

election 2010

Volatile general election campaign will blow the old order apart

Throughout the most unpredictable political struggle in decades, the voters have made it clear that they have a thirst for change. Now the two-party power struggle is under threat

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Nick Clegg, David Cameron and Gordon Brown before the second TV debate.
Photograph: STEFAN ROUSSEAU/AFP/Getty Images

A year ago, in his splendid room at the Foreign Office, [David Miliband](#) told a small group of friends that tumultuous and hugely unpredictable forces were about to be unleashed on British politics. "This is going to be truly massive," he said as he mulled the unfolding scandal over MPs' expenses.

Miliband's apocalyptic tone had echoes of that adopted eight years earlier by Jack Straw in the same office. As Straw watched television pictures of two planes smashing into the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001, he had turned to Geoff Hoon, then the defence secretary, and said: "This is going to change the world."

Miliband was not contemplating a catastrophe on the same scale. But in domestic political terms he sensed implications that could cause havoc with the established way of doing things.

The endless stream of revelations about MPs claiming for everything from moats and duck houses to imaginary mortgages and second homes had the potential, he believed, to undermine fundamentally the relationship between politicians and public. What unnerved the ambitious young foreign secretary most was that he feared others in his party did not realise the enormity of what was unfolding. And it was impossible to foresee what the fallout might be.

On Thursday and Friday, when the votes of about 30 million people are counted, a large part of the answer will be provided. For much of the past two years, it was widely expected that Friday 7 May would see David Cameron and his wife, Samantha, walking up Downing Street to proclaim the end of 13 years of Labour rule and herald a new Tory dawn.

But this has been the least predictable election of any in decades. Disgust at, and distrust of, politicians associated with the old order has been one of its dominant features. "The level of disrespect has been shocking," a former Labour MP defending a relatively safe seat said on Thursday.

Twenty-four hours earlier, Gordon Brown had made his life even more difficult when he was recorded describing 65-year-old Gillian Duffy from Rochdale, whom he had met minutes earlier, as a bigot.

"It will be even more ugly out there today," the Labour candidate said. "I can hardly face going out campaigning now." Another added angrily: "There is no safe seat after what he said."

The anger has been evident on doorsteps up and down the country. Traditional loyalties to Labour and Tory have been eroded. People want change, but are no longer willing to see it delivered on the basis of a Buggins' turn attitude of Tories alternating with Labour.

Alec Shelbrooke, the Conservative candidate for Elmet and Rothwell, near Leeds, used a farming analogy to describe his battle to win over voters in what felt and looked like a Tory area.

"I am a firm believer that you can't fatten the pig on market day. I have been working this seat hard for four years," he said, implying that people should by now be ready to switch to the Tories.

Unfortunately for Shelbrooke, he was unable to muster any such evidence. The first woman to answer her door to him during a canvassing blitz in the town of Garforth was a single mother. She was furious about MPs' expenses and said she would check his claims (he is a local councillor) and those of the other candidates before deciding.

Another woman who saw the Tories advancing up the street groaned: "Oh no. The last thing you want after a hard day at work." As she headed inside she grumbled: "I wouldn't vote for any of those bloody freeloaders anyway."

It was largely in order to respond to this unique mood that Cameron pushed Brown last year to agree to a series of television debates that would put the politicians before the people in the name of democracy and greater openness. Some say Cameron never thought Brown would accept and that he believed he would be able to make capital out of the prime minister's probable refusal. But eventually Brown did agree. And so did the man far less well-known among the public – Nick Clegg, leader of the Liberal Democrats.

The TV debates would be the chance for millions of angry voters to pass judgment on their politicians from their own sitting rooms, and to express their desire for change. The result was to be momentous – just as Miliband had predicted. Unbeknown to Brown or Cameron, Clegg was to storm to prominence as the candidate of a new kind of politics.

The election was to be the first three-horse race in more than a quarter of a century.

Soon after 10pm last Thursday, in the "spin" room at Birmingham University, where journalists and party propagandists watched the last of the three televised debates, most of the talk was of Cameron's narrow victory in instant polls.

The post-debate analysis also focused on the fact that Brown, though tired and down after "Duffygate", had put up a decent fight. The PM had still been blaming himself for the whole episode that morning and had hardly slept.

But the wider story was that Clegg had held his position in the ratings and remained ahead of Brown in most of the polls. The "Cleggmania" that had gripped the country since the first debate had not evaporated. In two post-debate polls of voting intentions, Clegg and Cameron were neck and neck.

Amid the spin-room huddles, former Lib Dem leader Paddy Ashdown talked in terms that no one would have thought remotely possible only three weeks before. "Tonight

showed that Labour is completely out of it," said Ashdown. "It is clear that the country has decided it wants change and the choice is whether they go for change with Nick, or change with David Cameron." While some of the sheen had come off Clegg's performance in the last debate, he still polled well.

It was no longer possible for Labour or the Tories to damn him with faint praise and say he was a flash in the pan. "The real point is that the Tories failed to kill Clegg," said a leading TV presenter between interviews.

The new political landscape that Clegg was continuing to carve out in Birmingham was being felt on the streets all over the country. The Lib Dems currently have 63 seats: if they continue to poll at current levels, they could raise that to 90. But even outside their 100 or so target seats, some were beginning to hope for what was unthinkable three weeks ago.

On the south coast, in the seat of Brighton Kemptown, Juliet Williams, the Lib Dem candidate, had started the campaign with no hope whatsoever. In 2005, the party polled a distant third. Did she think the dramatic surge, triggered by her party's leader, could translate into enough votes to result in a swing of more than 10%? "I do now. It is not an enormous chance. It is still below 50%, but there is a real chance," she said.

She will have to fight hard against the traditional "squeeze" message from Labour, which has its activists pounding the streets and repeating the mantra: "The Liberal Democrats can't win here."

Brighton Kemptown is a mixed constituency that stretches from the trendy heart of the city's gay village, past the brightly coloured terrace houses by the sea, through council estates and leafier suburbs and on into the more conservative, rural towns of East Sussex. It includes a university, so Williams may be boosted by the student vote.

A survey released by OpinionPanel showed that 50% of students were now planning to back the Lib Dems. Liberal Youth, a student organisation, claims to have had a "tenfold" increase in volunteering and support, and has recruited 300 new members in the past week.

In this seat, plenty will back Cameron's party, but there are others who consider themselves liberal or leftwing. Those angry with Labour – but who do not want to see a Conservative MP or government – now face a dilemma. The question they have to confront before Thursday is whether to vote tactically for Labour to keep the Tories out.

Before the final debate, people gathered at a gastro pub in an area filled with public sector workers and young families.

Andres Jugnarain, 36, sat in the corner with his wife, Chloe, 35 and their three young children. He fancied supporting the Greens, but she was less sure. "I am going to vote Labour because I want to keep the Tories out," she said. "It is a purely tactical vote."

It is the same decision for Pat, 50, an "anarchist" who will back Labour in an attempt to prevent a return to the 1980s; Lis, a primary school teacher, who fears Tory cuts; and Daniel, 23, a recent graduate who is gay and believes Cameron's party has not really changed.

Paul Goddard, a former Labour member, said he would back them this time through "gritted teeth". Only Professor Mike Cole, 63, who said he was a socialist, felt less sure. His friends were going to vote tactically, but, after thinking "long and hard", he had decided against it.

It was much the same for Lib Dem supporters in nearby Hove, an even tighter Tory-Labour marginal. They had another tactical concern. Ought they to back Clegg's party to boost his national vote, thereby helping the case for electoral reform?

Mary Conlon, 29, and Sarah Lucas, 26, both teachers, settled down in their shared flat and turned on the TV debate. Once again wooed by Clegg, they both said they really disliked Cameron. When the Tory leader mentioned teachers, they sniped: "He hasn't got a clue."

As the debate closed and instant polls flashed up on the screen, Mary leant back into the sofa and sighed: "That is it, I'm voting Labour," she said. "We need to keep the Tories out."

"Nooooo," said Lucas. "There is no point: the Tories will win here anyway. We need to help boost the Lib Dem vote around the country if we want a new voting system. I'm not thinking about this seat, I'm thinking about the bigger picture." Conlon cut in: "Yes, but if the Tories get in, there will never be electoral reform," she said, raising her arms. "For that, we need the Liberal Democrats to pair up with Labour. And in this seat that means voting Labour."

It is this kind of informed tactical approach – advocated by the likes of Peter Hain and the centre-left pressure group Compass – that Labour has to encourage if it is to prevent the surge to Clegg doing the party untold damage.

Following "Bigotgate" and the PM's failure to deliver a game-changing performance in any of the TV debates, the outlook is grim for Labour and Brown. Highlighting the impression that their time has passed, the party fielded the same team of spin doctors on Thursday night that took New Labour to power in 1997: Peter Mandelson, Alastair Campbell, David Hill and Charlie Whelan. They looked tired and, by the end, sounded as if they were struggling to believe.

It is not impossible that Labour can rally in the polls. But there is real chance that the Lib Dems – endorsed by this paper today and the *Guardian* yesterday – will beat them into second place in terms of the share of the vote. That would be a stunning result for Clegg. Even Labour strategists accept that, in that event, it would then be all but out of the question for Brown to hang on for long. If Cameron is deprived of an overall majority, the prospect of a Tory/Lib Dem coalition would come into play.

But unless Clegg receives some indication that Cameron would move on electoral reform – which the Tory leader wants to resist but will not explicitly rule out – it is hard to see how he would sign up. The Lib Dem leader has also made clear that he would be opposed to a deal with Labour under Brown. But there would also be difficulties with a Labour/Lib Dem coalition, if there were a new Labour leader who, again, had not been endorsed by the country.

Would Clegg reject both, and be prepared to see the Conservatives form a minority administration that would have to grapple alone with the need to cut the budget deficit? Clegg could conclude that this might not be his moment, but that it would not be too long before the plug was pulled on the Tories and that it would arrive. Then his party, and Labour with a new leader, could unite and push ahead with voting reform.

The possible scenarios are numerous, but one thing is certain: the Liberal Democrats will be anything but also-rans.

Additional reporting by Nicky Woolf

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