

After a drawn out “will he – won’t he” scenario, on 6th April UK Prime Minister, Gordon Brown (Labour), finally called for the dissolution of Parliament which thus triggered the start of what is one of the tightest General Election campaigns in recent decades.

- **WHY?**

A General Election in the UK has been on the political agenda ever since Gordon Brown took over from Tony Blair as prime minister in June 2007. There were some, such as the Liberal Democrats, who argued that Brown was not the choice of the people and an election should be called immediately while Labour said the public knew Blair would not serve a full parliamentary term prior to the 2005 election and that the Labour Government had a mandate to continue under Brown’s leadership.

The so-called “Brown bounce” that saw Labour experience a boost in the polls led to widespread speculation that an election was set to be called in autumn 2007, but this never materialised and now, with June 2010 the latest date when voters had to go to the polls, an election will finally take place in the traditional early May timeframe.

- **THE LATEST STATE OF PLAY**

This election is particularly hard to predict with the pre-campaign polls showing that neither Labour nor the Conservatives have a big enough margin to secure the 326 seats needed to give an overall majority to one party. This has raised talk of a “hung parliament” in which no party has a parliamentary majority and would need to seek support from elsewhere to build a governing majority. A hung parliament could make the Liberal Democrats the so-called “king makers” of British politics with Labour or the Conservatives likely to court Lib Dem support to form a government. While ELDR member parties in countries such as Germany and Sweden are currently successful members of ruling coalitions, a hung parliament has not occurred in the UK since 1974 and lasted less than a year. This is also largely due to the majority voting system “the winner takes it all”. On this occasion things may just be different though. With British politics in general discredited by last year’s MPs expenses’ scandal, the mood for doing things differently next time round, with a “new politics” is favourable and having more than one party in government may just appeal to the electorate at this moment.

The possibility of a hung parliament has only increased during the first two weeks of the campaign, as highlighted by the [latest polls](#). As with any election, public opinion changes on an almost daily basis with up to 80 opinion polls expected to be made over the course of the four week campaign period. As an indicator of the swing of the electorate’s mood, the day after the election was called, the Conservative’s were polling at 38%, Labour 31% and the Liberal Democrats with 19%. However, two weeks into the campaign and those figures have altered dramatically to give the Conservative’s 33%, Liberal Democrats 30%, and Labour 28%.

So what’s changed as candidates across the country hit the campaign trail? The “turning point” in this election so far was the first ever television debate that took place last Thursday between the leaders of the three main parties: Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrats), Gordon Brown (Labour) and David Cameron (Conservatives). For the first time in British political history the three leaders came face to face to answer questions from the studio audience.

The topic for the political heavyweights to answer questions on was domestic affairs, including issues such as immigration, constitutional reform, and how to cut the budget deficit. The leader widely credited with “winning” the debate? Nick Clegg, and since then his and the profile of the Liberal Democrats has soared as reflected in those polls mentioned previously.

The Liberal Democrats have been propelled to the summit of the opinion polls as fast as the ash from the Icelandic volcano has to Europe’s air space. While the ash is set to fall away, however, the challenge for the Lib Dems, is to remain sky high as polling day gets closer and their policies come under increasing scrutiny, by the other parties, media and public alike. One of, if not the key issue in this election is the economy. Early exchanges of views between the three parties on this issue have centered on how to improve people’s financial situation and cut Britain’s budget deficit, which as a percentage of GDP is set to be higher this year than the likes of Greece and Spain.

The Labour Party is proposing “targeted” increases in public spending over the next year to “sustain the recovery”, before saying they will cut the deficit by more than 50% by 2014. Sweeteners include a pledge not to increase income tax (tax on earnings) or extend VAT to food, children’s clothes, books, newspapers and public transport and increasing the National Minimum Wage at least in line with average earnings over the period to 2015. The Conservatives meanwhile are aiming to reduce spending immediately in 2010 with all areas subject to cuts, except health care and foreign aid, while funding a two-year council-tax freeze. The Liberal Democrats believe that the economy will be stable enough at the start of 2011-2012 to begin cutting the deficit and proposals for achieving this include scrapping Government plans for ID cards and cutting back burdensome regulation of local authorities. At the same time the Liberals are promising to increase the income tax threshold to £10,000 (€11.400), which is projected to put £700 (€800) back into the pockets of millions of people on low and middle incomes and free 3.6 million more people on low incomes from having to pay any income tax at all. The economy will be the topic for the third and final TV debate on 29th April, but before then the leaders will confront each other this Thursday (22nd April) on foreign policy matters, including their views on Europe.

EUROPE

The Liberal Democrats are the most pro-European of the three main parties, believing that the UK’s interests can best be served by working together with other EU member states, notably on issues such as international regulation on financial services and banking, addressing climate change, and fighting international crime. The Liberals also consider that it is in Britain’s long-term interest to be part of the euro when the economic conditions are right (not currently considered to be the case) and only if the decision to join the euro is supported by the outcome of a referendum. If the Conservatives come to power, however, they will form the most euro-skeptic government since Britain joined the EU in 1973, believing that the “steady and unaccountable intrusion of the EU into almost every aspect of our lives has gone too far.” The controversial decision by David Cameron to move his MEPs from the centre-right European People’s Party to form a new European parliamentary grouping of so called European conservatives and reformists after last year’s EU elections has marginalised the Tory voice in Europe and seen them join forces with a number of odd ball nationalist parties. The recent defection of long-time Conservative MEP Edward Macmillan Scott to the Liberal Democrats further serves to highlight the split that still exists in the Conservative Party about

their views on Europe. "I fear that many Conservatives want to leave Europe, not lead in Europe", commented Macmillan Scott at the time and it's easy to share this opinion when the need for EU cooperation is seemingly growing as Europe strives to emerge from recession and now is not the time for the UK to pull up the drawbridge and distance itself further from Europe. The Labour Party remains pro-European though they seemingly don't want to talk about it as much as they did under Blair's leadership. They would like to see all Western Balkan states begin talks on EU membership by 2014. A referendum on joining the single currency remains party policy, though there appears to be no rush to return to this any time soon.

- **WHAT DO THE LIBERALS WANT?**

A Liberal Democrat victory would do nicely! The big test for Clegg's Lib Dems will be whether the party's very promising opinion poll ratings are reflected in the votes cast by the British public on 6th May. If the opinion polls were reflected in the General Election results, the Lib Dems would be likely to double their number of MPs from the present figure of 62, thus making it highly likely that none of the three parties would claim an out-right majority. In such an event, either a deal would need to be done between the Lib Dems and one of the other parties (a deal strongly determined by the liberal democrats' reform agenda), which could see Liberal Democrat MPs taking up ministerial posts, or a minority government would take control in the short-term with the prospect of another election being called in the near future.

Interesting and now relatively unpredictable times lay ahead in British politics, but one thing for certain is that the Liberal Democrats will play an increasingly influential role in this election campaign, a campaign that has the potential to fundamentally change the British political landscape.

Stay tuned to www.eldr.eu for further UK updates and the results of the election.