

The 2010's a mid-term review: Sir Anthony Seldon

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The Gladstone Club
1 Whitehall Place London SW1A 2HD

Did Labour elect a decade in opposition? Who will succeed Cameron? And can the LibDems recover? Anthony Seldon reviews the second decade of the 21st century in British politics and reads the runes for the next parliament in 2020.

Jeremy Corbyn, he says, will last 3 years, like his ideological forebear Michael Foot who resigned in 1983 after Labour's worst ever election result. There is a spectrum between ideological purity and power. If you want to get anything done you have to be electable and that will mean renouncing positions that repel moderate voters. He thinks Labour will accept opposition in the name of radicalism for 5 years but not 10. Meanwhile is the Blair-Brown narrative done? Brown was temperamentally ill-suited to the PM role and his invidious *modus operandi* infected the Milliband regime. Principal Brown acolyte Ed Balls lost his seat in 2015 so it may be history. Seldon muses that (Blairite) Chuka Umunna would be the right sort of leader.

Rerun 1981 Labour split?

When the 'Gang of 4' left over Foot's policies of unilateral nuclear disarmament, nationalizing utilities, supertax etc 28 Labour MPs followed but the fate of the SDP and the careers of its leaders hold out few attractions for a rerun. The SDP-Liberal Alliance won 25.4% of the vote, the biggest Liberal share since Asquith and relegation to 3rd party status but it was not enough. Labour held 2nd on 27.6% and the Falklands won Thatcher the election. Age is a factor. Corbyn is 67, the same age that Foot became leader. If he won in 2020 he would be the oldest first term PM ever. By contrast at 43 in 2010 Cameron was the youngest PM since 1812 (Lord Liverpool).

Tory detox

Cameron was the 5th leader in 9 years and the longest spell in opposition since 1832. With Theresa May's 2002 'nasty party' and Ann Widdecombe's 'something of the night' there was a need to 'detox the brand' which he successfully did. Steve Hilton's eclectic metropolitan, progressive (ie. liberal) pragmatism supplanted the Big Society and 'hug a hoodie'. He added ring-fencing the NHS and the 0.7% foreign aid budgets. More hawkish advisers Andy Coulson and Osborne argued that 'Plan A' deficit reduction was all that mattered. The 2010 message was mixed and Cameron was blamed for not winning outright but for him the LibDems were a welcome protection. He genuinely liked Nick and was naively optimistic about the Coalition. Others knew it would destroy the LibDems and felt they had not done their homework on the destruction of junior parties here and in Europe.

Succession plan

Seldon believes it is journalistic vanity to claim Cameron's kitchen interview 'slip' was a fatal mistake. On 24th March he told the BBC he would not seek a 3rd term. Is it a slip? He seemed well-prepared with shredded wheat analogies and a theory that 3rd term PMs have a tendency to 'go mad'. Few handle the succession well. May, Osborne and Johnson were all tipped and each has had spells as bookies' favourite. Since his 'National Living Wage' budget in July Osborne is in front, up from 8% to 31% and May has fallen behind Johnson.

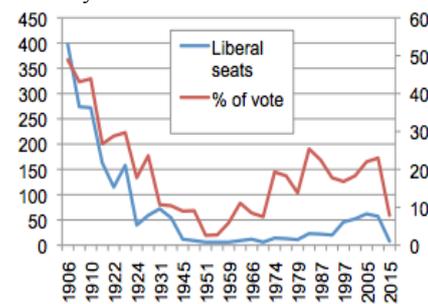
Incumbent deputies have a difficult record. Major survived against all odds, Eden following Churchill lasted only 21 months, Brown 3 years. It is difficult for a Chancellor not to be a one-trick-pony, with fortunes at the mercy of external forces. Osborne recognized that danger in his conference speech concerns for Chinese growth, Eurozone and US employment. He lacks the hubris for claims like Brown's "No more boom and bust!" Seldon says he is a master political strategist and he clearly relished Labour's discomfiture claiming the Tories are now the 'party of labour' repeating Bevan's 1945 line "We are the builders". But he says George is more admired than loved and lacks the warmth needed to be PM.

Seldon makes much of the rigours of the top job. He wonders if Boris has the stomach for the workload, whether his trademark *joie de vivre* could survive and whether he can mend his private life.

Theresa May's 'tough on immigration' conference speech was billed as a leadership bid. Described as icy, cynical and irresponsible by the Guardian, brilliant and brave in the Mail by Peter Osborne. He mounts a spirited case but surely to blame shortages of housing and hospital beds on immigration is just misleading: feeding on and nourishing ignorance.

A very dark hour for LibDems

To put the Liberal position in context, their lowest ebb in 1951 had 6 MPs from 2.6% of the national vote so May's 7.9% may not be as bad as it looks. The choppy recovery lost some momentum since 1997.



Liberal principles

LibDem fortunes depend more on attitudes to the party in office than liberal principles or policy, Seldon says, so to be definitive about what they stand for risks losing votes one side or the other. A disillusioned prognosis from a man with deep Liberal roots. He recalls aged 9 in 1962 his parents leading the Orpington by-election. His father was an influential proponent of Classical Economic Liberalism a tradition neglected by a Social Democratizing party to be enthusiastically embraced by Thatcher. The Seldons followed. LibDems insistence on being ahead of the electorate on progressive social and constitutional change also tends to lose this type of liberal and many on the centre ground. Tim Farron is less aggressively avant garde and that may pay dividends if the party will go with him.

Seldon thinks they could have got more from the coalition deal and underestimated how much Cameron needed them. Perhaps they pinned their hopes on AV changing the game for 2015? They certainly felt betrayed when Cameron waded in strongly for the 'No' vote.

Coalition was an opportunity for both sides to 'drop their more rubbish policies'. Seldon says the Tuition Fees promise fell into that category in the minds of the LibDem negotiators. The Conservatives would have given ground but Nick Clegg voluntarily surrendered it, so committed was he to show he was signed-up to 'Plan A'. Osborne allegedly told his staff 'They are mad!' All 57 Libdem MPs had signed the National Union of Students pledge to 'vote against an increase in tuition fees'. The government bill raising the cap from £3k to £9k passed by only 21 votes. 28 LibDems including Clegg, Cable and Laws voted it through. Mr Clegg later apologised, saying "We should not have made a promise we were not sure we could deliver" and added that the new system was fairer. He conspicuously does not say he fought to save the pledge. All this means they gave away what has long been the Liberals' most valuable asset – that they stand on the high ground of principle. Tim Farron kept the pledge as did 3 of his MPs: Mulholland, Pugh and Williams but it may be many years before 7m of tomorrow's electors and their parents will be willing to give the party a new hearing.