

Lessons From The British Election

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Why is the election of David Cameron of more than passing interest – even of qualified enthusiasm – for those whose politics have usually leaned the other way? Disregard the fact that his conservatism is not the traditional high Toryism we've come to know and dislike; and put aside the suspicion that Labour in Britain (as here in Australia) has apparently abandoned historic commitments to social democratic values. Listening to Cameron speaking in Downing St there was just the merest whiff of something in the political air, at last.

Days of riveting drama (monitored here via Radio 4's program of record, *Today*, streaming from 3.00pm aest; and through the night on the World Service, relayed on ABC News Radio) saw Britain's toxic Tory press turn viciously against Nick Clegg on the Monday following the election, when it seemed the Liberal Democrats were edging towards a deal with Labour. Then, the final climax on Tuesday 11th was pure history, played out live on the radio and analysed on the run by the best in the business, like the BBC's Nick Robinson.

What we heard from the steps of No 10 was a departure of courage and dignity from a man lampooned as an oaf, followed by words of clarity and inspiration from a man labeled as an insubstantial smoothie by the press of the other side. Both speeches were marked by a scarce commodity in modern politics. They had the ring of truth about them.

There are other reasons to take note of the British election, such as the fact that the Labour Party, notwithstanding Gordon Brown's initial public offer to stand aside, apparently made a collective decision against returning to government. In the age of professional politicians this was remarkable indeed, with a dim echo of the nineteenth century when governments often made it clear when they felt their time was up and, very occasionally, recommended a vote for the other lot. Altruism was not a likely scenario in this case because the next few years will be a good time not to be in government in Britain. But perhaps another reason was the probability that Labour has come to comprehend its need for a period of reflection and reformation. It needs to find out whether the Blair/Mandelson 'New' Labour model, with all the baggage now attached, is still viable. That couldn't be done in government.

Still, the fact is that Labour appears to have gone voluntarily into opposition, for perhaps a long time, when an extra inducement or two to Clegg during Tuesday's negotiations would probably have secured government. Is this a sign that democracy is not dead yet? It's a coincidence – and a neat one – that on the same day a series of radio documentaries began on Radio 4 by the former Conservative front bencher, Michael Portillo, detailing the history of democracy and why we need to look after it properly.

The promise of the British election outcome needs to be qualified by two important caveats. In the end, Cameron and Clegg are politicians and will do what politicians do to stay in office. Witness the recent abandonment of carbon reduction trading by Kevin Rudd in this country. More importantly, Portillo's point needs reinforcement – that democracy is as strong as its weakest link, and at the moment is widely seen as failing to address the problems the world keeps throwing at it. Portillo noted that Britons under

thirty have only ever known one election; and a recent BBC survey of 18-25 year olds revealed that a majority of them would consider voting only if it was something they could do while checking their emails. Days like these, when you feel that democracy might just be up for it after all, are few enough. So, for the time being, let's wish the Clegg/Cameron coalition well in its difficult days ahead.

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