– mainly remain / leave – may be becoming more important. The future, therefore, is highly uncertain, and there is still plenty of opportunity for further electoral shocks to disrupt the established political landscape.

With respect to the potential for future coalitions, the authors conclude that the outcome of the 2015 election does not show that, as Disraeli put it, 'England does not love coalitions', but that the voters did not like that specific coalition. That was partly due to the fact that Lib Dem voters didn't like Conservatives, but also because Lib Dem participation in coalition didn't obviously deliver anything much that they cared about. As David Laws' and others' recollections of the 2010–15 government show, the Conservatives rarely missed a chance to bring in measures that directly benefited their own voters and to veto things that would hurt them. In contrast, Liberal Democrat ministers governed with a comprehensive disregard to what their voters were likely to want and think – probably at least partly because Lib Dem politicians are more likely to see politics as a competition of ideas rather than of social groups. As one Liberal Democrat minister put it in 2011, 'The Lib Dem base has been public sector workers, students and intellectuals. We have contrived to fuck them all off.'

Arguably, if the party had stuck to its manifesto commitment to abolish tuition fees – which was clearly identified amongst the public with the Liberal Democrats, and was a popular policy particularly with university graduates, one of the groups most strongly voting Lib Dem – instead of insisting on its manifesto commitment to raise the income tax threshold – which was not strongly identified with the party and in practice benefited only the Conservatives – the 2015 election might not have proved such an electoral shock. Liberal Democrat participants in any future coalition need to pay as much attention to politics as to policies.

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Analysing the 2015 and 2017 elections

Philip Cowley and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2015* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)
Philip Cowley and Dennis Kavanagh *The British General Election of 2017* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)
Review by **Michael Steed**

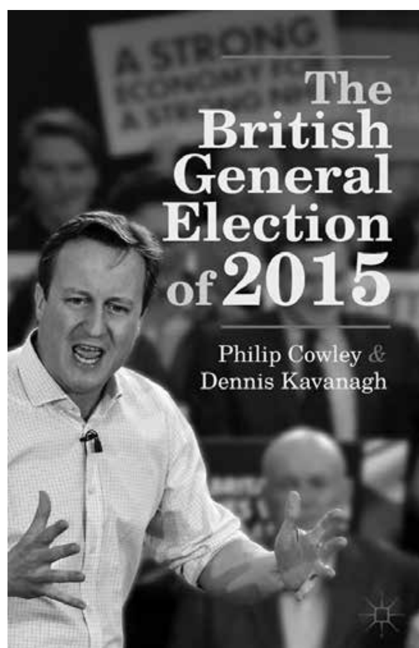
The cluster of UK general elections of 2015, 2017 and 2019 may appear to future historians as essentially one momentous juncture, comparable with that of the 1922, 1923 and 1924 elections. These, starting with the removal of the last Liberal prime minister and ending with the establishment of a new two-party dominance, transformed Britain's political landscape. Superficially, the 2015–19 trio confirmed the existing big-two-plus-others system, after a reshuffle of the smaller parties' cards. Dig deeper and maybe, just as the 1922–24 trio replaced an earlier political alignment with one based on socio-economic class, the three recent elections have dumped class and substituted a new mix of age and cultural values as the denominator of the British party system. If so, that alone would be a profound, once-a-century political realignment.

Or, perhaps, future historians will add in the first Scottish independence referendum of 2014 (surely not the last), along with the second European referendum of 2016, to make a set of five seismic popular votes which shook the United Kingdom: a shaking that will maybe finish off the Union – or perhaps just end the extraordinary dominance that the Conservative Party has exercised since the Disraelian realignment of 1874. Indeed, might a future Trevor Wilson be debating whether the Conservatives' demise following their last-ever victory of December 2019 was accident, old age, or the inevitable outcome of the suicidal insanity that gripped the party in 2010s?

Whatever the perspective, all such historians will need to consult these two comprehensive and meticulous accounts of the 2015 and 2017 British general elections. Their strength is that each looks at one specific election framed by the expectations and actions of those who took either part in that event or were assessing and defining its significance as it was happening. The authors follow a pattern laid down originally in 1945 and developed by many authors since then, most notably David Butler: what were known as the Nuffield election studies when I contributed (1964–2005) now proclaim themselves the Palgrave Macmillan election studies, these two being the nineteenth and twentieth in that series.

They also mark a turning point in authorship. Butler retired with the 2005 election; by then his co-author for nine volumes, Dennis Kavanagh, had taken the brand forward. Philip Cowley has now moved firmly into the saddle. A more earthy style, a decision to quote the exact words of interviewees under the stress of party infighting or unexpected setbacks (no expletives deleted), and quirky speculative asides have spiced up the Butler offering of clinical detachment. Anthony Howard reviewed Butler's 1970 election volume under the headline 'Taking the life out of politics',[1] somewhat unfairly – but it was a widespread view among the commentariat. Cowley may be criticised for using 'industrial language', but not for what Howard termed Butler's 'rigid and austere standards'.

These volumes also now appear later in the electoral cycle than Butler's used to. I well recall the rush to get my material on the 28 February 1974 election into print in time to inform commentators on the expected second election, in October 1974. Butler



thereby made sure that he wrote the first draft of history, fast; others took more time to analyse the evidence and ponder the meaning. That now includes another political science institution – the British Election Studies. The BES interviews a full representative sample of the electorate before, during and after the event; Cowley's volumes now include evidence from the BES, which makes for a fuller, more reflective, second draft of history.

The books have also grown. These two measure 483 and 570 pages respectively; the last pre-Cowley one (2005) was 275. I calculate the modal length in the period I was involved at about 380 pages, the mean was similar, the median 373.5 and the maximum ever (1970) 493 pages, expanded to include a one-off prescient appendix by James Kellas on Scottish Nationalism, despite the failure of the SNP to win any mainland Scottish seat at that election.

This expansion allows the authors, and the other specialists who have contributed (in total seventeen to one or other of these volumes), to handle better not only an increasingly complex party system but also what to a previous generation is a baffling multiplicity of media outlets. A shift in the books' media coverage records the print media having become more partisan in the electoral battle than other channels of communication: one important conclusion is that the 2017 result was a notable rebuff to the vituperative press campaign against Corbyn. Examining constituency campaigning in 2015, the authors assign the Conservatives' victory in the digital war to their having more money, thereby avoiding the effect of the long-term massive decline in the party's membership (i.e. volunteer workforce) on the ground. Yet the huge SNP surge did, it seems, owe much to the efforts of the swelling membership. The Liberal Democrat collapse followed from five years of loss of activists, councillors and Short money funding. Examined in such detail, these elections were a fascinating interplay between old and new types of campaigning.

Each book is a mine of well-informed and thorough research into British politics around the time of each election, rich in revealing nuggets. Political historians, whether with a focus on voting behaviour, on any of the British political parties (major or minor),[2] on any of the changing media or on policy issues, will neglect this evidence at their peril; Northern Ireland is the exception. The growing separation of the province's politics from mainland Britain has meant that, from 1997, the series has given it only perfunctory coverage (an unfortunate gap when the DUP suddenly acquired leverage at Westminster in 2017). Fortunately, the growing separation of Scotland's politics from the rest of Britain has not been treated in the same way; a lag in understanding how much the Scottishness of elections in Scotland now matters may explain why the 2017 campaign (when Scotland behaved slightly less differently) is more fully and better covered than the more dramatic 2015 outcome.

For the Liberal Democrats, the story of 2015 is confirmation that it was indeed the coalition that caused the catastrophe. A few weeks in spring 2015 could not reverse what had happened since 2010. The party was torn between trying to save seats by fighting on local MP's reputations and trying, with no success whatsoever, to string together a national narrative out of pupil premiums and personal tax allowances. Nonetheless, the BES found Nick Clegg's standing actually increased during the campaign more than that of any other leader.

Too late. The Conservatives had won the narrative war during the years in which Lib Dem ministers had been used as window dressing (quoted from a Cameron aid, p. 26). In their analysis of how Labour worked out its post-2010 strategy, the authors stress the Lib Dem role in this narrative construction, as Labour saw it. By using the Tory version of history ('to put right Labour's reckless spending', p. 72) to justify his decision go with Cameron, Clegg had reinforced that version. Here, perhaps, is also a key to later problems encountered by the Lib Dems. Buried in footnote 10 on page 38 lies the authors' sober verdict that 'it may indeed have been better for the Lib Dems to have left the coalition before the five years was up.'

Their account of Tim Farron's travails in 2017 over the sinfulness of sex adds little to the known story. The party was trapped by an odd combination of Channel Four News, the Daily Mail and a Labour Facebook campaign (what else do these three have in common?). The authors do comment on the oddity that his equivocation blew up in 2017 when it had been unnoticed at the point when he became leader in 2015, but do not explore any conspiracy explanation. Were, perhaps, the sins of his predecessor being visited upon poor Tim via an essentially trivial question?

There is a curious parallel in the Conservative manifesto commitment

to a free vote on fox hunting, which featured in both their 2015 and 2017 manifestos. This issue also cut through unexpectedly in 2017, having not done so at all in 2015, and the authors struggle to answer why (they dismiss the explanation that it was social media). Was it something about the very pointlessness of Mrs May's premature dissolution in 2017 which encouraged such side issues to explode as they did?

Cowley and Kavanagh see the gay sex issue as derailing the 2017 Lib Dem campaign, implying rather than concluding that it was therefore damaging: at the start of the campaign the party's prospects had looked better than things turned out. Another answer lies in a revealing statistic in Dominic Wring and David Deacon's exhaustive analysis of press coverage – the Lib Dem news presence dropped from 10 per cent in 2015 to 6 per cent in 2017.

The vote-share dropped less, from 8.1 per cent to 7.6 per cent, yet Lib Dem seats went up in 2017 (as they often do when there is a national anti-Tory swing but a falling Liberal vote, viz. 1966 or 1992). It is tempting to see the party's similar level of 2015 and 2017 votes as its baseline. Not so, as the statistical appendix by John Curtice et al. shows by examining the varied local performance. Serious politics seems to have played a major role in reshuffling the party's vote.

The overall drop was 0.5 points; but across Labour seats, regardless of EU referendum vote or education, the drop was three and a half times greater (Table A1.5). In Conservative ones, the vote share rose substantially if the area was strongly pro-EU or where more than a third of the population had degrees; elsewhere in (most of) Toryland it nonetheless dropped. The 2017 election is the one when the party found itself taking a clear step away from representing bits of Celtic fringe together with some distinctive local communities to representing a distinctive socio-cultural constituency: more internationally minded, better-educated people living in seats where Labour is not in the running.

Cowley and Kavanagh offer, as their overall encapsulation, that the 2015 election was the 'surprise election'. The date had been fixed by legislation, for the first time, well in advance; all participants – parties, media, commentators – had agreed that no one would win an overall majority of seats. This was not just drawn from their experience of the 2010 outcome; the expectation relied above all on polls, which consistently seemed to reflect a settled division of opinion that made such an outcome inevitable. The authors show how this framed each party's strategy (unlike 2010, when Labour was extraordinarily unprepared for inter-party negotiations) and responses to other parties. Thus, the prospects of a Labour–SNP deal became a campaign issue, skilfully played by the Conservatives. The authors report that the Liberal Democrats had picked up the local impact of this Tory message and felt the need to distance themselves from any chance of Labour coming to power 'on a life support system' from Alex Salmond (p 196). The withdrawal of tactical support for LD MPs by so many former Labour voters was thereby encouraged.

This 'false framing' by the polls frames the authors' interpretation of the 2015 result. The polls were actually only wrong about the gap between Conservative and Labour (they got the two huge changes, the SNP surge and Lib Dem collapse spot-on, but few commentators correctly understood how that would impact on seats won by the two larger parties). The narrow gap was, it later transpired, due to sampling methods which included a few too many Labour and a few too few Tory voters. Correcting for this mis-sampling means, Cowley and Kavanagh point out, the polls had been wrong for some years beforehand. They suggest that, with this correction, Cameron had really led Miliband since July 2013, with a slowly but steadily increasing lead; if that had been known, might Ed Miliband have been replaced in good time?

As for 2017, it comes over as the unprepared election. The sudden, grab-for-a-big-majority dissolution found few candidates in place (result: a more centralised rapid placing of future MPs by central party apparatchiks, a loss of grass-roots democracy fully set out here) and no manifestoes ready. Consequently, the lack of preparation of the bolder pledges in Mrs May's manifesto mattered in a way that no election manifesto has mattered in recent memory (previous volumes have dutifully covered steadily lengthening documents, seeing them as necessary but largely meaningless ritual). Mrs May was badly wrong-footed, and Jeremy Corbyn proved to be far better on the hoof. That, more than any issue (or the 'youthquake' which the authors dismiss), determined a campaign in which the polls charted a dramatic shift of opinion.

So the two election campaigns could not have been more different in how they played out. One was a set-piece battle, whose outcome was settled in advance (though inaccurately forecast) – a campaign with plenty of sound and fury, signifying little. The next was an unscripted drama, possibly, taking the long view, the campaign that changed more voting intentions than any other since 1935.[3] Historians may indeed come to see them as two stages of one seismic event; but each, at the time, went its own way.

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1. *The Observer*, 18 Apr. 1971.
2. Revealing nugget: in January Ofcom officially listed UKIP as a major party but the Green Party as a minor one. So much for UKIP's stance as an outsider unfairly treated by a liberal cultural and media establishment. Footnote asides in this style abound in these volumes.
3. See Tom Stannage, *Baldwin Thwarts the Opposition: The British General Election of 1935* (London, 1980). That being the last British election with no contemporary opinion polls, there is no measure with which to compare. Stannage argues, however, that all contemporary predictions were exceeded by the actual Conservative majority.