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Peter Noordhoek: Last week's election results from French and Dutch perspectives

Peter Noordhoek is a member of the Dutch Christian-Democratic Party (CDA).



Congratulations with the results the Conservatives got on the 3rd of May! I do not really know how far the Conservatives are when it comes to giving local government more responsibilities, but the locals certainly want more conservatives. Again, congratulations, this time from someone in the Netherlands who may be forgiven for feeling more connected to this result than otherwise. A weekend before the elections I went along canvassing with Greg Clark MP and some other wonderful people from Tunbridge Wells on a beautiful Saturday in April. Democracy in action, truly.

A month back I wrote about the danger of fragmentation. Our electorate has split in the Netherlands, with the extremes of the left and right winning the elections and losing them at the same time because of internal divisions. This might happen to you as well, I wrote. However, some of you rightfully pointed out that the French electorate seemed to be doing the opposite, having thrown their votes to either Ségolène Royal or Sarkozy, the final winner. So what is the correct analysis?

Let me first presume that I was wrong and that the British electorate, as much as the French, wants to go for a clear-cut choice between a left and a right wing candidate. Let me also presume that 85% of the British population will vote and that 58% of them will vote for the right wing candidate, Cameron. Does this sound true? Well, the LibDems certainly were pushed out of the equation on May the 3rd, and in fact you can only see one real colour in England and it is blue. So not much evidence of fragmentation there. Moreover; it seems likely the media will be absolutely focussed on the contest between Brown and Cameron in the run up to the national election, leaving no room for other parties. But having said all that, does this mean the British electorate will ignore the alternatives and like their choice? To me, it does not sound like the right analysis.

Good then, back to my original analysis; the coming fragmentation. The evidence for that seems mainly to be found in Scotland. I hereby invite all Scots to come to the Netherlands so that they can learn the subtle art of coalition building. The SNP won a victory but not a mandate. They will need to work with one or two junior parties, if you have the nerve to call the Conservatives or LibDems 'junior'. There is undoubtedly evidence of fragmentation there. But then, the conditions are extraordinary and it does not seem the Scottish vote will transfer itself to Wales or Northern Ireland. And when you look to the North of England, even though the gains may not be as much as Cameron would have liked, it is undeniably turning more blue than red or yellow. So again, no convincing evidence in the voting patterns for fragmentation.

So therefore it looks like the next general election will be a rather classic choice between two men and their

parties, a clash of blue and red, with some crimson for the loser. And given the way things are going, it is the burly Scotsman that will turn from red to crimson in the end. I must admit the scenario appeals to me. I will not claim I am neutral, Dutchman or not. Still, warning bells are ringing.

Think about it. After 20 years in opposition, the Socialist Party in France still has not managed to beat the rightwing party, even though Chirac's government has been tainted by scandals and failure. Though Sarkozy tried to distance himself from Chirac, he is still his successor. Madame Royal managed to hold her party together, had all the right imagery ('the best no make-up make-up ever'), but did not make it.

In Holland, the labour opposition won the local elections and everyone predicted a wipe-out of the government at the national elections. It did not happen - quite the contrary.

This is not to say that things will go wrong for the Conservative Party. There is reason enough for optimism. The significance of the election of May the 3rd is that the average voter now finds the Conservatives fit for government again and that is a real breakthrough. But much still needs to be done. For that it will be necessary to look underneath the votes and the electoral systems and see British society for what it is. Look at the difference in lifestyles. How to match the post-modern, cosmopolitan view of the affluent voter with that of those who are living on a small pension, or trying to make something of their lives in a bleak housing project?

Look at the number of people that came out to vote - no 85% here. If low turnout can be translated in low commitment to society, what does that mean for a party that has the wonderful one nation legacy in its treasure chest? Sarkozy shamelessly copied statements from Jean-Marie le Pen. He was willing to pay the price for that in social unrest, but is that the way to win in Britain as well? In the Netherlands the CDA gained victory with a firm focus on three words that captured all: wealth, security, respect. But those are the words of a party in power and with a firm track record. What will the words be that appeal to Britain in all its diversity and give a party in opposition the leading edge?

Whether in Holland, France or Britain, we live in societies where people are more and more alike. They watch the same television programmes, buy the same products and share many of the same fears and prejudices. At the same time, they do not feel alike and resent being treated as such. People are willing to take strong positions when challenged. Opinions are easy, voting is cheap. So there is a thin line between cohesion and fragmentation. Let the true master of politics reveal itself in the coming years.

Related link: [A message of fragmentation from the Dutch voters to Britain](#)

May 12, 2007 at 07:39 in [Peter Noordhoek](#) | [Permalink](#)

Comments



simon zei...

A thoughtful piece, well done! i don't think Mr Noordherk understands the 'complexities' of the Scottish Party system. It goes like this: Labour despise the SNP; the SNP despise Labour; the Conservatives despise the SNP- a little more than they despise Labour... Pause for breath. Meanwhile, the SNP despises the Conservatives but not as much as they do Labour; the SNP, the Conservatives, Labour all despise the Liberal Democrats. The Liberal Democrats just love themselves. That's basically it. Yep, coalition building will succeed in Scotland! Tongue in cheek...

[Antwoorden May 12, 2007 at 10:55](#)



Dave Bartlett zei...

" I do not really know how far the Conservatives are when it comes to giving local government more responsibilities, but the locals certainly want more conservatives. "

Mr Cameron and co are certainly doing a lot of 'talking' about devolving power from Westminster to local councils, and given that they've now tasted opposition for ten years I should think the notion of greater local gov't autonomy will be seen as an important defence for conservative values. Here's hoping :-).

Antwoorden May 12, 2007 at 14:04

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