

My fears: the nationalist parties

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I want to continue my series on the fears I have regarding the outcome of the 2015 general election. Having already addressed my concerns about what [the Conservative](#) and [Labour parties](#) might do if elected with working majorities (however unlikely that seems at present) I now have to change the premise on which I comment, because other parties will not, for all practical purposes, have much influence unless Labour and the Conservatives fail in that objective, as seems very likely.

I may at some point need to address my concerns about what are predominantly the English minority parties (and based on current forecasts that will be an accurate description of UKIP and, in all likelihood, the LibDems as well as the Greens) but let me for now address the nationalist issue.

The first, and obvious thing to say is that this issue is much bigger than that of the SNP. For example, none of the mainstream parties will hold seats in Northern Ireland after the election, and although Unionists have always had ties with the Conservative Party and there appears to be a natural affinity between the DUP and the Conservatives, that cannot be assumed to be the case. As has also been pointed out by Owen Jones and others, many of the DUP's ethical positions are deeply offensive to many in much of the rest of the UK now: their position may be Unionist, but it is also, hopefully, deeply isolating.

It is also important to note that whilst the Conservatives might be reduced to no more than one MP in Scotland so might the LibDems, whilst Labour might hold only two or three in that country, and LibDem and Tory representation in Wales will be pretty modest in the overall scheme of things (maybe seven Conservative and two LibDem).

I make these points for good reason. The reality is that after this election we will face the most fractured split of seats in the House of Commons that most will have known in their lifetimes. It seems likely that the electorate will decide that the Conservatives and LibDems are very largely English parties. Only Labour look likely to be left with any credible claim to have substantial representation in more than one of the constituent countries of the United Kingdom.

This is an extraordinary situation. If it is only Labour that is succeeding in being more than a single nation party at this moment the debate about nationalism does then need to consider not just the explicitly nationalist parties of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland but most particularly those of England as well, which quite specifically includes the Conservatives, for whom over 97% of their seats will be in that one country. UKIP does also, of course, fall into the English nationalist tendency.

I think this matters: it is likely that over the half the forthcoming parliament will be comprised of members from parties whose instincts are naturally bias towards one nation in the Union over the interests of all others.

By far the most worrying of these parties is the Conservatives. They are the only party who are threatening to use their position at Westminster to exclude members of parliament from another UK country from decisions that will impact their constituents. Their claimed English votes for English laws (EVEL) policy on matters such as tax makes this obvious: not all tax issues are devolved to Scotland and as a matter of fact Scottish tax powers will be pitched to English rates for at last the time being whilst decisions on funding in England clearly impact funding available under the Barnett formula. Tax matters also implicitly impact on monetary and fiscal policy if only most politicians understood that fact. To say there can be tax decisions reserved for English MPs alone, or English, Welsh and Northern Ireland MPs alone, is in that case just wrong: nothing so far agreed on devolved powers says that is appropriate.

Implicit in this policy is also a claim that sterling is an English currency that others may use with English consent. This, again, is not just wrong, it is deeply patronising, obviously inaccurate when at present this is the national currency of the whole of the UK, and contemptuous of the parliamentary rights of those representing otherwise to suggest that this is the case. The Bank of England is at present misnamed: it is most definitely the Bank of the Union, but the Conservatives are appropriating it for inappropriate purpose and of late I have seen far too many suggesting that it would be inappropriate for it to, for example, take Scottish issues into consideration in its deliberations. I believe that entirely incorrect whether economically, politically or constitutionally at present.

If, then, there is a party seeking to create parliamentary chaos based on nationalism the prime candidate would appear to be the Conservative Party.

What then of the other nationalist parties? UKIP I do not take seriously. I also think that this is the high point in their history. Just as the BNP was once considered a major political force and has faded with the fall from grace of Nick Griffin so too will UKIP decline, in my opinion. It is very obvious that this is a party wrapped around the personality of Nigel Farage and without any other coherent philosophy that binds the remainder of its membership together (unless xenophobia can be described as such). Without any obvious alternative leader to Farage, who is looking increasingly spent both physically and as a political force as this election progresses, it is hard to see UKIP

as being on anything but a downward political path in future.

The LibDems will also very largely be a nationalist party after this election: their Scottish base, barring the Northern Isles, where voting LibDem is simply a means of saying ‘none of the others’, looks likely to be totally eradicated.

But so too do the LibDems look like a spent political force. Not only will their seat numbers decline everywhere, whatever policy platform they once had appears to have disappeared, with the sole criteria for voting LibDem now appearing to be that which was once peculiar to the Northern Isles, except that it has come to mean ‘the moderate Tory alternative’ as the LibDem leadership makes clearer by the day that it could not face working with Labour and that it is not, as a result, a serious party of coalition after all. Its future is, then, linked too inextricably to that of its most recent paymasters in the Conservative Party to be considered separately any more.

Which finally brings us to the SNP. Let me be unambiguous: there are enormous risks in having a large block of MPs in the Commons from a party where most of those members will have very limited experience of operating in that place. But there are reasons to presume that this will not be the problem that might be reasonably anticipated and those all come from the fact that the SNP is a party used to power, government and negotiating with Westminster, whether in the political machine or the civil service. And presuming that the party whip will be tightly adhered to, as I suspect will be likely, then the leadership of Nicola Sturgeon in Scotland and Alex Salmond in Westminster will be effective. If the Scots are good at anything it is at training politicians, and almost all of them will now be nationalists.

That being said, will the SNP actually get its way? Yes, has to be the answer on some issues. So, it will get to crown the government. The simple fact that it is likely that Labour and Conservatives are likely to be less than ten seats apart after the election (unless every poll is wrong, and they could be, but it’s unlikely) and that the SNP might, with 50 seats, empower either to pass a Queen’s Speech means that, like it or not, they can make or break either party. That they will not support the Conservatives is not some crime on their part; it is the fault of years of Conservative neglect.

But, equally, I am certain that the SNP will not go into government with Labour. Philosophically the SNP cannot endorse the Westminster right to rule Scotland by joining a unionist party in power, and that is what Labour is. It’s really not credible to think they will do that. If there was any red line for the SNP I would imagine this is it. Their role in Westminster will always be on the backbenches.

That though will not alter the fact that Labour should be able to rely on the SNP to pass a Queen’s Speech (with the possible help of Green, SDLP and maybe Alliance support too) even if thereafter the SNP may quite deliberately decide to withhold support on particular measures, such as Trident renewal. It would then be for Labour to rally support elsewhere in the House, just as on occasion the 2010-15 government had to

rely on Labour support when Tory backbenchers were in rebellious mood.

And this is all we need to know about the SNP in Westminster. The simple fact is that it is not going to be in office. It is not going to write policy. It is not going to set terms. It is not going to be pulling any strings. What it is going to be doing is saying yes or no to the only party whose Queen's Speech it will vote for, which is Labour's, and it will then be for Labour to either work out if it can carry other party's with it on an issue or not. Overall, so long as Labour sticks to its current plans to invest and cut moderately so that non-ring fenced services survive largely intact most of its plans will receive SNP support. Obvious exceptions, like Trident, will survive because the Tories will not dare vote them down on such issues.

Certainly there will be compromises, deals done and negotiations made. But that is always and forever the way of politics, even when there is one party government because most of them are at best rather loose coalitions. Nothing will change, barring the fact that Labour will know it will have a significant task on its hands in presenting coherent policy that will be subject to a great deal of parliamentary scrutiny which will pass only if it passes muster with the House of Commons. I will deal with the Lords separately.

That I call a good thing.

And what I cannot see happening is the SNP using its position in Westminster to secure independence. Why do that when it can stand in Scotland on that platform in 2016?

So, the nationalist issue is a real one. If embraced it could be a force for good. It could enhance parliament and its effectiveness. It could enhance politics.

The problem of nationalism is inherent in the mindset of the English nationalist who believes they have a right to rule that has resulted in the alienation of the Scots, the rise of the SNP, and the undermining of democracy in the UK because of the unwillingness of too many to accept that the Scots can and should make their own choices

And that problem will survive the departure of the Scots from the UK, as will now surely happen. The Conservatives will not win a majority on the rest of the UK, Scotland excluded, in this election. That may well happen again in 2020. If so, and with Wales by then the targets for abuse, the problems of English nationalism will persist. Only electoral reform can address that issue. But that's the subject for another blog.