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The topsy-turvy election pollsters failed to predict

Ulrich Storck gives his take on the UK's general election

Theresa May's Tories (Conservatives) are still the largest party in the British House of Commons, yet they didn't manage to hold onto their majority, let alone increase it as they had hoped. What went wrong for them?

It feels almost as if Theresa May has lost the election, even though she won it, and her reputation as party leader has taken a significant knock. When she announced a snap election in April she was riding high in the polls and assumed she'd be able to increase her parliamentary majority. She decided to focus her campaign on the Brexit negotiations and present herself as the only person capable of uncompromisingly defending her country's interests against Britain's "enemies" in Brussels. Unfortunately for her, the plan flopped. She came across as increasingly arrogant, and kept rigidly repeating the same old tired slogans, which were relentlessly mocked by comedians and lost her credibility. Her campaign focussed too much on traditional hard-line conservative policies, which reminded voters of her party's reputed lack of compassion. She announced further cuts to social welfare which often hit the most vulnerable, such as those in care. Her refusal to rule out tax increases for her core voters shows just how confident she felt about winning. Other tactical blunders included a major U-turn on one of the key policies of her manifesto – making wealthier pensioners pay more for their care – and her refusal to face her rivals in a TV debate. Far from offering "strong and stable leadership," May appeared weak and dithering.

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Corbyn on the other hand entered the election campaign on an unashamedly left-wing platform, concentrating on domestic, social issues. He fashioned himself as a courageous thinker and authentic politician, prepared to go against the grain of established wisdom. Labour sought to get its target voters on side with popular promises: the abolition of university

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tuition fees for its younger voters; increased investment in schools and hospitals – all financed through a fair and progressive system of taxation that demanded more from the wealthiest individuals and large corporations. Although many Labour policies, such as the renationalisation of the Post Office and railways as well as "uncosted" social benefit payments, were dismissed by his rivals and the media as "old-fashioned leftie pie-in-the-sky", they did at least show that left-wing policies could still go down well with the British public. Many young people were enthused by Labour's policies, and by the prospect of real political change in the figure of anti-establishment Corbyn.

The Tories' plan to target aspiring middle class swing voters fell flat, despite the fact their campaign was concentrated heavily in constituencies where these voters live. Labour and Corbyn himself increased in stature during the campaign, and showed they could no longer be so easily discredited. Labour also reminded these swing voters that it was Tory austerity policies that had made their lives harder.

Labour MPs tried more than once to topple their party leader, Jeremy Corbyn. Can we expect an end to the squabbling within the party now he's performed so surprisingly well in the election?

Many see Corbyn as the real winner of the election: under his direction the Labour party shot up 10 percent in the polls, won 31 new seats and its share of the popular vote is just two percentage points behind the Tories. So he's performed significantly better than his predecessor, Ed Miliband. His fiercest critics within the party, who were far more concerned with his supposed lack of electability than with his political stance, have fallen silent. It's certainly true though that Corbyn won't be able to reconcile all the different political strands in his party. But at least he has now won enough respect to take on the challenge. I think we'll see the dividing lines between the pro- and anti-Corbyn camps weakening, and more MPs getting behind their leader. It's very unlikely we'll see another coup attempt soon, or that Corbyn himself will consider stepping down. Labour has without doubt increased its influence and voice in British politics, and it's now conceivable it will be preparing for Theresa May possibly being toppled – something that seemed a utopian dream just 24 hours before.

What can we surmise from the Scottish Nationalist Party's (SNP) poor performance? Is another independence referendum still on the cards?

The SNP overreached themselves. They lost 21 seats, including those held by two star players – Angus Robertson, SNP leader in Westminster, and Alex Salmond who's head of the party – and count among this election's biggest losers. The main reason for their poor showing is that Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's First Minister and the SNP leader, played a similar game to May, in that for party political reasons she decided to call a referendum (on Scottish independence) that the electorate didn't ask for. 65 percent of Scots are against holding a new independence referendum. Sturgeon has gambled away her chances of having a decent say in May's Brexit negotiations and also deprived herself of putting forward alternatives to a referendum, knowing full well that this is an unpopular notion currently. The election result is her reckoning.

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The Conservatives in Scotland managed to position themselves as champions of the union between the four nations of the United Kingdom. They were rewarded with 12 former SNP seats. The SNP government in the devolved Scottish parliament has been lacklustre, and this performance probably explains why they lost a further six seats to Labour in this election. Another independence referendum before the end of Brexit negotiations is now off the table. We'll have to wait and see if the mood has changed after the negotiations are over.

Interview conducted by Hannes Alpen



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