

For decades two political parties dominated the UK. No longer. In next month's election other factions will make gains, with potentially profound implications for the country's unity and place in Europe.

Is time running out for the Disunited Kingdom?

BY RICHARD WOODS AND ESTELLE SHIRBON



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Like millions of other British voters, Karl Wakeman supported Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives in the 1980s and then Tony Blair's New Labour in the late 1990s. But now, as Britain heads towards a general election on May 7, the 49-year-old from Gloucester has no time for either of the two parties that have dominated British politics for decades.

In his eyes, the last Labour government bungled its handling of the European Union, mass immigration and the country's finances. He thinks the present Conservative-led coalition has done little better.

"They may say the economy is doing okay, but people like me don't feel it," he said. Wakeman went to work straight from school, is married with two children, owns his home and has worked all his life – until recently. A former employee of a tool-hire company, he's been made redundant twice in the past 18 months. He feels neglected and let down. "The main parties aren't interested in people like me," he said.

So on May 7 he's going to vote for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), a populist group that deplores the EU and mass immigration. Many other voters look set to follow suit. Though UKIP won just 3.1 percent of the votes in the 2010 election, polls suggest it could win 13 percent in 2015, draining support from the Conservatives and, to a lesser extent, from Labour.

UKIP is not the only deep fissure in Britain's political landscape. The Scottish National Party, which won just 1.7 percent of the vote and six parliamentary seats in 2010, is enjoying a surge in popularity. Polls suggest it could win more than 40 of the 59 seats Scotland has in the national parliament. That would likely give the SNP a powerful say in who forms the next government. England's 38 million voters may find themselves at the mercy of Scotland's 4 million.



ON A ROLL: Nicola Sturgeon, leader of the Scottish National Party, has such strong support she is likely to have a powerful say in who forms the UK's next government. Cover: Clouds gather over Big Ben, the clock tower at Britain's Houses of Parliament. **REUTERS/RUSSELL CHEYNE/STEFAN WERMUTH**

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The breakdown of the old order has far-reaching and unpredictable implications for the future of the kingdom. The SNP's prime policy is to take Scotland out of the UK and make it independent, a goal it came close to achieving in a referendum last year. UKIP wants to take Britain out of the EU. Its influence has already driven Prime Minister David Cameron to offer a referendum, should the Conservatives form the next government, on whether Britain should quit Europe.

Further chipping away at the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats, the traditional third party of British politics and the junior partner in the present ruling coalition, is growing support for the Green Party and steady support for

Plaid Cymru, which wants independence for Wales.

The days when the Conservatives and Labour simply swapped places in running the UK are done, said Roy Hattersley, a former deputy leader of the Labour Party and a politician since the 1960s. "It's an absolute sea change."

As the nation's politics fracture, risks of the United Kingdom disintegrating are rising, he said. "It will be very difficult to defeat the next attempt to have independence for Scotland."

SHIFTING ALLEGIANCES

In the ancient cathedral city of Gloucester, where parliamentarians were besieged by royalists in 1643 during the English Civil War, politics have long been finely balanced. From the 1950s to the 1970s the seat, in the west of England, flip-flopped between Labour and the Conservatives. Since 1979 the city has been an electoral bellwether: Whichever party won there went on to form the government.

This time, the contest in Gloucester is too close to call, as smaller parties nibble away at support for the traditional parties. The Conservatives and Labour took more than 90 percent of the vote in Gloucester in the 1950s; now they will be lucky to get 75 percent. UKIP has 12 percent support or more in Gloucester, according to pollster Lord Ashcroft, the Liberal Democrats 9 percent, and the Green Party 3 percent.

Strictly speaking, Britain has not had a completely simple Labour-Conservative duopoly since the 1970s. In 1974 the SNP broke through and won seven seats in parliament. In 1977 the Labour government had to strike a deal with the Liberals to survive. And in the 1980s, parts of the Labour Party split away to form a new group which eventually merged with the Liberals to form the Liberal Democrats.

Nevertheless, Britain's electoral system has meant that most elections left one party in government. Under that system, known as first-past-the-post, the winner of each constituency takes all and gets a seat in parliament. The other candidates get nothing.

That can leave smaller parties with little or no representation in parliament, even if they win substantial numbers of votes across the country.

First-past-the-post has papered over gradual shifts in political allegiances brought on by a host of social and economic changes. In particular, Britain's social classes have blurred over the past few decades.

"Social divisions are represented differently and are not so prominent as in the past," said John Curtice, professor of politics at Strathclyde University. "In the 1980s, Labour was still the party of the working class. No longer."

Under Blair, Labour moved to the centre ground and was "intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich," as Peter Mandelson, an arch-Blairite minister, once said. New Labour strove to improve standards of education and social mobility:

“The multinational economy, multinational companies, the internet – all those things have taken power out of politicians hands.”

Roy Hattersley

Former deputy leader of the Labour Party



SALOON BAR POPULIST: Nigel Farage, leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party, has taken support from both the Conservatives and Labour by espousing nationalist policies.

REUTERS/DYLAN MARTINEZ

The proportion of young people going into higher education has risen from 39 percent in 1999 to 49 percent now.

As industry declined and office work spread, class divisions eroded and political parties mutated. While Blair's Labour embraced financiers and the City of London, Cameron's Conservatives wooed liberal voters with more socially progressive policies on issues such as the environment and gay marriage.

For people in economically deprived

areas, Labour is no longer the party of labour, said Rob Ford, senior lecturer in politics at Manchester University. "They feel that Labour is another party that represents places like London, Edinburgh or Manchester, full of confident university graduates embracing the world who don't at all understand the struggles of people like them."

Instead, UKIP, which draws a lot of support among older, white British voters with no higher education, has become the party of the working class, said political scientist Curtice.

In Barton and Tredworth, a deprived district of Gloucester where Victorian houses line narrow streets, UKIP even has some support among ethnic minorities, despite the party's tough anti-immigration stance. Harjit Gill, an Indian who came to Britain decades ago and runs a post office, abandoned Labour earlier this year and now supports UKIP.

UKIP leader Nigel Farage prefers a pint of beer and plain-talk to political correctness. He blames the huge rise in immigration over the past 15 years for many social ills, including pressure on housing and the National Health Service. Gill agrees: "Labour and Tories are just making excuses. Then I see Farage. I'm an immigrant. But he's right in what he's saying."

Such views also reflect disillusion with the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat leaders, whom many voters see as elitist clones. Cameron of the Conservatives, Labour's Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg of the Liberal Democrats are all middle-class, white, well-heeled and educated at Oxford or Cambridge universities.

Richard Graham, a former banker and diplomat who was educated at Oxford and who is defending Gloucester for the Conservatives, recognises the threat. "I've got plenty of constituents who are feeling (U)kipperish," he said. "Farage talks their language. They need to see the main parties are not ignoring them."

POWER FAILURE

Britain's old politics have also been swept away by tides of technology and globalisation. Voters have become more connected and vocal; politicians less able to shape events.

"We've seen a feeling that politicians don't deliver any more, and this I think is the most important thing," said Hattersley, the former Labour deputy leader, who is now a member of the House of Lords, the upper chamber of Britain's parliament. "The multinational economy, multinational companies, the internet – all those things have taken power out of politicians' hands. People rightly see politicians as not having the power and strength to do what they want them to do."

One disillusioned voter willing to experiment is 27-year-old Craig Higley, a graduate in Gloucester who used to support Labour. He's going to vote for the Green Party in May. Labour and Conservatives are unable to effect change and simply blame each other for the country's ills, he said. "That has made me have disdain for both of them."

As globalisation saps power from politicians, nationalism has become more important.

In the Scottish city of Glasgow, Stewart MacLennan, a 64-year-old who worked for trade unions, always supported Labour and was one of the party's candidates in the 1992 election. Now he's going to vote for the SNP.

Labour dominated Scottish politics for years but grew complacent, he said. Scottish voters were particularly disappointed by Blair's New Labour. The final straw was Labour's opposition to the SNP's campaign for independence last year, which MacLennan said "produced widespread disgust among (Scottish) Labour voters."

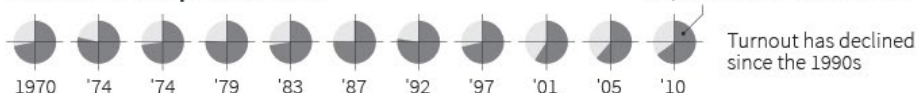
The SNP seems "to be driven by the motives and principles which used to direct the Labour Party. They are more social democratic," said MacLennan.

UK ELECTIONS

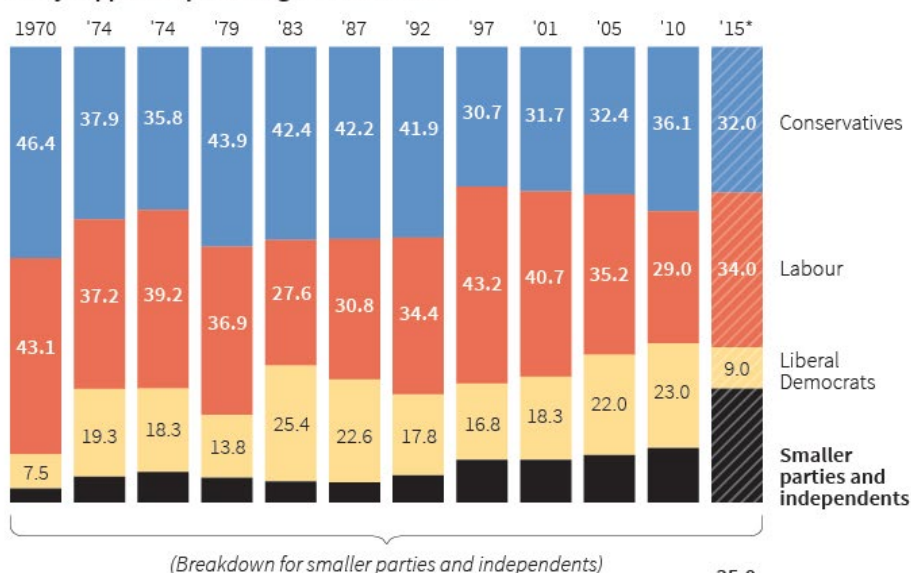
Support grows for smaller parties

Declining support for the two main political parties has benefitted smaller and newer parties.

Voter turnout in past elections:



Party support as percentage of total votes:



DUP: Democratic Unionist Party; UUP: Ulster Unionist Party; SNP: Scottish Nationalist Party; UKIP: United Kingdom Independence Party

*Voting intention poll by Populus, as of Apr. 20, 2015.

Source: UK Electoral Commission

Graphic by Chris Inton/Reuters Graphics

In the 2010 election Labour won 41 of the 59 seats in Scotland. Polls indicate the SNP could now destroy Labour in Scotland, depriving it of seats vital to Miliband's hopes of becoming prime minister with a majority in parliament. Even Labour's leader in Scotland could lose his seat.

In England, where the SNP has no candidates, voters are concerned about the Scottish party's possible influence in the next government. More than 300 miles south of Scotland in Gloucester, Labour candidate Sophy Gardner said: "The SNP are not popular in Gloucester. People want



STUMPED: Neither Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, left, nor Labour leader David Miliband, centre, look like winning a majority in the May 7 election. The Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg, right, may even lose his seat in parliament. **REUTERS/TOBY MELVILLE/ANDREW YATES (2)**

me to give them crystal clear assurance that Labour won't go into coalition with the SNP."

Miliband has ruled out a formal coalition with the SNP, but has left room for a looser arrangement.

The Conservatives have far less to lose in Scotland: They won only one seat there in 2010. Instead, the threat the Conservatives face is UKIP, whose impact is hard to calculate because it draws votes from various parties. According to the polling company YouGov, about 45 percent of people who have switched to UKIP since 2010 have come from the Conservatives, 17 percent from the Liberal Democrats, 15 percent from Labour and 15 percent have never voted before.

How that melange will play out in England's marginal seats is uncertain. UKIP will win less than a handful of seats, pollsters predict. But the votes it attracts will damage other parties. Martin Baxter of Electoral Calculus, an analyst of voting surveys, roughly estimates that the rise of

5%

Proportion of voters who support the Green party

Source: YouGov polling

UKIP "could cost the Conservatives about 30 seats overall."

Even if UKIP ends up with just a seat or two, it could come second in scores of constituencies, said Nick Pearce, head of the Institute of Public Policy Research, a left-leaning think tank. That would give the party a platform from which to mount a serious challenge in future, he said.

A NEW ERA

Barring sudden dramatic gains, no party is going to win an outright majority on May 7. To do so would require winning around 323 seats*, but the Conservatives and

Labour are currently predicted to get about 280 apiece.

Instead, a kaleidoscope of possible outcomes looms. A deal with the SNP may help put Labour into power. The Conservatives might cling on with help from the Liberal Democrats or UKIP and other minor parties. Some commentators have even mused on a grand coalition between Conservatives and Labour.

Whatever happens, the political fissures reinforce the sense that Britain's electoral system needs reform. Ruth Fox, director of the Hansard Society, which studies political engagement and the workings of parliament, believes politicians will have "to confront the problem of the imbalance" of powers between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The current "patchwork quilt" is not working, she said.

Vernon Bogdanor, professor of government at King's College, London, said the electoral system "doesn't really work for the multi-party system we have now." He suggests that the UK should stage a

* There are 650 seats in the UK's House of Commons. But Sinn Fein, a party that advocates creating a united Ireland, got five MPs in Northern Ireland at the last election. Sinn Fein MPs refuse to vote in Westminster. So the effective majority in the House of Commons is likely to be 323.



REFRESHING THE GOVERNMENT: A polling station set up in a pub in southern England in 2010. After five years of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, Britons will vote again next month on who they want to run the country. **REUTERS/EDDIE KEOGH**

“constitutional convention” to thrash out all the issues.

In a 2011 referendum, Britons rejected changing their first-past-the-post voting system. But this election is likely to throw up anomalies that will be hard to ignore. UKIP could win 10 percent of the national vote and get three seats or fewer, while the SNP might get 40 seats for just 3 percent of the vote because its support is concentrated in fewer constituencies.

“That will really pitch open the debate

about whether we can continue with the first-past-the-post system,” said Fox of the Hansard Society.

She believes Britain’s politics have entered a new era. “We’re not going back to the days of two parties clocking up 80 or 90 percent of the vote. I just can’t see it happening,” she said. “This is the kind of once-in-a-century change.”

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