

Editorial: A Failure of Expertise

Not for the first time in the United Kingdom, the combined ranks of pollsters, polling companies and political ‘experts’ have proved themselves to be out of touch with the real intentions of the electorate. We refer, of course, to the 2015 election in Britain, won by the Conservatives, with an absolute majority when all the pre-election ‘wisdom’ was for a victory shared by the Labour Party in some sort of combination with the Scottish Nationalists, or for a hung parliament, leading to weeks of tortuous negotiations, ultimately producing the same outcome.

No one, or at least no one we heard speaking in the public media, predicted an outright Conservative victory. (Privately some Conservative politicians whispered that things might not be as they seemed, but this may have been merely the boldness of the condemned in the face of fire and in any case was not taken seriously in public.) Prior to the election itself commentators (even in Conservative papers) and pollsters were having a field day in mulling over all sorts of ever-more complicated scenarios in the light of the hung parliament which was being treated as a given, rather than a mere possibility. This, naturally, bolstered the self-importance of the commentators, even of the ones who would have preferred not to see a hung parliament. So when the actual result came, there will be those, even including some of those who disliked the actual outcome, who will take just a soupçon of satisfaction from the fact that in a major political event, trolled over for months, ‘experts’, political scientists and pollsters were (once again) proved so wrong. (Once again: a similar thing happened in Britain in 1992, with another unexpected Conservative victory, while in 2001, although a Labour victory was correctly predicted, the Conservative vote was underestimated by 5% by at least one well-regarded polling company.)

Human beings do indeed remain unpredictable, and things will change again, often defying predictions and received wisdom. In due course the Conservatives will be undone, maybe in ways we cannot now imagine, as they were conclusively in 1997, and this was after a period in the 1980s in which it was confidently said by many ‘experts’ that the Labour party could never again win a British election. They did, of course, go on to win three elections in a row, starting with a huge victory in 1997.

Editorial

But before taking heart at human unpredictability, a word of caution is in order. The polling companies, the mainstream commentators and academic students of politics, including those working for the BBC, the British state broadcasting organisation, had for months, if not for years, been foretelling what in one way or another would amount to a Conservative defeat.

To what extent did all this forecasting and commentating actually influence events? From our position in London, it is hard not to conclude that the polls and the commentators were influencers and makers of opinion and of trends all going in one direction, as much as detached recorders, reporters and scientists. They certainly had an effect of the behaviour of the political parties contesting the election, which may in the end not have helped Labour is so far as they were given a false optimism. The wonder is that in the tide of opinion and expertise and supposedly impartial pre-election polling all going in one direction, the impossible actually happened.