094				

Source: Calculated from House of Commons and Electoral Commission data

Chapter 2

What 'Southern discomfort'?

What 'Southern discomfort'?

Labour's loss of support since 1997 has been attributed to an array of factors: a tired government, etatisme, and being out of touch. In a powerful reprise of an argument from 1992, Labour's defeat has also been put down to the loss of the southern vote. In Policy Network's paper *Southern Discomfort Again*¹ Patrick Diamond and Giles Radice run through seats where Labour lost in the South. They use this as a starting point to argue how Labour must renew itself in opposition to win in the future. Their argument in short is that Labour is unpopular in the South because these regions reflect a different social mix from other areas. In order to win again Labour must reshape its policies with an explicit appeal to these groups in the South.

The premise of the *Southern Discomfort Again* argument is that Labour won just 8 seats of 139 seats in the South West and South East. On first appearances this would suggest there is a strong case for winning back the South to gain victory in 2015.

However, the data suggests that Labour's losses were not worst in the South East or the South West (see table 3). The table may at first show the apparent weakness in the South East with Labour only losing the same number of seats in the West Midlands than the South East between 2005 and 2010. However, looking from 1997 to 2010 an even less clear picture emerges with Labour losing more seats in London, the Eastern Region, and the West Midlands.

Regardless of these facts, the main problem with this approach to analysing voting trends is that it is not weighted for the size of the region (the South East has more seats than any other region) or Labour's historical performance in these regions. It is also worth noting that at the height of Tony Blair's powers in 1997 Labour only secured 28% of the seats in the South.

Analysing the percentage point change (looking at Labour's percentage of the seats in 1997 or 2005 and comparing it with 2010) gives a far more accurate picture. By using this approach we see that between 1997 and 2010 Labour lost worse in the Eastern Region, West Midlands, East Midlands, London, and Yorkshire and the Humber.

1997 maybe a slightly arbitrary starting point as 2005 saw Labour gain enough seats to have a healthy majority. But from 2005 Labour lost worse in the Eastern Region, West

¹ Diamond, P and Radice, G *Southern Discomfort Again* (Policy Network, October 2010)

Midlands, East Midlands, and Yorkshire and the Humber than the South East. This certainly cannot be described as southern discomfort.

Table 3: Labour's performance (seats) in the regions 1997-2010

	London	South East	South West	Wales	Eastern Region	West Midlands	East Midlands	North West	North East	Yorkshire and the Humber	Scotland
Labour seats (2010)	38	4	4	26	2	24	15	47	25	32	41
Total seats (2010)	73	84	55	40	58	59	46	75	29	53	59
Percentage of seats (2010)	52.05%	4.76%	7.27%	65%	3.45%	40.68%	32.61%	62.67%	86.21%	60.38%	69.49%
Labour seats (2005)	44	19	13	29	13	39	25	61	28	44	41
Total seats (2005)	74	83	51	40	56	59	44	76	30	56	59
Percentage of seats (2005)	59.46%	22.89%	25.49%	72.50%	23.21%	66.10%	56.82%	80.26%	93.33%	78.57%	69.49%
Labour seats (1997)	57	22	15	34	22	43	30	64	28	47	56
Total seats (1997)	74	83	51	40	56	59	44	76	30	56	72
Percentage of seats (1997)	77.03%	26.51%	29.41%	85%	39.29%	72.88%	68.18%	84.21%	93.33%	83.93%	77.78%
Number of seats lost (2005-2010)	-6	-15	-9	-3	-11	-15	-10	-14	-3	-12	0
Number of seats lost (1997-2010)	-19	-18	-11	-8	-20	-19	-15	-17	-3	-15	-15
Percentage point change (2005-2010)	-7.4%	-18.13%	-18.22%	-7.5%	-19.77%	-25.42%	-24.21%	-17.60%	-7.13%	-18.19%	0%
Percentage point change (2005-2010)	-24.97%	-21.74%	-22.14%	-20%	-35.84%	-32.20%	-35.57%	-21.54%	-7.13%	-23.55%	-8.29%

Source: Calculated from House of Commons and BBC data

For the southern discomfort argument to have any real credibility requires a distortion of geography. As such, *Southern Discomfort Again* includes seats in both the South and the Midlands. But the Midlands is distinctive, and as the name suggests, is neither North nor South.

Some may argue that Labour's southern malaise is a result of the UK's first past the post system. However, a similar pattern appears when analysing where Labour lost votes since 1997. Since 1997, for instance, Labour suffered a bigger drop in support in Wales, Eastern Region, West Midlands, East Midlands, North West, North East and Yorkshire and the Humber. Since 2005 the regions which fared worse than the South East and South West are the Eastern Region, West Midlands, East Midlands, North East and Yorkshire and the Humber.

Table 4: Labour's performance (votes) in the regions 1997–2010

	London	South East	South West	Wales	Eastern Region	West Midlands	East Midlands	North West	North East	Yorkshire and the Humber	Scotland
Vote share (2010)	36.62%	16.24%	15.39%	36.24%	19.61%	29.76%	30.60%	39.47%	43.55%	34.68%	42%
Vote share (2005)	38.94%	24.39%	22.81%	42.71%	29.83%	38.69%	39%	45.08%	52.86%	43.56%	38.87%
Vote share (1997)	49.48%	29.13%	26.43%	54.75%	38.6%	46.95%	47.83%	53.56%	64.03%	51.94%	45.56%
Percentage point change (2005–2010)	-2.31%	-8.14%	-7.42%	-6.46%	-10.22%	-8.93%	-8.4%	-5.62%	-9.3%	-8.88%	-3.12%
Percentage point change (2005–2010)	-12.86%	-12.89%	-11.04%	-18.50%	-18.99%	-17.19%	-17.23%	-14.10%	-20.48%	-17.26%	-3.56%

Source: Calculated from House of Commons and BBC data

If we want to take a regional approach to where Labour lost it is not the South but the midlands (the Eastern region, the West Midlands, and the East Midlands) where losses were heaviest, taken either from a 1997 or 2005 starting point. If anything we have witnessed a squeezed middle in regional politics.

Clearly Labour can (and must) do better in the South but there is no evidence to support an electoral strategy based on 'southern discomfort'. Labour has traditionally fared far worse in southern England than elsewhere and to base a strategy on winning back the South (which was never won) would be comparable to a Conservative strategy based on winning Wales and Scotland.

Chapter 3

Who left Labour?

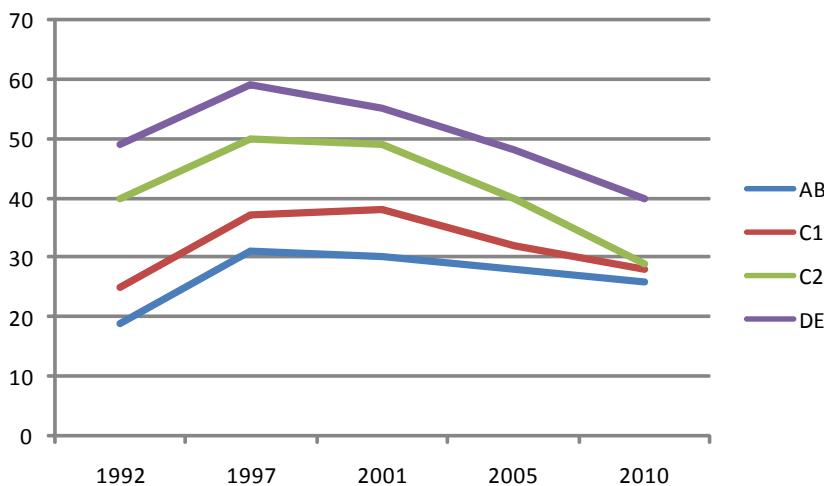
Who left Labour?

Whilst seats are what win elections Labour must understand who in these seats decided not to vote for them. The picture for Labour is varied and complex with some worrying trends. This section provides an analysis of voting patterns by social class, age, gender and ethnicity.

Social class

Britain is still divided by social class, and voting patterns are no exception. In dissections of the 2010 election much has been made of the collapse of Labour's C2 vote (skilled manual workers), who are seen as part of Labour's core support. Concentrating on the collapse of their support is hardly surprising given an 11 percentage point fall (which represents a 7.5% swing towards the Conservatives). Indeed, just as worrying (although not such a collapse given the higher starting point) was the DE swing of 7%. However, relatively good news came from AB and C1 voters with respective swings of just 2% and 3%.

Figure 3: Labour's performance by social grade 1992-2010

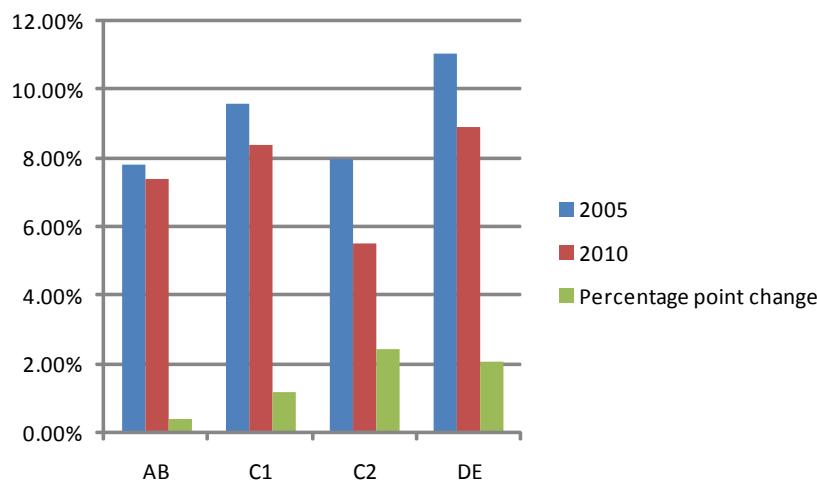


Source: Ipsos-MORI

The above graph shows a depressing picture of decline. Clearly Labour needs to reengage with its 'core vote' to secure a majority. However, a political strategy based purely on its core vote would be extremely risky.

The way social grades are split suggests that each grouping represents a quarter of the electorate. However, each social grade is not equally weighted. Not only do C1s out number other grades (and ABC1s outnumber C2DEs) there is also the impact of turnout. The data is unequivocal in showing that the poorest in society vote less – in 2010 the difference between AB and DE turnout was nearly 20 percentage points (or in other words ABs receive 1.33 votes each compared with DEs 1). If you weight the social grades (by using Ipsos-MORI data on social class from the 2005 election) it shows Labour cannot win on the back of working class support alone.

Figure 4: Labour's vote by social grade (weighted) 2005-2010²



Source: calculated using Ipsos-MORI data

The above graph shows again that Labour can gain most from C2 and DEs (the green bars). However, it shows that in the 2010 election Labour gained more votes from ABs than from C2s and similar numbers from C1s as DEs. It also shows that in 2005, when Labour secured a healthy majority, the Party secured similar number of votes from ABs as C2s and there was less than two percentage points more from C2DEs than ABC1s. To further back up this argument, in 2010 ABC1s contributed 1.36 percentage points more to Labour's tally than C2DEs.

² This shows the contribution of different social grades to the share of Labour's total vote in Great Britain (36% in 2005 and 30% in 2010).

What this shows is that for Labour to win back a majority it has to gain the support of more C2DE voters, but must be very careful not to damage its standing amongst ABC1 voters.

The make up of voters at the last election was roughly ABs, 29% of the electorate, C1s 30%, C2s 19%, and DEs 22%. Whilst Labour's support of ABs looks fairly strong, in 1992 Labour secured just 19% of ABs. If Labour had this result in 2015 it would require a 9% rise amongst DEs to have the same overall support as it did in 2010. There is no working class majority and therefore there cannot be a 'core vote' strategy in its crudest form.

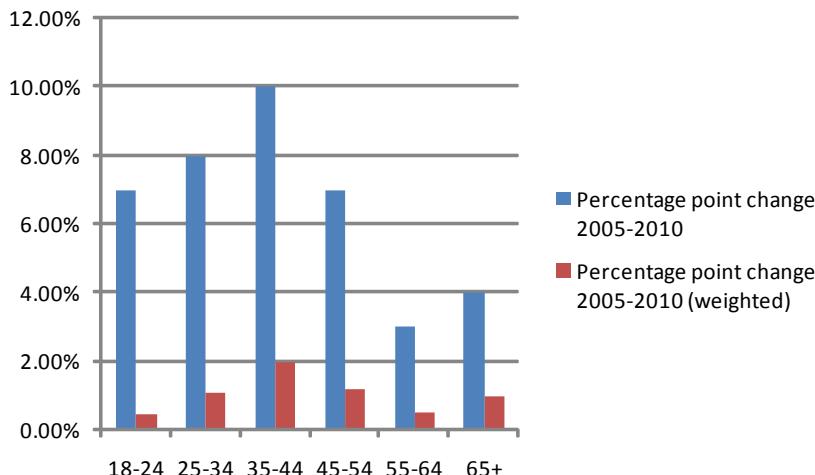
Age groups

What is striking about Labour's performance between age groups is how consistent it was – mostly in line with national trends across the board (ranging from 28% to 31%). Labour managed to be most popular with one group – the 18-24 year olds – and by just 1 percentage point. Indeed, the biggest swings are between the Lib Dems and Conservatives with swings towards the Lib Dems in the younger cohorts and swings towards the Conservatives amongst older voters.

For Labour though, the worrying signs are where it lost ground compared with the previous election. As the blue bars show in the below chart, Labour lost most ground amongst younger voters (aged 18-24, 25-34) and those in early middle age (35-44). However, once again when weighted (for numbers in each cohort and turnout) we see again a different pattern emerging. Whilst Labour leaked rather a high percentage of 18-24 year olds (looking at the blue bars) it was hurt a lot more by the 4 percentage point drop amongst 65+ voters (the red bars).

In some respects Labour did well not to haemorrhage too many votes from the 65+ range. However, the most costly was the 35-44 age bracket. This group represents 20% of people who vote and Labour managed to drop from 41% to 31% in five years (representing just under a third of its lost support). Whilst Labour should worry about the grey vote and hope to capitalise from the Lib Dems unpopularity amongst younger voters, the main target group (24-55). Labour's lost support from this group which represents around 50% of those who voted was twice what it was from all other age groups combined.

Figure 5: Labour's performance by age 2005–2010



Source: calculated using Ipsos-MORI data

Gender (and age and social class)

Men and women voted for Labour in almost equal measures (31% v 28%). However, when looking at gender and age there is a significant divergence from Labour's national performance amongst 25–34 year old men and women. 38% of women of this age voted Labour compared with just 23% of men. Whilst these age/gender groups represent around 7% of the electorate each it does hint at where Labour performed well and badly at the last election.

Some interesting nuances can also be found when looking at gender and social class. For females the biggest drop was amongst C2s (down 15 percentage points) with both the Lib Dems and Conservatives reaping the rewards and the Conservatives taking a 17 percentage point lead. Whilst for men the biggest drop was for DE voters with Labour's lead just three percentage points over the Conservatives. Further to this it is worth highlighting that one fifth of male DEs voted for 'other'. Some of this may be explained by the Nats but this is an 8 percentage point increase on 2005 when the SNP and Plaid Cymru vote was fairly flat. So this is probably only explained by the rise in support for the BNP.

Ethnicity

The limited voting data on ethnicity appears to suggest that the white working class is shifting away from Labour. On the other hand, the non-white vote has stayed fairly loyal to

Labour, particularly in the inner-cities. Once again this shows the complexity of any repositioning.

Conclusion

There is no working class majority in Britain, and Labour would be foolish to think that there is. Any strategy that focuses on Labour's core vote will end in failure if Labour loses support from wealthier voters. For Labour to win it must have a vision for the country that resonates with all groups in society. Where Labour seems to have lost most support is from the working age population who feel Labour was no longer on their side. Labour also lost from C2DEs who appear to have largely turned to the Tories, and particularly for DEs the BNP.

Chapter 4

Back to two party politics

Back to two party politics

In John Curtice's paper, *The Last Post*³, he puts forward the argument that the 2010 hung parliament "was no one-off aberration". He explains that over recent years a smaller and smaller number of seats are now marginal. With the growth of the Lib Dems and the Nationalists fewer seats are held by the main two parties, while the proportion of votes cast for both Labour and the Conservatives is now lower than anytime since 1918.

However, this could well be a one-off (or at least once in a generation result as first past the post now and again throws up minority governments). Arguments about the likelihood of hung parliaments appear ahistorical. By calculating the future on the past ignores what is happening now. There is great unpopularity with the Lib Dems decision to form a coalition. Much like the story of Icarus, as the Lib Dem's fly too close to power they get burnt. We still have a political system which is defined by the two main parties, being seen as an alternative and then allying yourself to one undermines the purpose of voting Lib Dem. Also, the 2010 election was fought against the backdrop of the MPs' expenses crisis. This only helped smaller parties and the Lib Dems, who looked less guilty (traditionally in closely fought elections you would expect the third party to be squeezed but the Lib Dems increased their vote share). This means marginals are too narrow a focus as many more seats can be won if Lib Dem support is soft. It also ignores that the number of marginals was lower in 1983 than 2010, and yet that election resulted in a 144 majority for the Conservatives and the subsequent five elections resulted in clear winners (including two landslides).

Arguments around the likelihood of hung parliaments have also focused on the fall of the combined popularity of the two parties. Whilst the combined vote has fallen from around 97% to 67%, the combined number of seats is not taken into account. In 2010 this was still relatively high at 87%. Also, whilst there has been a decline in the combined vote, both 1983 and 2005 elections resulted in large majorities but the combined two party vote share was not too dissimilar from 2010.

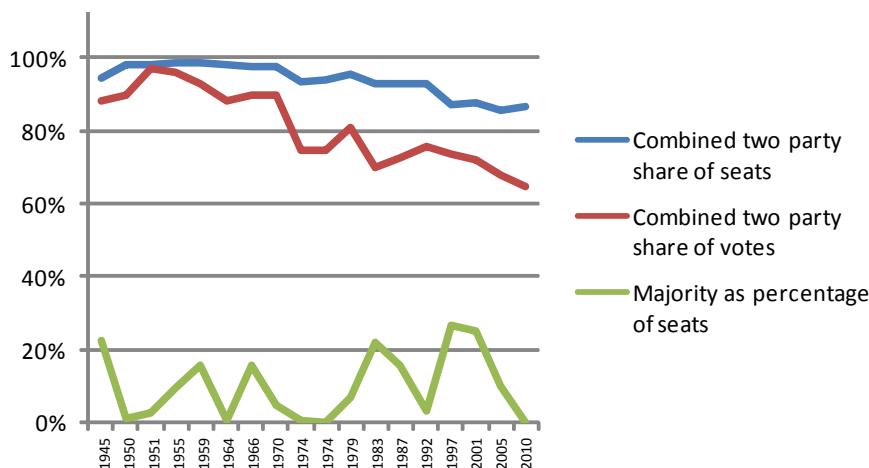
Despite these undeniable facts the central argument is that first past the post no longer works as it fails to produce clear majorities because of the decline in support for the main parties. Whilst the support in terms of votes is clearly not what it was it would be wrong to assume because of one election result that we will have far more hung parliaments. Looking at figure 6 you can clearly see no correlation whatsoever between the two party

³ Curtice, J *The Last Post* (Parliamentary Briefings, 2010). See also Curtice, J "So What Went Wrong with the Electoral System? The 2010 Election Result and the Debate About Electoral Reform" in *Parliamentary Affairs* Vol. 63 No. 4 (2010) pp.623–638 and Lodge, G and Gottfried, G *Worst of Both Worlds: Why First Past the Post no longer works* (ippr, 2010)

share of votes or seats and the size of majorities. What still matters most is one party's share of the seats. Whether these seats are won on a fair basis is completely different question to whether first past the post can produce majorities.

Labour should not be defeatist about their prospects at the next election. Whether or not it is fought under AV it certainly won't be fought under proportional representation. As such, Labour's electoral strategy should aim for an outright majority.

Figure 6: Two party share of seats and votes and overall majority



Sources: Calculated using BBC and ippr data

The Lib Dem vote

As we have seen between 1997-2010 there was a huge surge in the Lib Dem vote, rocketing by 30% since 1997 to a position where they took almost a quarter of all votes. In absolute votes the Lib Dems have gained more than any other party in this period. Since 2005 they may have not gained as much as the Conservatives, but they are close to the 7 million vote mark.

However, as outlined above the 'Icarus effect' had yet to set in. At present the Lib Dems are languishing in the polls with their support dropping as low as 7% (less than a third of what they received at the election). Unless they somehow manage to distinguish themselves from the Tories it is difficult to see why voters would choose them over candidates from the

main two parties. It is not unrealistic to expect the Lib Dem vote at the next election to halve to around 12%. Gaining from Lib Dem unpopularity could hold the key to Labour's success. However, it is where Labour wins these votes (and the spread of seats) that count. If Labour capitalises on the Lib Dems collapse only in Labour held seats it will make no electoral impact whatsoever.

The Tories

The threat from the Conservatives cannot be ignored in a strategy that would suggest chasing Lib Dem votes. After all, of the 94 seats Labour lost, 87 were lost to the Conservatives. With a jump in votes (albeit not big enough for them to secure an overall majority) the Tories have ousted Labour as the most popular party in the country. At the 2005 election they gained most from Labour and are the main opposition in the marginals, be it Tory or Labour held seats.

Given that we have a first past the post system, in Labour-Tory marginals any vote that goes to Labour from the Tories counts double whilst taking votes from the Lib Dems is worth just one. Any strategy must recognise this obvious point.

BNP

Whilst the threat of the BNP gaining Labour held seats is not all that real (the highest percentage of the vote they managed in any seat was just 15%). It does ignore the impact they can have on the election results. In 1997 the BNP's vote stood at just 35,000 representing a meagre 0.1% of the national vote. Today its vote is well over half a million and has almost 2% of the vote. In 2010 it put up 339 candidates, 216 of these candidates were in Labour held seats and 70% of the BNP vote came in seats where Labour won. In 2010 if the BNP vote went straight to Labour it would have kept 14 seats that went to the Conservatives and taken three seats that went to the Lib Dems. Although some of these votes would have gone to the Tories it does show that Labour must try to win back votes that went to the far right. If Labour had won those 17 seats it would have had a total 275 seats and would have been in a much stronger position to form a coalition.

Marginals

At present there are 89 marginal seats where the Conservative share of the two party vote lies within 45-55%. Under the current system (which may change when boundaries are redrawn) Labour needs to gain somewhere in the region of 42 seats to beat the Tories and form a coalition, 68 seats to have an overall majority, and around 75 to have a working majority. If there are just 89 marginal seats of which a significant number are Labour's then of course Labour cannot get a majority just through marginals.

However, with the potential of a Lib Dem collapse marginals are too narrow a focus. If the Lib Dem vote does collapse far more seats are up for grabs. Labour therefore needs to look beyond these seats (and can realistically do so) to form a majority.

Table 5: Number of seats Labour needs

2010 Result	Largest Party	Overall Majority	Working Majority
258	c.300 (+42)	326 (+68)	335 (+77)

Rather than looking at marginals where the Conservatives share of the two party vote is between 45-55% focus should be extended to 40-60%. On this basis there are 177 'extended marginal seats' of which the Conservatives hold 90 (as you can see from table 6 these are spread across the country). Labour would therefore need an 8% swing from the Tories to win all of these seats. To gain more seats than the Tories (with around 50 seats going to other parties) Labour requires a 3.5% uniform swing in these seats. To get a majority would require a 5.5% swing and to have a working majority (20 seat overall majority) 6.5% swing would be needed.

Table 6: Conservative held 'extended marginals' by region

London	South East	South West	Wales	Eastern Region	West Midlands	East Midlands	North West	North East	Yorkshire and the Humber	Scotland
9	8	9	5	12	14	11	13	1	8	3

With such figures it is hardly surprising that a number of people are predicting another hung parliament. Table 7 also shows how large a collapse the Lib Dems would have to suffer to win on the back of Lib Dem unpopularity alone, which appears unlikely. However, combining a possible Lib Dem crash with gains from the Tories could change the electoral landscape completely and make what appears a Sisyphean task possible.

One of the problems with table 7 is that it overplays the gains Labour can make from the Lib Dems. First, it doesn't account for the size of the Lib Dem support in these constituencies; and second it almost assumes that the Conservatives wouldn't gain at all from a Lib Dem collapse. (For example, all things being equal, if Labour took every Lib Dem vote in Chatham & Aylesford it wouldn't be enough for Labour to win the seat.)

Table 7: Seats won on varying swings

		Swing from Lib Dems															
		0%	1%	2%	3%	4%	5%	6%	7%	8%	9%	10%	11%	12%	13%	14%	15%
Swing from the Tories	0%	-	8	12	20	26	33	38	41	48	53	61	68	74	83	85	89
	1%	12	20	26	33	38	41	48	53	61	68	74	83	86			
	2%	26	33	38	41	48	53	61	68	74	83	86					
	3%	38	41	48	53	61	68	74	83	86							
	4%	48	53	61	68	74	83	86									
	5%	61	68	74	83	86											
	6%	74	83	86													
	7%	86															
	8%	90+															

Source: Calculated using Electoral Commission data

A better guide for a decline in Lib Dem support would be their performance in respective constituencies in 1997 (where they received 17% of the vote nationally). If Labour and the Conservatives performance remains as it did in 2010, the Lib Dems are reduced to 1997 levels in respective constituencies and Labour picks up 54% and the Tories 36%⁴ of the Lib Dem lost vote (10% going elsewhere) then Labour would gain just 9 seats from the Tories. If the split is closer to 70/20 then Labour would gain 23 seats. If the vote collapsed to 12.5%⁵ then Labour would win 34 seats on a 70/20 split. Clearly this is still not enough.

However, just like the last example, if there is a swing from the Tories plus gains from a slump in Lib Dem support the gains become much larger. Table 8 shows how this would play out. If the Lib Dems drop to 1997 levels and Labour receive a 54/36 split of these lost votes it would require a 5% swing to win 67 seats and 6% to win 83 seats. This shows that Labour faces a more difficult task than the first scenario. However, it is far easier than if there was no collapse in Lib Dem support.

This analysis does ignore the impact on Lib Dem held seats. There are 29 Lib Dem held seats where the Tories are in second and require a 10% swing, and 13 seats where the required swing is 5%. For Labour the situation is less promising with 6 seats that would be gained on a 5% swing, 8 seats on 7% swing and 11 on a 10% swing. Whilst a collapse in the Lib

4 According to YouGov before the 2010 election, Lib Dem voters favoured Labour 3-2 over the Tories.

5 This is calculated by the difference between the 1997 and 2010 vote (which represents a drop of 23% of the national vote to 17%) in individual constituencies and extrapolated for a loss of support to 12.5% nationally.

Table 8: Seats Labour could win from swings from both Lib Dems and the Conservatives

Swing from Tories	Seats won with no swing from Lib Dems	Lib Dem vote to 1997 with 54/36 Lab/Con split	Lib Dem vote to 1997 with 70/20 Lab/Con split	Lib Dem at 12.5% and 54/36 Lab/Con split	Lib Dem at 12.5% ad 70/20 Lab/Con split
0%	-	9	23	15	34
1%	12	21	34	26	44
2%	26	35	47	39	54
3%	38	47	55	49	64
4%	48	55	66	61	78
5%	61	67	81	70	86
6%	74	83	88	85	88
7%	86	89	89	89	89

Source: Calculated using Electoral Commission and House of Commons data

Dem vote will help the Tories gain more seats direct from the Lib Dems than it will Labour, if Labour needs to top up its number of seats to gain an overall majority it is almost academic. Where it would help the Tories, is if we are in hung parliament territory.

Whilst Labour has a huge task to win a working majority in the next Parliament it is not insurmountable. Given that the Tories had a 5% national swing but a 7% swing in the seats they won from Labour, relatively large swings are possible. If the Lib Dems do collapse and Labour gain more than the Tories then a much smaller swing is required (that is votes taken straight from the Conservatives) – probably around 4 to 5% (rather than 6.5%).

This is of course all conjecture and ignores changes to constituencies, but it does show that Labour could gain from Lib Dem unpopularity but most importantly has to gain from the Tories as well. By attacking the coalition as Tory led, Labour is by implication also attacking the Lib Dems as complicit in Tory actions and not distinct. However, the real challenge for Labour is how they woo (rather than just attack the Coalition) both Lib Dem and Tory voters in the right places.

Chapter 5

Suburban discomfort: the missing link?

Suburban discomfort: the missing link?

The purpose of this discussion paper is in part to debunk some of the myths surrounding Labour's recent defeat and to understand where it lost almost 5 million votes. Understanding the past is crucial to planning how to win again. As the election data shows, whilst Labour did lose seats in the South there was definitely no 'southern discomfort'. Furthermore, Labour did lose its core vote but it would be foolish to adopt a core vote strategy that puts off wealthier voters as there is no 'working class' majority.

Despite a hung parliament in 2010 there is no reason to believe this will be the case next time given the Lib Dems' unpopularity. However, Labour cannot win on the back of Lib Dem unpopularity alone and must target both the Conservatives and the Lib Dems to make winning easier.

Whilst the paper has examined traditional ways of understanding Labour's defeat, there is a missing issue which links them together. Policy Network's paper is right to look at the importance of geography but rather than seeing the defeat as a North/South issue it is far more illuminating to view the electoral geography in rural/suburban/urban terms. On this basis, in 2010 Labour suffered not from 'southern discomfort', but rather 'suburban discomfort'.

Much has been made of Boris Johnson's electoral strategy in 2008. It is hardly surprising given the electoral map of where Boris won. If a picture is worth a thousand words then Labour should take a hard look at it, and not just for the sake of the 2012 mayoral elections but for the country as a whole.

Boris Johnson declared in his 2008 manifesto that "Ken Livingstone has neglected London's suburbs". And his strategy (shaped by the Australian political strategist Lynton Crosby) was based on gaining support in the suburbs, whose voters had traditionally seen City Hall elections as about inner-city London. By speaking to the hopes and fears of the suburbs Boris was able to win. Without their extra support Ken would still be in power.

The same could be said for the general election of 2010. Labour had failed to speak to voters in suburban towns. The list of towns that Labour lost reads like a who's who of suburbia: Bedford, Burton, Bury North, Carlisle, Chester, Dewsbury, Dudley South, Ipswich, Lincoln, Loughborough, Milton Keynes South, Northampton North, Norwich North, Reading West, Rugby, Stafford, Swindon North and South, Warrington South, Watford, and Worcester.

These suburban towns almost represent microcosms of Britain. An analysis (albeit

using 2001 census data) shows that these places have a similar social mix to the UK average. The seats which Labour won are poorer, have a higher BME population, have younger constituents, and have lower levels of homeownership. The reverse, unsurprisingly, is true of the seats the Conservative's won.

Although suburbia is fiendishly difficult to define and means different things to different people the list of seats Labour lost is noteworthy. Such seats are neither inner city places nor rural areas, and do not have the same traditions of voting Labour or Tory. Whether these places vote the way they do because they are suburban is in one respect irrelevant. If Labour wants their support it should not just speak about general issues, be it tax, public services or crime, but also things that define these areas – such as unique issues around transport, housing and the public realm.

Whilst demographics clearly matter the importance of the suburbs does as well, especially as many of these places are swing seats. Labour must understand how to reengage with suburbia without antagonising its loyal inner city support.

Conclusion

The inquest into Labour's defeat has not reached a conclusion, and there are important lessons still to be learnt. Relying on Tory or Lib Dem unpopularity or the so-called 'core vote' will not be enough. Labour can win back many of the vanquished 5 million to form a majority, and hung parliament's are a false prospectus. But to win again Labour needs a different electoral strategy based around policies that are attractive to voters in places which are not traditionally Labour.

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If you would like to know more about the Smith Institute please write to:

The Smith Institute
Somerset House
South Wing
Strand
London
WC2R 1LA

Telephone +44 (0)20 7845 5845
Fax +44 (0)20 7845 5846
Email info@smith-institute.org.uk
Website www.smith-institute.org.uk