

David Cameron Must Find his Nerve Against the Scottish Nationalists

My wife Barbara, a renowned political scientist, in the absence of conclusive evidence of humanly generated climate change, suggests that some ineluctable and universal forces are possessing electorates to smite themselves, as if deranged by a self-destructive political bilharzia, inadvertently carried passively by the media.

In the United Kingdom, all three leaders lost the 2010 election, and the country entered the first peacetime coalition since 1935. The Conservative and Liberal Democratic government has had an economically competent record that balanced austerity well enough with fiscal incentives, and has a lower level of unemployment and a higher rate of economic growth than Canada, despite being a comparatively poorer country, tucked into a less promising economic association with Europe than Canada enjoys with the United States.

But David Cameron has waffled on everything else. The National Health Service, which surpasses all other British sacred cows – even the BBC – was to be reformed, and then not; the education department, which has produced steadily less educated students in inverse proportion, as in most other Western countries, to the resources committed to education, was to be reformed, and then not. Arm in arm with France, Britain charged into Libya, ran out of missiles, and, in a time-honoured pattern, called for American assistance; the whole mission, inspired by the boudoir politics of the former French president (Sarkozy), has been a fiasco. Ukraine, Syria, Iranian nuclear weapons: in lock-step with and robotic mimicry of the abstentionist regime in Washington, purposeful words were followed by shilly-shallying.

Cameron started as a Euro-enthusiast, dismissing the UK Independence Party as skinheads and racists (which they are not), and ended committed to a referendum on continued membership in the European Union, making ambiguous claims for a better deal from the Brussels at which he formerly beamed contentedly. He started his term as an alarmist on global warming driving a snowmobile around the Arctic on campaign film, and is now a background-noise mumblor about climate change (which in practice is a reminder that winters are colder than summers in the northern hemisphere).

Having been over-confident about Scotland going into last summer's referendum campaign, and having then panicked, mid-campaign, in vintage Jean Chretien (1995 Quebec referendum) style, when the unionists won the referendum he again panicked and promised wholesale devolution. He was back at it again on election night, even though the Nationalist sweep of the Scottish constituencies didn't imply any increased support for the nonsensical cause of secession. (The Nationalist percentage went up slightly but against five opposing parties, not a monolithic No coalition as in the referendum; for the Cameron government, panic is the default page).

Cameron manages to make even the most mundane announcement a booming *pronunciamento* worthy of Cromwell dismissing Parliament, regardless of whether he is proclaiming a position 180 degrees from his previous recent stance on the same subject. In the hacking scandal, he went in a week from being the (presumably) unpaid advance man for Rupert Murdoch's squeeze-out of the minority at Sky Television to screaming at the dispatch box that Murdoch's company had to be "reformed root and branch." His good fortune was that the leader of the opposition Labour Party, Ed Miliband, was even more unconvincing than Cameron. Cameron wanted the Conservatives to go back to before Thatcher, but Miliband wanted to excavate the Labour cretinism that antedated Tony Blair.

Thursday's election was a monumental illustration of the

vagaries of the Parliamentary system. The Scottish National Party, though only slightly up from its referendum result, smashed the Labour Party's hold on Scotland, elected 56 MPs (a little like Brian Mulroney's destruction of the Liberal lock on Quebec in 1984, which has not been regained). The SNP got eight per cent of the whole Parliament on about five per cent of the total vote in the country. UKIP, from a standing start, won more than twice as many votes as the Liberal Democrats, more indeed than the LibDems and SNP combined, but elected only one of the country's 650 MP's. UKIP had the strongest of the party leaders, Nigel Farage, but he lost his own election and is retiring as leader, as are Miliband and Liberal Democratic leader and outgoing vice premier Nick Clegg. (The most pleasing individual defeat was of George Galloway, formerly of the payroll of Saddam Hussein and who declared his constituency an "Israeli-free zone.")

In sum, the Conservatives bombed their Liberal Democratic partners into oblivion, gained only slightly from Labour, but emerged with 51 per cent of MP's with 37 per cent of the vote, while the ScotsNats, unencumbered by any mandate except to speak strongly for the local interest at Westminster, amputated a whole leg of Labour's and from the middle of election night on have been roaring like a fire-breathing, whiskey-raddled dragon, determined still to shake the centuries-old Union of Britain and Scotland by the eye-teeth.

The Conservatives were the best traditional party on offer, but are the one-eyed man in the valley of the blind, and beneficiaries of the capricious luck of elections, of the implausibility of antiquarian Labour, of the profound redundancy of the Liberal Democrats, and of the picador blood-letting inflicted by the SNP and UKIP against the faltering beast of half-resurrected Old Labour. As Napoleon said, the best generals are the lucky ones and Cameron gets that rarest political gift – a second chance.

The ScotsNats are just regional blackmailers of the Péquiste

and Bloc Québécois variety. British unionists should study Pierre Trudeau's playbook from the 1980 Quebec referendum on independence, when that issue comes up again in Scotland. The country-wide parties should run fusion unionist candidates in Scotland until the hoary head of Scottish separation joins the Loch Ness monster and the Jacobites of the Isle of Skye in the rich Scottish folkloric past.

The Liberal Democrats should merge with Labour and move it a bit to the Blairite centre, and the Conservatives should accommodate UKIP and move slightly right. On Thursday's vote that would give the Conservative group about half the votes and the left-centre 40 per cent, the rest divided between Scottish Nationalists and Greens and the Ulster splinter groups. Cameron will soldier on but there is no reason, to judge from his platitudinous and rather ungracious remarks on election night, that he will be much more impressive than he has been. Boris Johnson, who returned to Parliament, remains the man to watch.

Canada's cameo role in Western political shenanigans was Alberta's election of the NDP this week. Rachel Notley is a thoroughly attractive candidate and it is natural that an electorate tires of a regime after 44 years, and in ideological terms, government of the moderate right under Social Credit and the Conservatives end-to-end for 80 years. But there is no indication that Albertans have the remotest idea what they have done with their province that is still essentially a petroleum, natural gas, and ranching economy.

The premier-elect was very effective in soothing ruffled post-election nerves in the oil industry but she is ostensibly committed to spend more than a billion dollars a year in giveaways to the public service unions, reduced sizes of school classes, stricter environmental regulation, increased minimum wages, welfare benefits, and payments to first nations, enhanced child-care facilities, and capped university tuition. And she is committed to pay for it by income tax and

oil royalty increases.

Either she will make a few symbolic gestures and then enjoy the grace of conversion that economic and political arithmetic can produce, or implement the NDP manifesto after a tokenistic show of bonhomous open-mindedness. The first would require more cynicism than self-proclaimed New Democrats usually possess; the second would be a disaster that would make former Ontario premier Bob Rae, (a fine and able man but not successful in that position), look like St. John Robarts.

Most contemporary politics and politicians are not very interesting, and not because the times aren't challenging enough to require capable leaders.

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