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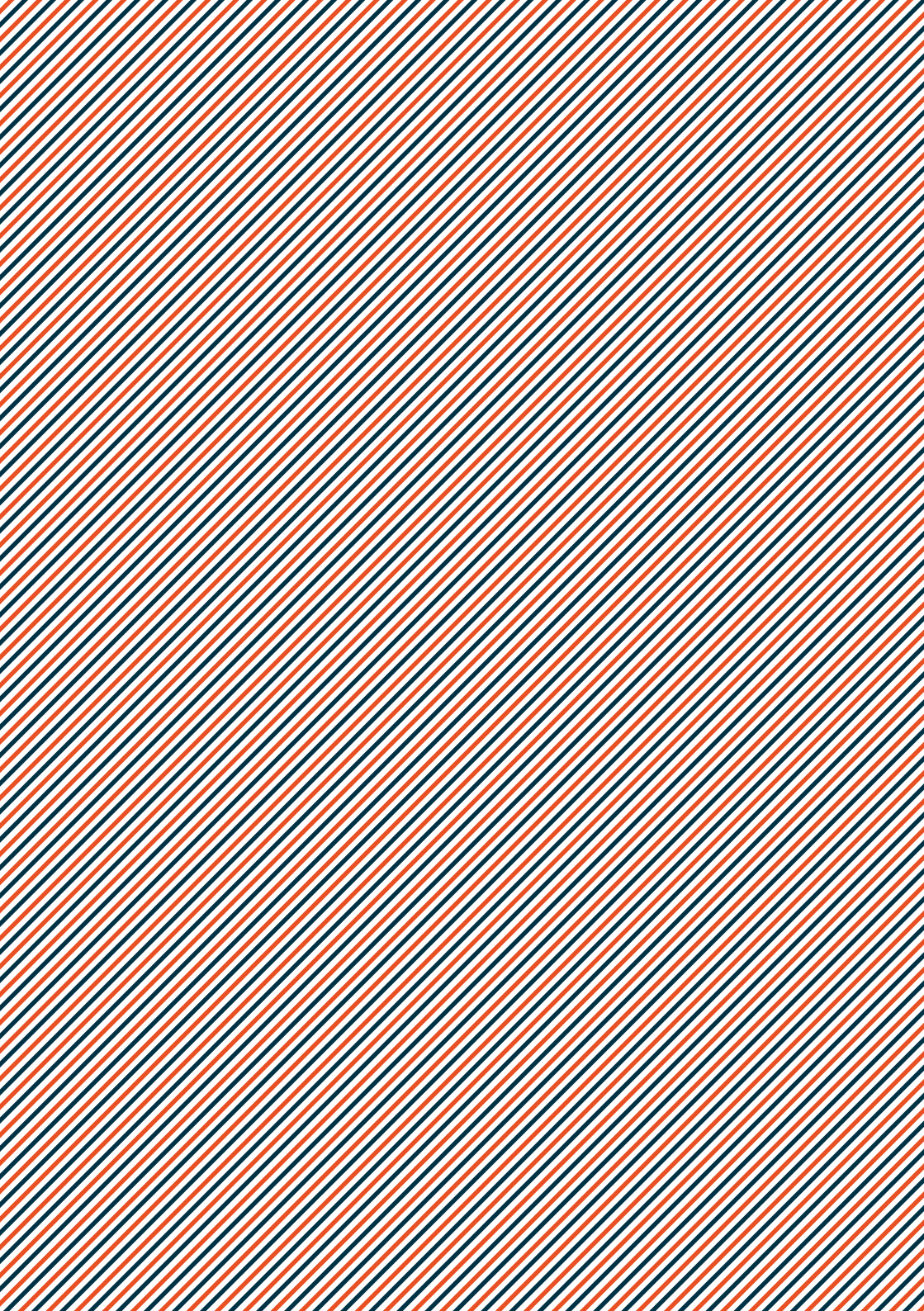
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THE LOTTERY ELECTION

PROFESSOR JOHN CURTICE

FEBRUARY 2015



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FOREWORD

**By Darren Hughes, Deputy Chief Executive
of the Electoral Reform Society**

At every election, it seems, we are told that the poll is ‘historic’, that it is the ‘most important in a generation’ because the country is ‘at the crossroads’.

What makes 2015 a contender for some of those usually hyperbolic descriptions is that our electoral system seems to be collapsing before our eyes. In this report for the Electoral Reform Society, Professor John Curtice of the University of Strathclyde uses polling data to demonstrate how relatively small shifts in support among the parties can have dramatic effects on the shape of the next Parliament, and therefore the next government.

Indeed, some of the outcomes predicted in this report seem so random as to suggest voters would be as well buying a lottery ticket as being handed a ballot paper. As Professor Curtice notes, this is an election where it looks like there will be no relationship between votes cast and seats won.

Electoral reformers rarely miss a chance to point out the problems with First Past the Post – but the arguments have never seemed less theoretical and more tangible than they do now. Using a two-party system to conduct six-party politics just won’t work. The current voting system is not fit for purpose.

It has even stopped doing the one thing it was meant to be good at – delivering clear, decisive results. As Professor Curtice states, it is a “fair prospect” that no one party will achieve an overall majority and that the UK is “faced with considerable uncertainty” as a result.

The decline in both membership and voter base for the two largest parties is well understood. Their days of achieving 95% + of the vote share are well and truly over, with some polls showing

them struggling to settle around the 60% mark. What Professor Curtice brings together in this report, however, is something less well understood – how the lottery election can lead to the most random of outcomes for the country.

UKIP coming third in votes but sixth in total seats? The reverse position for the SNP, who could decimate Labour in Scotland to be the third-largest party in the Commons on a tiny UK-wide vote share? Or not. A relatively small shift in their support (and the geographical spread of it) could see them gain not 53 Westminster MPs, but barely more than the six they currently have.

The inequity of Labour needing a smaller lead over the Conservatives to win a majority than the Tories would need over Labour is explained, and the fate of the Liberal Democrat vote, particularly in their heartlands, is explored.

Finally, Professor Curtice predicts where the Green Party might make their next breakthrough, and ponders the potentially crucial role of the 18 MPs from Northern Ireland in all of this.

This report makes it clear that we are heading for a most unusual election. It puts beyond doubt that we do not have a voting system in which we can genuinely say every vote counts.

For that reason, the Electoral Reform Society hopes that this report will be read and analysed, both before and after the General Election. Because when the lottery balls have finally settled in whatever position fate places them, real decisions on how our democracy is to operate will need to be taken.

Let's make this Britain's last Lottery Election.

INTRODUCTION: PREDICTING THE UNPREDICTABLE

It has become something of a cliché. But it is no less true for that. The 2015 general election looks like the most unpredictable in post-war British politics.

There are three reasons why this is the case.

Firstly, this is the first post-war election to be held following a spell of coalition government. The last five years have turned the Liberal Democrats from a marginal party of protest into an unpopular party of government. In its former role the party often gained ground in the final weeks of the election, but what will happen now that it has donned a very different mantle is far from clear. And how will voters finally apportion the credit and the blame for the developments of the last five years between the two coalition partners?

Secondly, support for parties other than Conservative, Labour and the Liberal Democrats is at an unprecedented level in the polls. UKIP in particular have come to pose the most significant independent fourth-party challenge in post-war English politics, while in Scotland the SNP appear to be enjoying levels of support for Westminster that hitherto it had only ever enjoyed in a Scottish Parliament election. Nobody can be sure how far the support for these parties – and the Greens – ends up being reflected in the ballot boxes and what impact their success or otherwise will have on the fortunes of the other parties.

Thirdly, new circumstances and new parties create new uncertainties about how votes will be translated into seats. Under First Past the Post (FPTP) much depends on the geographical concentration of a party's vote. Historically UKIP's support has been geographically evenly spread, making it difficult for the party (as a

minor party) to win seats. But perhaps the party's advance will be much greater in some kinds of seats than others? In contrast, the Liberal Democrat vote has become more concentrated in recent years, thereby enabling it to become a much more substantial parliamentary force, and much rests on how far this remains true in the very different circumstances in which the party now finds itself.

This paper is not a crystal ball. We will only know how these uncertainties have been resolved in the early hours of 8th May. What it does do is provide a guide to some of the possible implications of the different ways in which these uncertainties might be played out. In the first part (chapters 1 and 2) we discuss the outcome to which the polls currently point, and the possible consequences if the polls shift in one direction or the other. In the second part (chapter 3) we consider what the different possible scenarios might point to so far as the partisan colour and nature of the next government are concerned.

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THE STATUS QUO

Table 1 presents a simple summary of the UK-wide polls during the last 12 months. It represents the monthly average of the results published by the four companies that have conducted polls throughout the course of the current parliament, namely ComRes, ICM, Ipsos MORI and YouGov. The first three polls are conducted over the phone, the last via the internet.

TABLE 1: POLL OF POLLS JAN 2014 –JAN 2015¹

	Con	Lab	LD	UKIP	Grn
2014					
Jan	32	37	11	12	3
Feb	32	38	10	11	3
Mar	33	36	11	11	4
Apr	31	37	10	13	3
May	31	35	9	14	5
June	31	34	8	15	5
July	32	35	9	13	6
Aug	31	35	9	13	6
Sept	32	35	9	13	6
Oct	31	33	9	16	5
Nov	31	31	9	16	7
Dec	30	32	10	15	7
2015					
Jan	32	33	8	13	8

Three points emerge. First, Labour support has gradually been easing in recent months, and now stands at only a little above the 30% that the party secured in 2010. As a result the party has been left

¹ Based on monthly average of polls conducted by ComRes, ICM, Ipsos MORI and YouGov.

with only a narrow lead over the Conservatives, whose support has largely remained stagnant. Second, Liberal Democrat support stands at less than 10%, much as it has done since last spring, and just a third of the 24% it secured in 2010. Third, far from diminishing as the general election has approached, UKIP support is now only a little below what it was at the time of the European elections last year, while more recently the Greens began to enjoy hitherto unprecedented levels of support.

The nationalist effect

However, Britain-wide polls tell us relatively little about what is happening in Scotland and Wales where nationalist parties are important parts of the political scene. In Wales two polls conducted in January 2015 on average put Plaid Cymru on 11%, the same as the party's share in 2010. But in Scotland polls taken since the independence referendum in September 2014 have detected a 'surge' of support in favour of the SNP. In four polls conducted between mid-December and mid-January 2015, SNP support was on average put at 46%, up 26 points on the 20% the party won in 2010. The big losers from this 'surge' are Labour who, with an average score of 27%, are 15 points down on where they were in the last general election.

The current picture in the polls is very different from the one that pertained just months before the 2010 general election. In January 2010 the Conservatives enjoyed no less than a ten-point lead over Labour; the contest between the two largest parties looked much more one-sided than it does now. At the same time, between them the two largest parties enjoyed the support of 70% of voters, low by historical standards but still well above the 65% that they enjoy now. Meanwhile, at 19% support for the Liberal Democrats was more than twice what it is now. In total, 89% of voters were backing one of the three main Westminster parties, compared with just 73% now. Meanwhile, in Scotland support for the SNP stood on average at just 27% in four polls conducted in the second half of 2009, far short of where the party is today.

But what might today's poll numbers mean when it comes to the outcome in seats? The most common way of addressing that question is to assume that any difference between a party's level of support now and its level of support in the general election occurs uniformly in each and every constituency. For example, the most recent monthly poll averages represent a ten-point increase in UKIP support, a seven-

point gain in the Green vote and a three-point rise in Labour support, while, in contrast, Liberal Democrat support is 16 points adrift of where it was in 2010, and the Conservatives are down five points. If we apply all of these changes to the 2010 result in each and every constituency, we obtain the following estimate of the outcome in seats:

TABLE 2: 2015 PREDICTION BASED ON CURRENT AVERAGE POLLING AND UNIVERSAL SWING

Labour	319
Conservative	276
Liberal Democrat	22
SNP & PC	13
Greens	1
Others	19

That would mean Labour would be just seven seats short of an overall majority, for which 326 seats are required². However, with only a slightly bigger lead over its main competitor than Labour enjoys at present, apparently it might still be possible for one party to secure an overall majority, despite the fracturing of voter support across a myriad of parties. Indeed, if we just add one point to Labour support and take that point away from the Conservatives – enough to put Labour three points ahead nationally – Labour’s estimated seat tally rises to 333. At the same time we should note that even at 13% of the vote this method of calculating the possible outcome in seats still suggests that, thanks to the geographically even spread of its support, UKIP could come away empty-handed.

“The movement in party support has not taken place uniformly across Britain as a whole”

2 This number is reached by taking half of the Westminster constituencies, minus the Speaker who cannot vote. However, the real number required to reach a majority could effectively be lower owing to Sinn Fein’s historical commitment to abstaining from taking their seats in Parliament.

But we already know from the polls in Scotland that the movement in party support has not taken place uniformly across Britain as a whole – and that Labour has lost ground heavily to the SNP there. So we should certainly use the evidence of the polls in Scotland to estimate what is likely to happen there, applying the changes in party support in the polls in Scotland to all seats lying north of the border, while at the same time applying the change in party support in the polls in England & Wales alone, to the seats in the rest of the UK. Doing that secures the following estimate:

TABLE 3: 2015 PREDICTION INCLUDING SCOTTISH POLLS

Labour	293
Conservative	263
SNP & PC	56
Liberal Democrat	19
Greens	1
Others	18

This one simple variation to the assumption of uniform swing points to a rather different prospect. First, Labour are now as many as 33 seats short of what is required for an overall majority. Second, the largest group of third-party MPs would not be the Liberal Democrats, but nationalists from Scotland and Wales (with all but three of them coming from Scotland). Apparently winning an overall majority might prove rather more difficult for Labour after all, while a so-called ‘hung’ parliament may not necessarily be one in which the Liberal Democrats are best placed to play the role of kingmaker. Indeed under this scenario the Liberal Democrats would not have enough seats to take either a Labour or a Conservative-led government past the 326 mark.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBILITIES?

These two simulations raise a number of questions about the prospects for 2015. First of all, how easy or difficult is it likely to be for Labour and the Conservatives to win an overall majority? Is the widespread expectation that it is unlikely that any party will be able to win an overall majority necessarily valid? Second, what is the pattern of seats and votes in Scotland? How much do Labour need to recover to head off the prospect of serious losses to the SNP? Third, what considerations do we need to take into account to understand the prospects facing the Liberal Democrats? Is it really feasible that the party might retain two-fifths of its parliamentary representation, even though at 8% its current support in the polls is less than the party has secured at any general election since 1970? Finally, is the prospect that UKIP might not win any seats even though it is much more popular than the Liberal Democrats a realistic one? After all, the party has already managed to gain two seats at parliamentary by-elections.

We have already seen that, with the Liberal Democrats standing at 8%, Labour might win an overall majority with no more than a three-point lead over the Conservatives – so long as the party avoids losses in Scotland. But even if that were not to happen and the party's performance north of the border were to continue to be as bad as it is at present, the party could still (just) win an overall majority if it were to stretch its Britain-wide poll lead to a little over five points. That said, as Table 1 shows, it is quite a while since Labour has managed to be that far ahead.

But can we anticipate that in the event that it secured leads of three to five points, the Conservative party would also be able to win an overall majority? Not so. These days at least, the FPTP electoral system does not treat the two largest parties equally, but rather is

inclined to reward Labour more than it does the Conservatives. On the assumption of uniform changes in party support across Britain as a whole (as the Conservatives only have one MP in Scotland the strength of the SNP there does not have any significant implications for the Conservatives' overall prospects), the Conservatives would need to be seven points ahead of Labour before they secured an overall majority. This, of course, is exactly what the Conservatives achieved in 2010, yet on that occasion the party were still left short of an overall majority. But if (as we are assuming) the Liberal Democrats only win 8% of the vote rather than the 24% they won five years ago, the Conservatives could expect to secure the seats that they need to pass the 326 mark simply by capturing around 29 seats from the Liberal Democrats.

“The electoral system does not treat the two largest parties equally”

So if all of the parties other than Conservative and Labour were to retain their current levels of support, Labour could well need at least a five-point lead to win an overall majority, while the Conservatives would be likely to require nearly a seven-point advantage. A narrow lead in votes would be unlikely to be sufficient to deliver either of the two largest parties an overall majority in the Commons. However, the task facing the Conservatives seems rather more formidable than that facing Labour.

Conservative disadvantage

There are two key reasons why our simulations suggest that the Conservatives are likely to be at a relative disadvantage in their efforts to secure an overall majority. First, fewer people are registered to vote in the average Labour-held constituency than in the average Conservative-held one (in 2010 the difference was nearly 4,000 voters), and still fewer of those who are registered actually make it to the polling station in Labour-held seats (the turnout in the average Conservative seat was seven points higher than that in the typical Labour constituency in 2010). The difference between the turnout in Labour-held constituencies as compared with Conservative has been

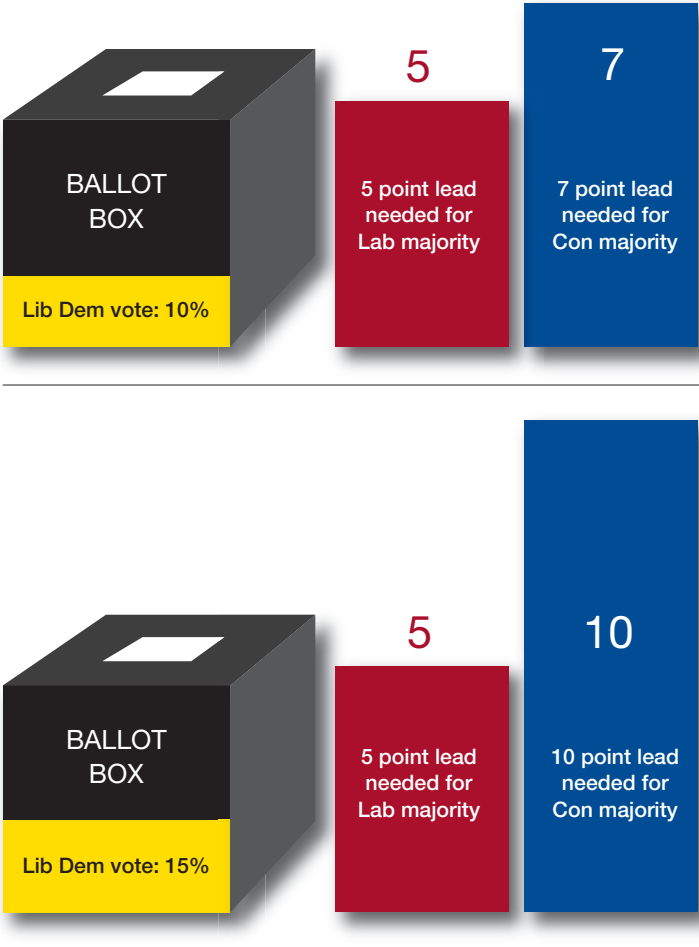
an important feature of every election since 1992 and thus seems unlikely to disappear in May 2015. The Conservatives had hoped to eliminate the disadvantage they suffer from the differences in the number of people registered to vote in each seat by pushing through a new set of constituency boundaries, but those hopes were dashed when the Liberal Democrats joined with Labour to vote to postpone the review of boundaries until after the 2015 election. However, some of the largest increases in the electorate since 2010 have occurred in parts of the country, such as London and Scotland, where Labour does relatively well, and this may help to reduce somewhat (though certainly not eliminate) the disadvantage that the Conservatives suffer from the differences in constituency sizes.

The second reason for the Conservative disadvantage is that there is some tendency for Labour's vote to be more efficiently spread than that of the Conservatives – that is they win rather more seats than the Conservatives do by relatively small majorities. This, however, is a phenomenon that can vary significantly from one election to another. One reason why it might not advantage Labour so much this time around is that incumbent Conservative MPs who are defending a marginal seat that they captured from Labour for the first time in 2010 could benefit from an 'incumbency bonus'. At recent elections MPs defending a marginal seat for the first time have often succeeded in outperforming their party, probably because they have succeeded in developing a personal vote during the previous five years. If first-time incumbent Tory MPs do outperform their party some of them may succeed in (narrowly) defending seats that on the national swing would be predicted to be lost, thereby reducing Labour's overall tally and making it less likely that Labour would be able to turn a narrow lead in votes into a majority in seats.

“Whether or not the Conservatives win an overall majority depends on how well the Liberal Democrats do”

But it should also be evident by now that whether or not the Conservatives can win an overall majority on the back of a seven-point lead depends heavily on how well the Liberal Democrats do.

FIGURE 1: THE THREE-WAY LOTTERY¹



1. Based on calculations by Professor John Curtice for the Electoral Reform Society. Takes January 2015 poll of polls including Scottish variation as baseline, and assumes all other parties achieve a vote equivalent to their current polling.

All of the gains that we projected for the party on such a lead would be made at the Liberal Democrats' expense. But more broadly, because a majority of the seats that the Liberal Democrats currently hold are ones where the Conservatives (38 seats) rather than Labour (17 seats) are the main challengers locally, just how well the Liberal Democrats do is likely to have much more impact on how many seats the Tories win for any given lead over Labour than it will on how many Labour can.

This can be illustrated by looking at what would happen if there were to be a modest recovery in Liberal Democrat fortunes, with the party winning 15% of the vote nationally. In those circumstances the Conservatives would need as much as a ten-point lead to be able to take themselves beyond the 326 mark, while in Labour's case the target would remain three points if there were no losses in Scotland and five points if there were (*see Figure 1, p15*).

The Lib Dem fate

So far as the Liberal Democrats themselves are concerned one implication of the fact that more of their MPs are threatened by a Conservative rather than a Labour challenger, is that the answer to the question, 'How many seats can the party retain?' depends in part on how well the Conservatives and Labour do. For any given share of the vote, the party is always likely to win more seats the less well the Conservatives do.

But the Liberal Democrats themselves believe that, irrespective of the fortunes of the other parties, they can win more seats than simulations based on the assumption of uniform movement suggest. They argue that most of their MPs enjoy a substantial personal vote in their own constituencies, and that this vote will remain loyal to the local MP irrespective of what voters think of the party's record in government. The former statement is correct, but whether the latter conclusion will prove to be the case is much more debatable.

There is, after all, a small matter of arithmetic that suggests that in fact the simulations based on the assumption of uniform movement paint too rosy a picture for the party. Those simulations based on the current polls assume that the Liberal Democrat vote falls by 16 points everywhere. However, in just over a quarter of constituencies the Liberal Democrats did not win as much as 16% in 2010 in the first place. Arithmetically the fall in the Liberal Democrat vote in these seats must be less than 16 points – and thus the fall in at least some

seats elsewhere, including perhaps those that the party is defending, must be greater than 16 points.

One possible pointer to what might actually happen is to look at the party's performance at elections held during the course of this parliament. Although the party's vote held up relatively well in some constituencies where there is an incumbent Liberal Democrat MP, on average the party's performance in such constituencies was only slightly better than average in the local elections held in England in 2013 – and was no better at all in the local polls held in 2014. Meanwhile, in Scotland Liberal Democrat support did actually fall on average by four points more than the average in those seats that were being defended by an incumbent MSP. On this evidence the assumption that on average the party's vote will fall in the seats it is defending in line with the drop in the party's support nationally does not appear to be particularly pessimistic. Indeed, the evidence from Scotland indicates that we cannot rule out the possibility that the party's vote might actually fall away rather more heavily in such seats.

The UKIP conundrum

Establishing how many seats UKIP might win is even more uncertain. The party's two by-election successes following defections by the incumbent Conservative MPs certainly mean that the party's prospects in those two constituencies, Clacton and Rochester-upon-Medway, are much better than any assumption of uniform movement suggests. It is also clear from the evidence of both the polls and the European elections that the party's advance is much weaker in London and in Scotland, and thus rather stronger in much of provincial England. Indeed, the party seems to have developed something of a concentration of support along and abutting the east coast of England from Grimsby down to Thanet. Maybe this will prove sufficient to enable the party to nudge ahead in a few seats, most likely in constituencies that are already competitive between two or more parties and where, say, a third of the vote might be enough to deliver victory. But just how many such instances there might be is impossible to predict, though at 13% of the vote it seems unlikely that they will be numerous – and that consequently UKIP do indeed face the possibility of winning far fewer seats than the Liberal Democrats even if they do outpoll them in terms of votes.

“UKIP face the possibility of winning far fewer seats than the Lib Dems even if they outpoll them in terms of votes”

Winning a highly competitive seat on no more than a third of the vote is exactly what Caroline Lucas managed to achieve in Brighton Pavilion in 2010, thereby giving the Greens their first parliamentary success even though the party’s overall national vote actually fell back a little as compared with the 2005 election. Now that the party’s national support has risen to 8% the party would retain the seat if vote shares in the constituency were to rise and fall in line with the GB-wide movements since 2010. Achieving any other success would require the party to increase its support by much more than average in one or more constituencies. Its best hope would appear to be in Norwich South, where the party secured its second-highest vote in 2010, and which is already highly competitive between three parties.

The SNP spread

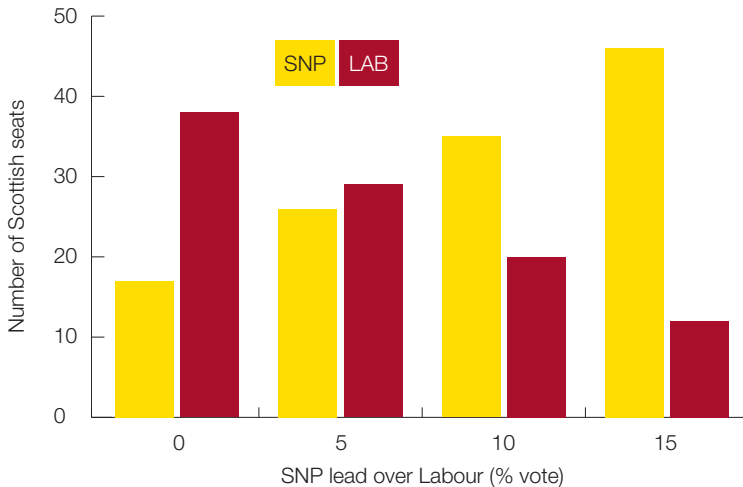
Support for the SNP is, of course, concentrated entirely in constituencies located north of the border. Thus the party can expect to win seats on no more than a modest share of the GB-wide vote; in 2010, for example, it secured six seats despite winning just 2% of the GB-wide vote. However, within Scotland itself the SNP’s vote is relatively evenly spread – with important implications for how votes for the party are likely to translate into seats.

At the share of the vote to which the polls currently point – around 45% and some 20 points ahead of Labour – the relatively even spread of the party’s support proves to be an advantage. It means that the party’s share of the vote will be at or above the 40% mark in most constituencies, and in a multi-party contest that will usually be sufficient to win a seat. That is why the party’s current poll rating could well prove sufficient for it to win the vast bulk of the seats north of the border (an outcome that, of course, would be highly disproportionate).

However, should the SNP no longer be ahead of Labour in the Scotland-wide vote, the even spread of its vote would prove to be a substantial disadvantage. There are just three constituencies in which the SNP were less than 20 points behind a Labour incumbent in 2010.

Given that the SNP were 22 points behind Labour in the Scotland-wide vote in 2010, if the SNP were just narrowly behind Labour in the Scotland-wide vote, the party could expect to pick up no more than a handful of seats from Labour (together with perhaps a few others gained from the Liberal Democrats). But any advance that the party makes above that position soon turns famine into feast, and the exact number of seats that the SNP wins becomes highly sensitive to the share of the vote that it wins. Once again, it seems, we are faced with considerable uncertainty (see Figure 2, below).

FIGURE 2. THE SCOTTISH LOTTERY IN THIS YEAR'S GENERAL ELECTION²



2. Based on calculations by Professor John Curtice for the Electoral Reform Society. Assumes Conservatives in Scotland poll at 13% and Lib Dems at 5%, as per current polling situation (January 2015)

FORMING A GOVERNMENT

Whatever the uncertainty, however, one implication of our analysis is quite clear – there is a fair prospect that no single party will secure an overall majority. Labour might well need a lead of at least five points over the Conservatives to achieve one, while the Conservatives themselves are unlikely to secure enough seats for a majority on a lead of much less than seven points – and even that might not be enough. Given where the polls have stood during recent months, ‘winning’ the 2015 election looks like a formidable challenge for both parties. And we should remember that securing a ‘safe’ overall majority which would ensure the next government was immune from the vicissitudes of backbench rebellions, defections and by-election defeats, will be even more difficult. So what kind of government might emerge if indeed Britain is faced with another hung parliament after 7th May?

Do the maths

The first point to note is that whatever the aims and aspirations of the politicians and the parties, much depends on the precise parliamentary arithmetic. There is, for example, little point in two parties coming to an arrangement if between them they are still well short of the 326 mark. Equally, it will be very difficult to deny a party that is just a few seats short of 326 the opportunity to form a (possibly minority) government. Nevertheless, different parties are likely to play the same arithmetic hand rather differently.

At the same time we should remember that there is more than one kind of government that could be formed in the event of a hung parliament in May. The resolution that was reached in 2010, the formation of a coalition between two parties that between them commanded a majority in the House of Commons, is not the only possibility. One party might form a minority government after reaching a formal ‘confidence and supply’ agreement with one or

more of the smaller parties. Under such an agreement the smaller party promises to support the government's financial legislation and to vote for it in any confidence motion, in return for either policy concessions and/or regular consultation on the government's measures, but without taking up any ministerial posts. The 'Lib-Lab pact' of 1976-8 which helped sustain Labour in office after it lost its majority is the most obvious example of such an agreement. However, a minority government could also be formed without such an agreement, in which case the government is working on the premise that the opposition parties will not all gang up on it to vote it out of office. That was what happened when Labour won most seats but less than a majority at the February 1974 election. Meanwhile it is even possible for a coalition to be formed that is itself still a minority government; that, for example, would have been the situation had any coalition formed between Labour and the Liberal Democrats after the 2010 election.

“A small party can now join a coalition more or less safe in the knowledge that its senior partner cannot pull the plug”

There has, however, been a crucial change to the constitutional rules since 2010, a change that might be thought to make the option of forming a minority government a less attractive option. When Labour formed such a government after the February 1974 election it did so in the expectation that it would be able to call an election later that year in which it could win a majority. Indeed the party did go to the country the following October, though in the event the majority it won was too small to sustain it throughout the next five years. However, the current parliament has passed the Fixed Term Parliament Act, which takes away a Prime Minister's ability to call an election at a time of his or her choosing. An early election is only called if either (i) the government loses a vote of confidence and no alternative government is formed within the next ten days, or (ii) two-thirds of MPs vote that an election should take place. This means that a minority government has relatively little control over its own fate, making the option look less attractive. In contrast a small party

can now join a coalition more or less safe in the knowledge that its senior partner cannot pull the plug on the arrangement by calling an early return to the polls.

Nevertheless, the SNP have indicated that in the event of a hung parliament they would be unlikely to be willing to become part of a UK government coalition. Rather they have stated that, in tandem with both Plaid Cymru and the Greens, they would prefer to negotiate a 'confidence and supply' arrangement. In so doing they have laid out a number of stipulations. First, they have said that they would not be willing to help keep a Conservative government in power, not least because of a reluctance to see Scotland governed by a party that currently only has one MP north of the border. Second, as one might anticipate, the nationalists want more powers devolved to the Scottish Parliament, but on a more extensive scale than proposed by the Smith Commission that was established following the independence referendum. Equally, Plaid Cymru would be looking for further devolution to the National Assembly for Wales, doubtless including the implementation of whatever emerges from all-party talks on Welsh devolution that are currently being chaired by the Welsh Secretary, Stephen Crabb and are due to conclude by St David's Day.

Bargaining for power

However, the ambitions of the nationalists and the Greens do not end there. They also have adopted stances on wider government policy. They want an end to financial 'austerity', and the UK government to decide not to renew Britain's nuclear weapons capability (a decision on this is due to be made in 2016).

This would appear to represent a substantial shopping list. Yet in stating that they would not be willing to consider negotiating an agreement with the Conservatives, the nationalists and their Green allies run the risk of reducing their bargaining power. Labour will know that supporting them is the nationalists' only option. Meanwhile, the nationalists' ability to press their position on nuclear weapons might be constrained if the Conservatives were to signal that they would back a decision by a Labour government to retain the country's nuclear weapons facility. All in all, unless they prove to be the only third party with enough seats to provide a government with a majority, it looks as though the nationalist group may find it relatively difficult to press home whatever parliamentary advantage they might have.

“The Lib Dems’ stance on the deficit is somewhere in between that of the Conservatives and Labour”

In contrast the Liberal Democrats’ position appears to be more flexible. As in 2010 they have left open the prospect of doing a deal with either Labour or the Conservatives. Again as in 2010 they have indicated that in the first instance at least they would open talks with whichever of those two parties was the larger. As it happens the party’s stance on how the public sector deficit should be handled is somewhere in between that of the Conservatives and Labour. Like the Conservatives the party believes the deficit should be eliminated by 2018, but like Labour believes that reduction should be achieved by a mixture of tax hikes and spending cuts rather than through reducing expenditure alone. There would appear to be a reasonable chance of forging a compromise in either direction. But what the Liberal Democrats would be hoping to achieve as far as one of their key traditional preoccupations are concerned – electoral and constitutional reform – is as yet far from clear, while, given their commitment to renegotiating Britain’s terms of membership of the EU, reaching an agreement with the Conservatives on Europe might well prove more difficult than it was in 2010. Just as importantly, perhaps, how much appetite there is in the party for another spell of coalition government, after its bruising experience in the last five years, remains to be seen.

The European question

As we have noted it seems unlikely that UKIP will secure a large block of parliamentary seats. It is thus only likely to have much in the way of bargaining power if a party (or combination of parties) is relatively close to the 326 mark. Although its statements on the subject have not been wholly consistent, the party has on various occasions raised the prospect of supporting – from the backbenches – both Labour and the Conservatives (though only so long as that government is not also backed by the SNP). But the likely price of its support – an early referendum on Britain’s membership of the EU (without any renegotiation of Britain’s terms of membership as envisaged by the Conservatives) – is one that both Labour and the

Conservatives are likely to be very reluctant to concede. Indeed the Conservative chairman, Grant Shapps, has expressed that reluctance publicly. Much like the nationalist group, UKIP's likely demands may well make it relatively difficult for it to press home whatever bargaining power it does manage to secure.

“The 18 MPs elected from Northern Ireland could come to have a crucial role”

Meanwhile, we should remember that should a prospective government be only a little short of the 326 mark, the 18 MPs elected from Northern Ireland could come to have a crucial role. Any MPs elected under the SDLP label can be expected to provide support to a Labour government, though only three were elected in 2010. Meanwhile to date Sinn Fein have pursued an ‘abstentionist’ policy under which their MPs (of whom there are currently five) have not taken their seats, a decision that effectively means that the target to win an overall majority is in fact likely to be two or three seats less than 326. However, the position that might be adopted by the DUP is a little less certain. In 2010 the Conservatives formed a pact with the DUP's principal unionist opponents, the Ulster Unionists, but in the event their Northern Irish allies failed to win any seats. That pact is now dead and it has been reported that the Conservatives have been courting the DUP in case they might be in a pivotal position after the election. The current Conservative-led government has already promised Northern Ireland the devolution of corporation tax as well as financial support for a beleaguered Northern Ireland Executive, and doubtless the DUP would want to use any negotiating strength it might have to ensure (from the backbenches) that those promises were kept.

Coalition constraints

Of course, as should already be clear from what we have said so far, what kind of government emerges after the next election will not only depend on the stance of the smaller parties but also on the position adopted by both the Conservatives and Labour. There are likely to be contradictory pressures. There is no doubt that many a Conservative

backbencher has disliked the constraints (as they see them) of coalition and would much prefer to govern alone, including as a minority government. The party leader, David Cameron, will be under pressure to consult his parliamentary party more fully about any negotiations than was the case in 2010, while he has also indicated that he would not wish to lead a government that was not committed to holding a referendum on Europe, an issue on which, the DUP apart, he may struggle to find willing allies. On the other hand he will be aware that he is unlikely to retain his party's leadership should he fail to keep the keys to 10 Downing St. And that, as proved to be the case in 2010, might result in him being more flexible in any negotiations than his public utterances would suggest.

Out of power for five years, Labour can be expected to be hungrier for power than it appeared to be in 2010. Meanwhile its leader, Ed Miliband, will also be aware that the future of his leadership is likely to be on the line. But whether this proves to be enough to persuade the party to concede more powers for Scotland, electoral reform for English and Welsh local government or to alter its stance (in either direction) on how best to handle the deficit is far from clear. The party is still insistent that it believes it can win an overall majority, and thus is making few obvious overtures to prospective partners.

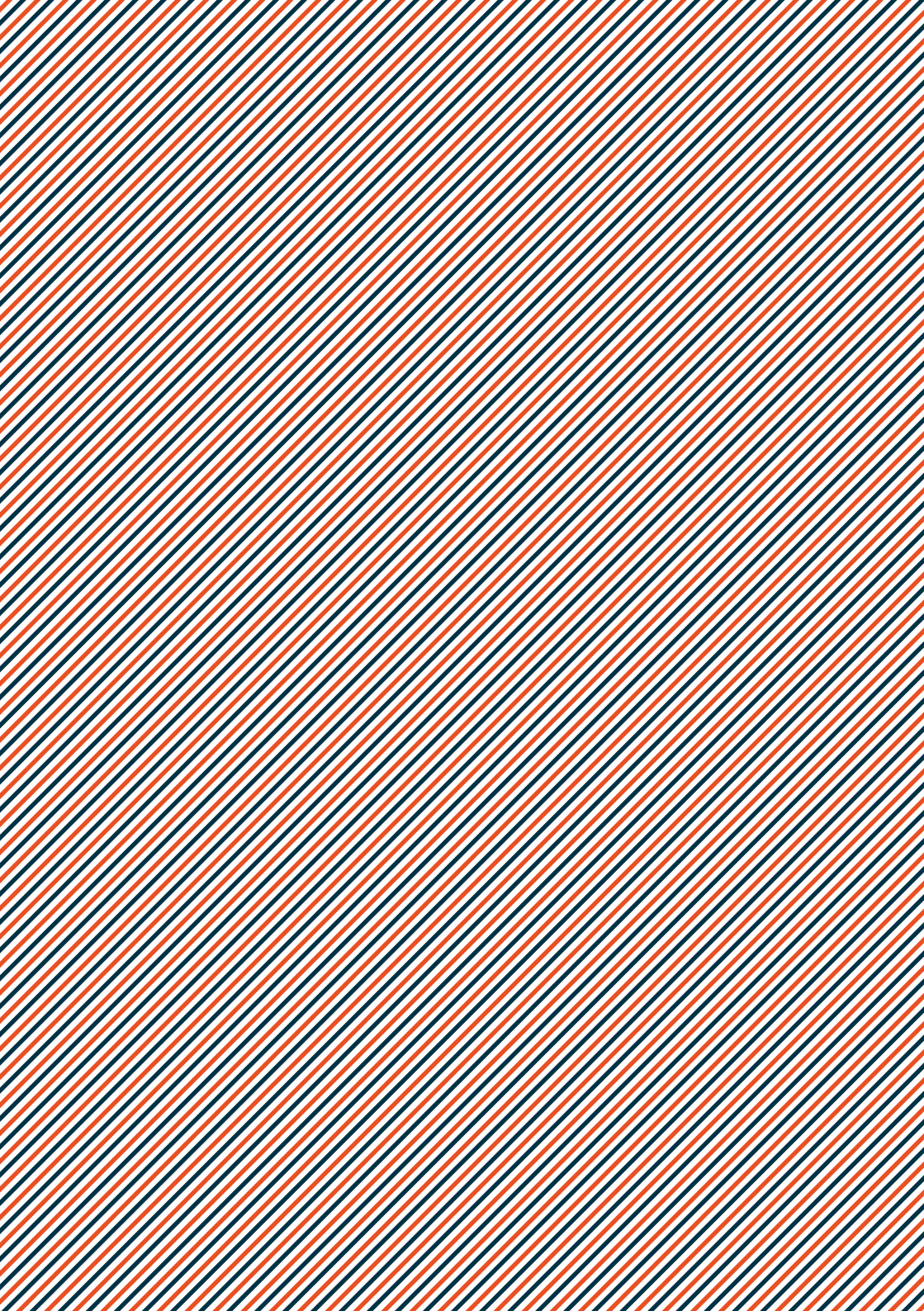
CONCLUSION: A BROKEN ELECTORAL SYSTEM?

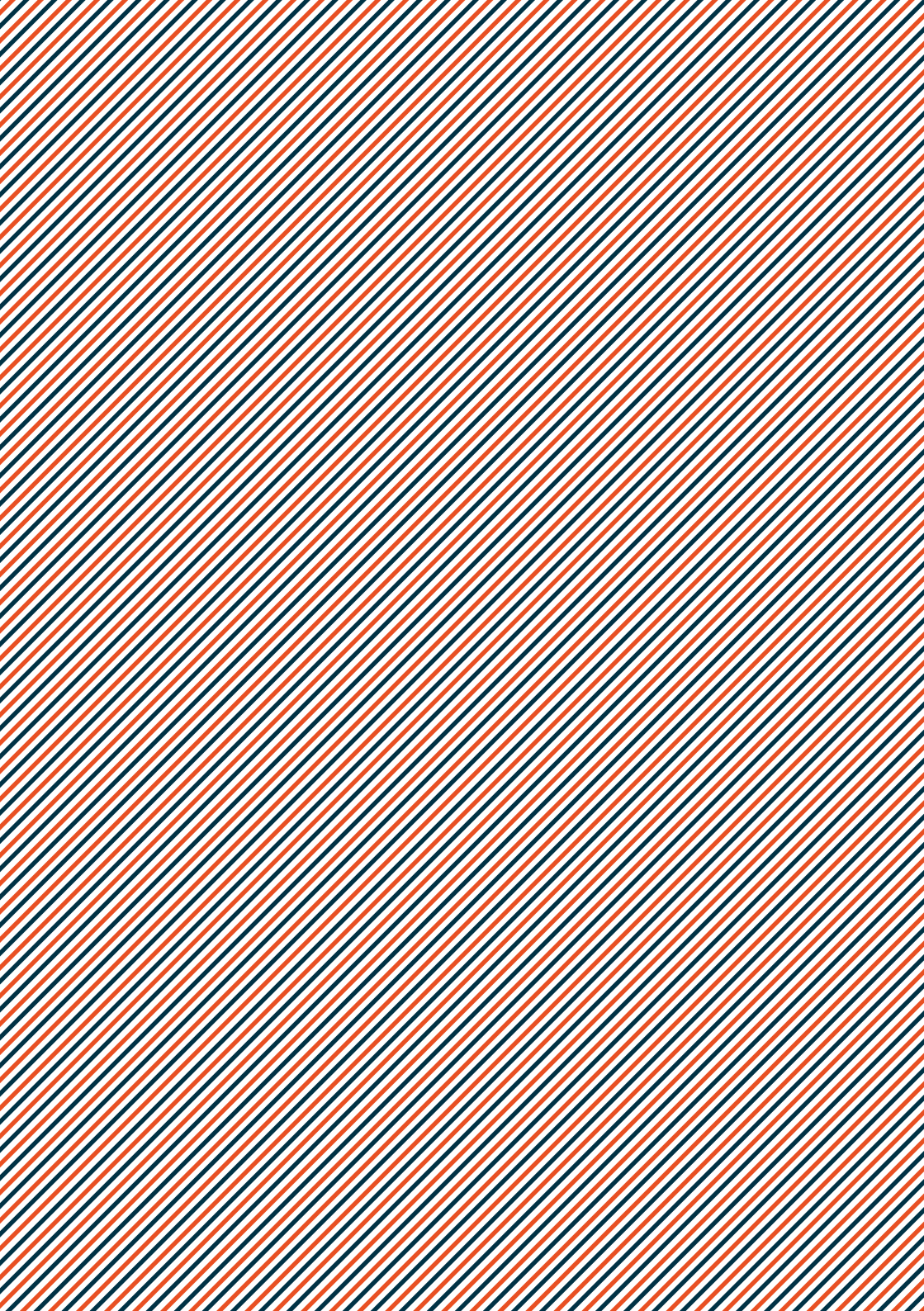
It is still commonly asserted that the ‘real’ choice at a British election is between a Labour or a Conservative government. Given the long and consistent experience of single-party government from 1945 to 2010 it is perhaps not surprising that that view is still widely promulgated – though anyone with a rather longer historical lens would appreciate that Britain has not always enjoyed alternating single-party majority government.

But the 2015 election looks less like a simple battle between two straightforward alternatives than any of its post-war predecessors. Both the Conservatives and Labour face a formidable challenge if they are to achieve their preferred outcome of an overall majority. Despite the continued use of an electoral system that is supposed to ensure that one party has an overall majority, a hung parliament looks at least as likely an outcome as an overall majority, if not more so.

A second failure of the FPTP system to deliver an overall majority, following on from that in 2010, could in itself be expected to revive the debate about electoral reform. But the 2015 election threatens to add its own distinctive twist to the tale. We have seen that thanks to the varying geography of their support, a party that comes sixth in votes across the UK as a whole, the SNP, could emerge with more seats than any of the other smaller parties, including the Liberal Democrats. Conversely, the party that at present appears best placed to come third in terms of votes, UKIP, is at apparent risk of coming sixth in seats, behind not only the SNP and the Liberal Democrats but maybe the DUP too. Meanwhile, even if one party were to win an overall majority, in Labour’s case this could possibly be achieved with a lower share of the vote than that enjoyed by any previous majority government, as well as less than would have been required by the Conservatives to deliver a similar success.

More immediately, however, the very real possibility of another hung parliament raises questions about how the 2015 campaign should be fought. The traditional expectation that one party would win an overall majority has meant that the Conservative and Labour parties have set out their policy stalls and then batted away questions about what they might do in the event of a hung parliament. Only the Liberal Democrats have been expected to address that issue. As we have seen, so far in this campaign the smaller parties have to varying degrees at least set out their stall on how they might negotiate, while for the most part Conservative and Labour spokespersons have tried to avoid the question. Is it not high time that the Conservatives and Labour should be expected to do so too?





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