

An Insider's View into the UK Elections

Volunteering on the 2010 British General Election was certainly an interesting way to spend my annual holidays. However it was something that I will remember for years to come.

The election was a fascinating blend of old politics versus new politics. In many ways, the campaign was similar to the 2007 Australian election and the 2008 US Election.

Former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown entered the campaign leading a government that had been in office since 1997. An old school campaigner, Brown portrayed himself as a safe pair of hands who could deliver a 'fair future for all'.

The Opposition Conservative Party, led by David Cameron, ran a campaign, that in my opinion was very similar to Kevin Rudd's and Barack Obama's that tapped into a generational mood for change.

They invited the people to vote for change by 'joining the Government of Britain'.

But that is where the similarities between Australia and the US end.

If it was just the two major parties campaigning for the election, I am sure the outcome would have been much different and the result would have been a majority Conservative government.

However the 2010 campaign was infused with excitement with the 'arrival' of Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats who energized the media and public with their campaign based on the theme 'change that works for you'.

To understand how the Liberal Democrats dramatically altered the campaign, you need to start with the election debates.

This election was the first time the leaders of all major political parties were able to debate each other in front of a live, uncontrolled audience. (NB: *In the past there had been no live debates and the Liberal Democrats were never given the opportunity to be 'onstage' with Labour and the Conservatives*).

These debates electrified the campaign (*at least for two political parties*). They showed the true reality of modern campaigning by putting two young charismatic, media savvy leaders on centre stage, against an ageing leader who had never been comfortable in front of the camera.

For the Conservatives, they were able to portray their Leader as the 'Heir to Tony Blair'. David Cameron portrayed himself as the quintessential modern family man and a man who had 'unleashed the shackles' of the Conservative Party past to reinvent the party as a new progressive force.

For the Liberal Democrats, the election debates allowed them to reach out to an audience previously denied to them. It gave them equal billing to both the Labour Party and the Conservatives and raised awareness of their policies.

However, for Labour, the debates proved to be a distraction as their Leader was forced to go against two media savvy leaders from the so-called 'Obama' generation.

After being elevated to the national stage as a result of the debates, 'Cleggmania' swept the country, confusing the campaigns of both major political parties.

The general public became captivated by what was perceived as the new force in British politics with commentators predicting the Liberal Democrats would become the major Centre-Left party.

This led to one of the most fascinating turn of events of the campaign where on election night, the Liberal Democrats, despite their huge surge in opinion polls and support from the 'pundits', failed to capitalise on their support and suffered a loss of six seats.

There are many reasons floating around as to why the Liberal Democrats were unable to capitalise on their momentum. Many suggest they simply grew too big too quickly and were unable to muster support on the ground in the key battle seats. Others suggest that the more prominent they became, the more people became aware of their policies. The truth is probably a combination of both.

Despite losing seats however, the Liberal Democrats came out of the election as the clear winners as they became the party of the balance of power.

Although the Conservative Party made more gains than at any election since 1931, with a net gain of 97 seats, they still fell short of a governing majority placing them in uncharted waters.

After days of intense negotiations, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, parties who waged at times a vicious and personal campaign against each other during the election, agreed to form a Coalition Government.

The new Government in many ways does represent true change for the people of the United Kingdom. Two political parties, who are not usual bedfellows, have made a commitment to govern in Coalition for the next five years.

Despite grassroots opposition in both parties, their political wings have agreed to govern in the common interest.

The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats have promised a radical, reforming government that will create a stronger society, smaller state with power and responsibility in the hands of every citizen. It's an interesting promise and one in which only time will tell if it succeeds.

Key Election Facts

- Conservatives made more gains than at any election since 1931 with a net gain of 97 seats. Previously, the most seats gained by the Conservatives in a single election since 1931 was 87 – in the 1950 general election.
- Conservatives record their second biggest swing from Labour since 1931. The Conservative Party has received a swing from Labour of 5.1 per cent, second only to that achieved by Margaret Thatcher in 1979 (5.3 per cent).
- Labour lost more seats than at any General Election since 1931. Labour suffered a net loss of 91 seats. Previously, the most seats lost by the Labour Party in a single election since 1931 was 78 – in the 1950 general election.
- Conservatives now have more seats in England than Labour, the Liberal Democrats and Greens combined, but were unable to make significant inroads in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, resulting in claims that they cannot govern for the United Kingdom.
- The Greens elected their first Member of Parliament in the seat of Brighton Pavilion following a tactical campaign by Centre Left parties to freeze out the Conservative vote.