

The 2001 Elections
The Long Term Lessons

David Butler

**The 2001 John Stuart Mill
Institute Lecture**



John Stuart Mill Institute

Biographical Note

Dr David Butler is Emeritus Fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford and the leading authority on British electoral politics. He has researched and published work on every British general election since 1945, his most recent book being *The British General Election of 2001* (Palgrave, 2001) co-authored with Professor Dennis Kavanagh. Dr Butler is also an acknowledged expert on Indian and Australasian electoral politics and has edited or served on the advisory board of numerous academic journals in the field of political science. He comes from a long line of distinguished academics and is married to Professor Marion Butler, Rector of Exeter College, Oxford.

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It is a great honour to be speaking under the shade of John Stuart Mill. Sixty years ago I read his treatise on *Representative Government*; the schoolboy who then struggled with the impracticalities of his first unveiling of proportional representation stands before you today, still struggling to comprehend and interpret electoral systems.

Dennis Kavanagh and I have just published a book, *The British General Election of 2001*, but I have also spent much of the last month in Australia looking at an election which, like ours, appeared dull and which, like ours, resulted in the expected return of the party in office. Yet both these contests offer many lessons. They were, to the enthusiast, as

fascinating in their conduct and in their implications as any that had gone before.

I was challenged by the organizers of this lecture to think widely about what the 2001 election could mean for the future of British politics. The future is a dangerous, non-academic subject but I could not resist the challenge. I shall respond in two ways. First, I shall make a number of detailed points about aspects of the 2001 campaign which have ongoing ramifications. Then I shall venture much more rashly into the years ahead, exploring the bleak prospects which may face each of our three major parties.

I want to explore a number of areas where the events of last summer may make us think differently about the directions in which electioneering and British politics are going. I shall consider first the electoral system, then the uniformity of swing, then

turnout, then the issues, then party finance, devolution and then the new nature of campaigning before I finally turn to wonder about the prospects for the parties.

The electoral system

The British electoral system has always been unfair to minor parties but, allowing for the fact that the winner gets an exaggerated majority, it used to operate relatively equitably as far as the two leading contestants were concerned. John Curtice has shown that, fourteen years ago, assuming even swings from the actual result in 1987, Conservative and Labour would each have won a clear majority of seats if they secured 39 per cent of the national vote. By 2001 the situation was very different: Labour could have got a clear majority on only 34 per cent of the vote while the Conservatives would have needed 42 per cent to win. It is odd that the Conservatives remain the party most deeply

attached to the first-past-the-post system when it so deeply disadvantages them.

The pro-Labour bias in the system will be slightly diminished when Scottish representation is cut from 72 to 58-- but that probably won't happen until the election after next. The apparent bias will be more seriously diminished when we have an exciting contest that restores turnout to its former level. Labour's current advantage is largely due to the exceptional fall in participation in its safe seats. Gone are the days of 1950 when Durham miners marched *en bloc* to the polls and produced 85 per cent turnouts in rock solid constituencies. But, even with a high turnout, the system will still retain a significant pro-Labour bias.

However, it is not only the Conservatives who remain attached to first-past-the-post. Labour, twice blessed by the winner's bonus which the system

now provides, has drifted away from their commitment to a referendum on change. The chances of the Jenkins Commission Report being implemented in the near or medium future have sharply diminished.

Yet proportional representation is on the national agenda in a way that was unthinkable ten years ago. We now have proportional representation for the Scottish Parliament, for the Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland, for the London Council and for the European Parliament and, though the systems may be modified in detail, they are unlikely to be abandoned for any of these institutions. It is currently being proposed for the House of Lords- or at least for a sliver of it. Moreover, nationally we now have a multi-party system. All the smaller parties like PR. The wider public is being educated to it by using it. In all probability, we shall get it in the end but only when a hung Parliament (or a

second hung Parliament) gives leverage to third and fourth parties. That will not, I think, be in my lifetime.

The uniformity of swing

During the campaign the likelihood of uniform swing was derided. We were promised a diversity of results. But did the British electorate in fact behave differently at a regional or local level? Consider two facts.

1. In every Standard Region of England and Wales turnout fell by a notably constant amount--ranging between 10.1% and 12.8%.
2. In every Standard Region of England and Wales, except one, there was a swing from Labour to Conservative that only varied between 0.1% and 1.6%. In the West Midlands there was a small swing (0.8%) to Labour.

Such statistics certainly offer a picture of national uniformity.

Of course, if we consider sub-regions or cities or constituencies, we can find greater variations. But the diversity of outcomes that some commentators anticipated during the campaign was hardly borne out. Even in hotly contested marginals turnout fell by 11 per cent, only one percent less than the average elsewhere. In the election a mere six seats switched between Conservative and Labour and, excluding Northern Ireland, only 22 changed sides overall.

Yet, behind this relative uniformity, there were a few exceptional results. By far the most remarkable was in Wyre Forest, where an Independent, standing on the single issue of the closure of the Accident and Emergency Unit at Kidderminster Hospital, snatched a safe Labour seat, winning 58 per cent of the vote. But also notable was Martin Bell's 31 per cent, as he charged against all parties into the unfamiliar territory of Brentwood and Ongar.

These results show that the big party stranglehold on representation is not completely unassailable. Such breaches with the established tradition of independent candidates humiliatingly losing their deposits may encourage other substantial figures to try to follow in the footsteps of Dr Taylor and Mr Bell. Watch this space.

I have pointed to the relative uniformity of swing. But one new feature is worth noting. The candidates who entered Parliament in 1997 fared slightly better than their veteran colleagues. There was actually a small swing towards Labour in its marginal constituencies, almost all of them 1997 breakthroughs. All but two of the 27 Liberal Democrats who entered new territory in 1997 held on, mostly with increased majorities. Some of this was due to tactical voting. Whichever party had demonstrated in 1997 that it was locally most capable of holding off the Tories won extra votes

from a few realistic Liberal Democrat or Labour supporters who had seen their party come third. However, some of this modest (only one or two per cent) advantage must have been a reward for zealous constituency activity. Even the Conservatives who first entered Parliament in 1997 fared better than their colleagues. A little-noted sequel to the election was an agreed increase in members' office allowances. MPs can now afford to be even more active, more like Congressmen in Washington, in the exploitation of their incumbency and the publicising of their activities.

The turnout

The nationwide turnout of 59 per cent was the most surprising aspect of the 2001 result. It was 12 per cent lower than in 1997, and that was the lowest ever. It was not excused by the weather on polling day or the exceptional state of the electoral register. It was an expression of popular indifference to a

contest in which the outcome was not in doubt and in which, on most of the basic issues, there was no great difference between the parties.

The low turnout is not to be remedied by gimmicks. Our admirable new Electoral Commission is exploring various devices, most of them well-tried in Australia. What about allowing voting in advance or in outstations or using mobile polling booths and booths in supermarkets or more convenient places? What about making postal voting still easier? But such measures can yield only a minimal difference. Better registration procedures could produce a cosmetic improvement (the register is currently at least 8 per cent in error at the time of compilation). And there is, of course, the draconian remedy of compulsory voting but Britain will certainly not follow that Australian example (although, because lightly handled, it remains remarkably popular in the Antipodes). Turnout will only return to the 75 per

cent average of 1950 to 1990 when (a) we have contests where opinion polls tell everyone that the outcome is likely to be close and (b) when the public care about the choices being offered to them.

A hundred years ago, even fifty years ago, British elections were about great issues: Irish Home Rule, Tariff Reform, the House of Lords, drastic retrenchment, and nationalisation. But such issues are no longer at stake. The quasi-referendum general election is a thing of the past. Most issues are more negligible. If there is a big question it is now referred to a real referendum. Elections merely chose which group of politicians are to manage the mixed economy and the welfare state, deeply constrained in their freedom of action by European Union membership and by global considerations. Parliamentary elections are being downgraded like local elections which draw ever lower turnouts because there is so little to decide.

The issues

When will we have an exciting election, a contest that seems to matter to an overwhelming majority of our fellow-citizens? When will the parties offer radically different alternatives? In two elections this year I have watched ever more disciplined parties setting forth ever narrower options. In 2001, as in 1997, the leading opposition party promised to match the government's spending plans and that prevented any serious Dutch auction of tax cuts. On almost all the main issues the only way that parties really sought to win votes was by presenting themselves as likely to be more efficient in delivering agreed goals.

All parties conducted their own private polls and focus groups and all received the same picture of electoral concerns (although they did show contrasting skills in translating these into attractive campaign messages). In 2001 the one issue,

Europe, on which the British parties disagreed, failed to affect the result: the Conservatives gave prominence to their negative attitude to the euro because they were assured by the polls that the public was with them. But the public was far more interested in health and education. The Conservatives suffered in the eyes of much of the electorate by wittering on about the euro, an issue that was not very salient and about which nothing could happen without a referendum. A focus on Europe, moreover, highlighted an issue on which the party was publicly divided and there is strong evidence that the voters dislike divided parties. One of the few changes from the prepared strategies that occurred during the actual campaign was the belated downplaying of the euro theme by Mr Hague and his colleagues.

However, although Labour was helped by being more trusted on health and schools, it was surely

prosperity that did most to consolidate the party in power. Gordon Brown's performance as Chancellor and the statistics on growth and employment, presented month after month from 1997 to 2001, did much to demolish the traditional fears of middle England that Labour could not be trusted to run the economy. There was a remarkable erosion of class-based voting in the 1990s, as Labour escaped its old image as a sectional, trade union and working-class party. In 1992 the middle classes, the pollsters' category ABC1, divided 52%-22% between Conservative and Labour. In 2001 the division was 38%-37%. That is the Blair revolution, the most remarkable switch in voting patterns in my lifetime.

One lesson of 2001 was the way issues could be turned around. The Conservatives won the 1992 election with their 'Labour's Tax Bombshell' poster, their stress on the frightening increases in tax and

national insurance that might follow a Labour victory. In the aftermath of that contest it seemed that a promise of reduced taxes was a *sine qua non* of modern electoral success. But by 2001 the tables were turned. Neither of the main parties, it is true, suggested tax increases. The Liberal Democrats were not punished for proposing one. The theme 'You can't get something for nothing' seemed to be accepted. It was recognised that the public wanted better hospitals and better schools and that they knew that they would have to pay for them. There were no serious promises of tax reduction. The tax and spend argument withered down to a narrow dispute over a possible £8 billion cut in expenditure (a mere 2 per cent in an uncertain budget).

Party Finance

One of the major innovations of the 2001 election came with the regulation of central party finance. Following the 1999 recommendations of the Neill

Committee, the *Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act* was passed a year ago. For the first times parties' names and their logos had to be registered nationally. For the first time a limit was placed on what the national parties could spend in a campaign year. And for the first time all substantial contributions to parties had to be revealed. An Electoral Commission was established to regulate affairs. Furthermore the 1883 law of agency, which for more than a century kept British elections so pure and so cheap, was modified.

These changes had little noticeable impact in 2001 but they have far-reaching potential. This year none of the three big parties came close to the £14 million ceiling set on their central outlays, although all faced the burden of accounting weekly to the Commission for everything spent nationally and locally. Few commentators noted the way in which the new rules could increase central party control.

The nominated accounting officers of each of the parties became criminally liable for false accounting or overspending, not only at national headquarters but in each of the constituencies. Obviously each party engaged in sensible delegation of control. But in future the new Act may come to be regarded as a nail in the coffin of the 1883 idea of local electioneering.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, all electoral law was based on the constituency. The 1883 Act envisaged two independent gentlemen seeking the suffrages of their neighbours and required them to give total authority over their spending to their agent; his personal duty was to spend the money legally and to keep within an ever narrower limit. Now the agent has to report to the national party.

However, the 1990s saw another development. On 23rd February 1998, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg found that the freedom of speech of Phyllis Bowman, the Chair of the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child, had been violated when she was prosecuted for disseminating pro-life literature in the Halifax constituency during the 1992 election. The judgment drove a cart and horse through the 1883 law of agency. The Neill Committee recognised the problem and the 2000 Act allowed any registered outside group, misleadingly described as 'third party', to spend up to £500 in any constituency ; it required 'third parties', spending more than £10,000 nationally to be accountable to the Electoral Commission. This raised (in a modest way) the spectre of American profligacy in electioneering. In the USA the First Amendment provisions about freedom of speech have allowed any number of separate Political Action Committees to run rings around all attempts

to cap election expenses. Something of the sort could now happen here.

It did not happen this year, partly because interested groups had not woken up to the new dispensation, but mainly because it was not a close-fought election. If such provisions had been in force in 1951 or 1964 or 1970 those contests might have been very different. In 2005 or 2009, if the outcome looks close or the issues are great, 'third party' expenditure may loom large in the campaign.

One other aspect of the *Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act* deserves note. The zeal for openness means that any party contribution of more than £5,000 must be revealed. Both Conservative and Labour have expressed anxiety lest this deter subscribers. There may still be millionaires like Lords Hamlyn and Sainsbury as well as Christopher Ondaatje who did not mind giving £2 million each to

Labour or like Lord Ashcroft and Stuart Wheeler who thrust even larger amounts on the Conservatives. But the donors of substantial but less overwhelming sums may be reluctant to have their partisan largesse advertised.

Devolution

Devolution was a new feature of the 2001 election. It was notable that, by the standards of 1999, if not of 1997, the nationalist parties fared ill. Plaid Cymru's vote fell from 31 per cent in the 1999 Assembly election to 14 per cent this year. Scottish National Party support fell from 28 per cent to 20 per cent. For Scots, of all opinions, voting for Westminster in 2001 was especially frustrating since, apart from Europe, the main issues were matters that belonged to the Scottish not the United Kingdom Parliament.

Yet the politics of the United Kingdom have been permanently changed by devolution. In Scotland and Wales four-party politics has been established, (although the Conservatives trail unbelievably by the standards of a generation ago - they actually came fourth in Scotland). When an election comes in which the Conservatives have a serious chance of winning in England, they will still be far from a major force in Scotland or Wales; they will have difficulty in presenting themselves as a fully nationwide party. And the likely conflicts between Edinburgh and Westminster (or Cardiff and Westminster) will become a major story. What would have happened in the 1980s if Margaret Thatcher had had to contend with a Labour-dominated Edinburgh Parliament?

The new nature of campaigning

The central control of campaigning has grown and is still growing. Thanks to the internet, the pager and the portable phone every candidate and activist

is now kept in constant touch with party headquarters. Campaign literature and local press handouts can be prepared much more professionally and cheaply in Smith Square or Millbank than in the constituencies. The party line on any new development can be instantly distributed. Electioneering is ever more completely nationalised.

As party workers decline in numbers and advance in age, door-to-door canvassing diminishes. The telephone partially takes over. Over recent years the Conservative and Labour parties each deployed huge telephone banks and, from the centre, contacted millions of marginal voters in marginal seats, sometimes paying resting actors rather than party volunteers to canvass, interrogate and persuade. Key opinion leaders are identified to be targeted with direct mail or E-mail approaches on specialist themes. I must not exaggerate how

extensive or how effective such activity was this year. But what happened was certainly a far cry from the electioneering I used to watch 25 and 50 years ago. And, remember, we are at the beginning, not the end, of an E-world

The campaign

In the sanitised, centralised campaign of 2001 the unexpected hardly happened. Almost no one on any side went off-message. The only memorable events involved Sharron Storer's confrontation with the Prime Minister, Lady Thatcher's 'Never' and 'The Mummy Returns' and, above all, Prescott's punch, unique in its spontaneity.

In 50 years of writing about elections I cannot recall a contest in which there was so little that was unexpected or dramatic to record. For most people what they saw of the election was from the TV news, as they watched William Hague and Tony Blair in their well-researched photo-opportunity

locations, uttering their prepared sound-bites but saying nothing that was likely to move their viewers from the attitudes built up over the years. Will any party dare to risk greater spontaneity in 2005?

Do campaigns change votes ? Henry Durant, founder of the first British polling organisation, used to argue that the best predictive survey in an election was the one taken at the start of the campaign. And in many contests the evidence supports his thesis. But there are exceptions. In June 1970 and in February 1974 events during the final days produced outcomes very different from the initial findings. On the whole it was external occurrences, not party initiatives that made the difference. In 1970 the balance of trade figures, published two days before the vote, punctured Harold Wilson's claim that he had solved the currency difficulties that had so driven his administration off course three years before. In

February 1974 Ted Heath, sailing to victory on a 'Who governs Britain ?' theme, had his argument suddenly destroyed by the data emerging from Sir Frank Figgures enquiry ; this suggested that the striking miners instead of being greedy were actually underpaid. And this year it is well to remember that on 9th May the polls on average gave Labour a 20 per cent lead. On 7th June the Government's margin was only 9 per cent.

An increasingly volatile electorate, ever less rooted in traditional loyalties, is more vulnerable now than ever before to last-minute arguments and scares and, perhaps, to the cases made locally for tactical voting. I have argued that campaigns are deader than they used to be, but no one should dismiss them. They still have the potential to upset the apple-cart. Fifty years of election watching has taught me to expect the unexpected.

The next election

But it is not changed electoral rules or changed styles of electioneering that will decide the next election. The result will still be determined at the grand level. It is already being fought in the House of Commons as Tony Blair tries to demonstrate his ascendancy over Ian Duncan Smith and Gordon Brown endeavours to maintain his reputation as a prudent economic manager while, on the other side, shadow ministers busy themselves undermining the credibility of individual government ministers and policies.

The status of politicians has, to judge by the opinion polls, fallen catastrophically in the last two generations. Even ardent partisans can find few heroes. Elections necessarily become an unpopularity contest. Elections are reduced to the crude question, 'Which mob is least unsuited to run the show?'

Therefore let me turn to the future and explore a best scenario and a worst scenario for each of the parties. Of course, external circumstances and the performance of their party rivals will have most to say on how they fare in an election a few years hence. But a lot still rests in their own hands. We have to guess how wise they will be in learning from the past and, more particularly, from the lessons of the 2001 election.

Labour

Labour is sitting pretty on a sustained 20 per cent poll lead and with its leader enthroned by record personal poll ratings. The Prime Minister has set up structures in Downing Street to prepare for the next election and beyond. He has a machine for monitoring the performance of departments and the fulfilment of promises. He is supported by an extraordinarily strong and able Chancellor. He has Philip Gould with his finger on the pulse, a True

Thomas capable of telling him unpleasant truths. He has a huge and largely docile parliamentary majority. Any Prime Minister in the last hundred years would envy his situation, seemingly on course for a third victory in 2005.

And yet... and yet... How will Tony Blair cope with a slump if one comes ? Will the euro have the power to derail him, either through a referendum defeat or a split in his own ranks ? Is the tension between him and Gordon Brown a journalistic fantasy or a time-bomb waiting to explode ? Has Tony Blair gone too far in marginalising the Trade Unions and the Old Left ? Has he failed to find enough ministerial talent among his 400 MPs to administer government without blunders or scandals ?

Above all, is he immune from the arrogance of power ? Governments do seem subject to a law of natural deterioration. Continuance in high office

does odd things to the judgment of even the most sensible of politicians. Often they run out of ideas and often, especially when they are sitting on a large majority, they become arbitrary. The well-publicised decline of cabinet government and collective discussion seems already to have removed one early warning device from those at the centre of power. 10 Downing Street's impatience with parliament, together with a well-whipped culture of back-bench subservience, may allow further drifting towards self-destruction. I am not saying that Tony Blair and Gordon Brown have yet become insensitive tyrants, so deaf to their colleagues and supporters, let alone their critics, that they have yet lost the responsiveness necessary for successful democratic government. I am only speculating on how the current ascendancy of President Blair and his regime might come to grief.

The Conservatives

And it is possible that at some time he will face a worthy enemy. The Conservative party is generally thought to be in a bad way. Let me set out its downside before pointing to its residual strengths.

Ian Duncan-Smith, in his understated fashion, may possibly, like Bonar Law or Baldwin or Attlee, emerge as a formidable leader. If not, he may be replaced. I have met colleagues and commentators who give him only a 50/50 chance of being still there to lead the party into the 2005 election (remember the Australian Liberals who, a decade ago, changed their leader five times in five years before settling on John Howard, who then managed to lead them to three successive victories).

Oppositions don't win elections. Governments lose them. Yet oppositions can help to earn victory by sensible use of their time in the wilderness. The

Conservatives, who seemed unelectable in the wake of their 1945 debacle, moved quickly to rethink their structure and their policies. In a less spectacular way Ted Heath did the same in 1966-70 and so did Margaret Thatcher in 1975-79. And, of course, the Labour party transformed itself in the final opposition years under Blair.

It seems generally agreed that the Conservatives did not make such good use of the period after 1997. It is possible that Mr. Duncan-Smith will demonstrate the inspiration and the skilled choice of colleagues that will be needed if he is to succeed where William Hague so signally failed, if he is to transform his party into a fully credible alternative government. The omens do not look good.

However, the Conservatives still have 166 MPs and they are second in 308 of the 413 Labour seats and in 44 of the 52 Liberal seats. If the Labour

Government were to implode through internal tensions or if economic disaster were to strike, a despairing electorate could still turn to the Conservatives for salvation. A Conservative victory only requires a nine per cent swing. That was more than achieved in 1945 and again in 1997.

But the Conservatives have a long way to go. They have yet to show that they relate to middle Britain. In the last few years they have forfeited their long-standing advantage as the party best fitted to manage international affairs and defence and as the party most capable of dealing with economic policies. Since 1999 opinion polls have shown them behind Labour in all these fields.

Moreover the Conservatives have come to be regarded as the most divided of the parties. The current front-bench may share Ian Duncan-Smith's euro-scepticism, but, if joining the euro does

become subject to a referendum, Kenneth Clarke and Michael Heseltine will not be silent. The possibility of a split or a significant breakaway must always be there.

The Conservative party has little chance of a major role in Wales or Scotland. It has no MPs from any big city except London; indeed in some areas, especially in the North, the Liberal Democrats have become the alternative to Labour.

The greatest difficulty for the current Conservatives is that the public does not know what they stand for except opposition for its own sake – opposition to the euro in particular and to everything in general. Where is their positive appeal to a new generation? They simply exist, an alternative waiting for the downfall of Labour to give them their opportunity.

The Liberal Democrats

Yet, if there is a downfall of Labour, may the Conservative alternative be supplanted by something else? Is there a third force? Two years from now the political scene could be deeply affected by a Plaid Cymru win in Wales or, more seriously, by an SNP win in Scotland. But those improbable scenarios raise problems which are too wide for me today. So let me turn to the Liberal Democrats who certainly cannot be ignored.

In a way that would have seemed unthinkable fifty years ago the Liberals (broadened and reassembled under a new hyphenated name) have clawed their way back to a significant role. Their 52 MPs, many now with safe seats, are apparently a united and happy band under a young and sympathetic leader (who certainly won his spurs in the 2001 campaign). They have a solid base in local government and they have freed themselves

from the weirdo fringe image that sometimes attached to them a generation ago. They are available as coalition partners in any hung parliament. During this year's campaign Charles Kennedy suggested that his party might take over as the official Opposition since the Conservatives were so ineffective. However, although the Liberal Democrats have a few bright spokesmen, they are not a formidable army. Moreover, electorally the Liberal Democrats are not in the position of their predecessors in 1983 when they came first or second in 315 seats. Now they are first or second in only 161 seats and, apart from the 52 seats they hold, they are serious challengers (i.e. within 10 per cent of victory) in a mere 20 more. Only in the event of a massive split in Labour ranks or, more probably, among the Conservatives, do the Liberal Democrats have a prospect of becoming a major player on the political scene.

Conclusion

Predicting is dangerous. If I am honest and think back to what I would have said six months after the elections of 1951 or 1959 or 1966 or 1970 or 1979 or 1992, I have to feel humble. My expectations would have been totally falsified by the outcome of the following contest. Today the uncertainties are huge. At this moment in time we do not know whether the civilised world has the means to control terrorism without damaging the essence of civilisation. We do not know if a comprehensive recession, rather than a blip, is hitting the economy. And more locally we do not know if our government is going to seek entry into the euro.

Let me end on uncertainty. There is the Chinese curse 'May you live in interesting times'. We do. Thank God, we do.

David Butler

26 November 2001

John Stuart Mill Institute

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ISBN 1 871952 22 0