

UNITED KINGDOM

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INTRODUCTION

Politics in the UK during 2013 saw the rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in opinion polls, in representation at the local level and in record-high by-election scores. Partly related to this, the European Union (EU) was a recurring theme with the Prime Minister starting the year by promising an in-out referendum if the Conservatives won the next general election, preceded by negotiation of a new settlement between the UK and the EU. The year came to an end with the government pushing through new restrictions on welfare benefits that EU migrants to the UK can claim. Other notable events included the passage of legislation to allow same-sex marriage, the Scottish Executive's publication of a white paper making the case for an independent Scotland, and the recall of Parliament over the summer to discuss the conflict in Syria, at which MPs voted against UK military action. The final quarter of the year saw much discussion of energy prices in the light of Labour leader Ed Miliband's announcement at his party's annual conference that he would freeze energy prices for 20 months if Labour were to win the next election. The year ended with figures showing that UK unemployment in the third quarter of 2013 was at its lowest level since 2009. Although there were some signs of economic improvement, the Conservatives finished 2013 firmly behind Labour in the polls with the Liberal Democrats fairly consistently polling in fourth place behind UKIP.

CABINET REPORT

Cameron I

This cabinet took office on 19 May 2010 and is a coalition of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties.

[Table 1 here]

For the composition of Cameron I on 1 January 2013 see (Whitaker 2013: 239)

[Table 2 here]

PARLIAMENT REPORT

House of Commons

Both coalition parties finished the year with a net loss of one seat in the House of Commons.

In the case of the Conservatives, one of their MPs (Nigel Evans), who was at the time a Deputy Speaker, resigned from his position in October 2013 following his arrest on allegations of sexual assault, of which he was later acquitted. Liberal Democrat MP Mike Hancock withdrew from the party whip (and was suspended from the party in January 2014) over allegations of sexual misconduct.

There were two by-elections in 2013. The first, held on 1 March in Eastleigh, was a result of Liberal Democrat MP Chris Huhne resigning as an MP, having been convicted of perverting the course of justice (more on this below). The seat was retained by the Liberal Democrats (on 32.1% of the vote) although UKIP finished second with their highest ever by-election vote share of 27.8%, some 24 points higher than their general election score in the same seat. David Miliband's decision to leave the House of Commons led to a by-election on 2

May in South Shields which saw Labour holding the seat, with UKIP second on 24.2% of the vote, a long way behind Labour's 50.5% share (Coleman et al. 2014).

[Table 3 here]

House of Lords

One notable change was the arrival of the first Green Party member of the House of Lords, Jenny Jones, in August 2013.

[Table 4 here]

ISSUES IN NATIONAL POLITICS

The year began with the coalition government presenting their mid-term review, listing their achievements in the first half of their five-year government and setting out plans for the period up to the intended May 2015 election date. David Cameron and Nick Clegg talked up their agreement on the fundamentals of reducing the deficit and thereby improving the economic outlook for the UK. They each emphasised areas of particular importance to their party including education reform, public sector pensions and university funding for the Conservatives, and raising the income tax allowance and providing funding for education for the poorest children for the Liberal Democrats. Future plans included legislation to begin work on a new high speed rail network (known as High Speed 2) connecting London and Birmingham initially, more measures to help fund childcare for those on the lowest incomes, and legislation to ease entry into the housing market. Nevertheless, others reflected on the slow progress in improving the economy, the failure of the coalition to do much in the way

of constitutional reform, their differences over European integration and the sense that there was little ambitious legislation left for the second half of their term. Tensions between the coalition partners were evidenced in January when the Liberal Democrats carried out their threat made in August 2012 (Whitaker 2013: 241) to oppose the planned alterations to parliamentary constituency boundaries that would have reduced the number of MPs from 650 to 600 following the 2015 general election. A combination of Liberal Democrat, Labour and other MPs defeated the Conservatives (by 334 to 292 votes) on this element of what became the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013. It had been widely expected that these changes would have electorally benefitted the Conservatives to a degree.

A recurring theme throughout the year was the UK's relationship with the EU and the tensions that this posed between the coalition partners, within the Conservative Party and between the Conservatives and UKIP. Prime Minister David Cameron made a speech on 23 January in which he promised that if the Conservatives won a majority at the next general election, they would hold an in-out referendum on UK membership of the EU by the end of 2017. This would be preceded by negotiation of a new settlement between the UK and the EU. That this promise had not entirely succeeded in quietening down Conservative backbench dissent on the EU became apparent when Tory MPs John Baron and Peter Bone tabled an amendment to the Queen's speech in May. For them and others, Cameron's speech was not enough by itself. Instead, what was needed was the promise of a bill in the 2013-14 session legislating for an in-out EU referendum to be held after the 2015 election. The Queen's Speech amendment expressed regret that the government had not announced such a proposal. Of course, any such act could be repealed by any government taking power after the 2015 contest but for some Conservative backbenchers it would have indicated the

strength of Cameron's commitment to the referendum. In the event, Cameron responded to the pressure before the amendment was put to a vote by promising such a bill.

Nevertheless, this had to be introduced as a Private Member's rather than a government bill, given that it lacked the support of the Liberal Democrats. Such bills have far lower success rates than those proposed by government. While the bill had completed its passage through the House of Commons by the end of the year, partly thanks to Labour and Liberal Democrat abstentions, it was effectively killed off in the House of Lords in January 2014 with the government saying they would re-introduce it in the 2014-15 parliamentary session.

Arguably by promising a referendum and introducing a bill to legislate for this, the Conservatives were reacting not only to their backbenchers but also to the pressure they felt as a result of UKIP's growing popularity. The party was scoring around 4-5% in opinion polls in early 2012 but this had risen to levels of 12-15% by the end of 2013. A significant part of UKIP's campaigning has involved linking immigration to EU membership. An awareness of this, combined with pressure from Conservative backbenchers and the ending of restrictions (on 1 January 2014) on the ability of Bulgarian and Romanian citizens to enter the UK for work, saw the prime minister announce in mid-December new rules on how long EU migrants would have to wait before they could claim unemployment benefits. These were to be pushed quickly through parliament to ensure their entry into law as soon as possible in 2014. A further government initiative on the UK's EU membership was the publication in July 2013 of the first reports from a review of competences of the EU, something promised in the coalition's Programme for Government. These reports covered a range of topics including the single market, foreign policy, welfare and tax. They were met with limited attention in the press, partly due to the birth of Prince George on the same day

as their publication. Nevertheless they disappointed some Eurosceptics, while those favouring EU membership picked out the positive elements of the reports in support of their case.

While there was nothing on the scale of the parliamentary expenses scandal of 2009, a series of events saw parliamentarians being suspended, resigning or even being imprisoned during 2013. The Liberal Democrats were particularly affected by this. In February, Chris Huhne, a Liberal Democrat MP and former cabinet member, pleaded guilty to the offence of allowing his then wife to take a penalty for speeding on his behalf. He and his ex-wife were sent to prison for eight months. Later in February, Channel Four news reported allegations of sexual impropriety made by a number of women against Lord Rennard, who had been Liberal Democrat campaign director and chief executive of the party. Leader Nick Clegg responded by setting up an internal investigation into the matter. A police investigation was held but concluded that there was insufficient evidence for a prosecution. That the Lib Dems managed to win the Eastleigh by-election amid these circumstances perhaps reflects their effective local party machinery. But further problems came in June when Lib Dem MP Mike Hancock withdrew from the party whip amid a civil case against him for indecent assault.

Other parties also faced problems. Conservative MP Patrick Mercer resigned from the party in June after he appeared to have accepted money from journalists posing as lobbyists and then failed to declare all of the income. In July, former Labour MP Denis MacShane was charged with false accounting in relation to parliamentary expenses, an offence to which he pleaded guilty in November and which led to a jail sentence. Three members of the House of Lords (one Ulster Unionist and two Labour) were suspended in June amid allegations that

they agreed to take actions in the upper chamber in return for payment. Amid all this parliamentary scandal, it is not surprising that when, in December, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority recommended an 11% increase in MPs' pay, the response among the public and media was largely unsupportive.

Local elections were held on 2 May in all 28 shire counties and seven English unitary authorities. The big story was the success of UKIP with the party making a net gain of 139 seats and an estimated national equivalent vote share of 22% (Duckworth 2013). In 66 local authority districts, UKIP's vote share rose by 20 points or more compared with the previous elections in 2009 (Thrasher et al. 2013: 3). Their success was far greater than they had achieved in any previous local contests. Both governing parties made net losses, with the Conservatives down 337 and Liberal Democrats seeing a net fall of 122 seats. Labour made net gains of 287 seats including gaining control of two shire county councils. Two mayoral elections also took place in Doncaster and North Tyneside. Labour won both contests, defeating an independent and a Conservative incumbent respectively.

The year also saw Parliament passing a law that legalised same-sex marriage. This proved a controversial issue with Cameron being told by chairs of some Conservative Party associations that the change would lower support for the party. Those opposed – including representatives of several religious faiths – argued that the legislation would redefine or devalue marriage and/or that it was an unnecessary distraction from the need to improve the UK economy. For Cameron, the proposals were part of modernising the Conservative party by pursuing a socially liberal agenda. Evidently, Conservative MPs were not united on this issue. The bill passed its third reading in a free vote in the Commons by 366 votes to 161

but this included 130 Conservative MPs voting against the legislation, among them two members of the Cabinet (David Jones and Owen Paterson). While some opponents speculated that the bill might be rejected by the upper house, in the event the Lords voted against a second reading amendment designed to wreck the bill by 390 to 148 and the legislation proceeded through its remaining legislative stages to receive Royal Assent in July.

In August news broke of an attack in Syria which was believed to have involved chemical weapons and to have caused hundreds of deaths. The UK Parliament was recalled on 29 August to debate and vote on a motion which stated that a strong humanitarian response was needed 'which may, if necessary, require military action' solely for the purposes of alleviating suffering rather than any 'wider objectives' (House of Commons 2013). This was carefully worded to avoid accusations that the government was seeking permission to push for regime change and was explicit that another vote would be held in the Commons prior to any military action being agreed. Despite these conditions, the rebellion among Conservative and Liberal Democrat backbenchers was sufficient to ensure the government's motion was defeated by 272 votes to 285 with 30 Conservatives and nine Lib Dems voting with the opposition. This was a serious blow for the prime minister and was potentially problematic for UK relations with the USA and France on the issue. The principal arguments against the government were that it was not yet clear whether the Assad regime was responsible for the attack and that the consequences of military action – in the light of the Iraq experience – were uncertain. Nevertheless, defeats on foreign policy issues for governments are extremely rare in Britain. Cameron's leadership, however, did not come seriously under threat as a result of this.

Although in February, Moody's credit ratings agency had downgraded the UK from an AAA to an AA1 rating, the UK's economic situation looked marginally better by the end of 2013 than it had done at the start of the year. The Chancellor announced via his autumn statement in December that economic growth forecasts for 2014 had been revised upwards. The economy grew in all quarters of 2013 and inflation, as measured by the consumer prices index, dropped in November to its lowest level for four years at 2.1%. The numbers of unemployed declined in all but the last month of the year. While trust in Cameron and his Chancellor George Osborne to run the economy had risen a little by the end of 2013 compared with a year before, the equivalent measure for Labour's Ed Miliband and Ed Balls had not moved much and was eight points below that for their Conservative counterparts in a December 2013 ComRes poll (Curtice, 2013).

In November in Scotland, the Scottish Executive published its White Paper, *Scotland's Future*. This set out a case for an independent Scotland including how this would work and what benefits the Scottish National Party felt it would bring.

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Table 1 Cameron I

1 January 2013		31 December 2013	
Party	Number of cabinet posts	Party	Number of cabinet posts
Conservative Party	18	Conservative Party	18
Liberal Democrats	5	Liberal Democrats	5
TOTAL	23	TOTAL	23

Table 2 Incoming and outgoing ministers in Cameron I

Incoming ministers:

Scotland Office: Alistair Carmichael, male, 1965, Liberal Democrat, became Secretary of State for Scotland on 7 October 2013

Outgoing ministers:

Secretary of State for Scotland Michael Moore replaced by Alistair Carmichael on 7 October 2013

Table 3 House of Commons membership

Party	1 January 2013		31 December 2013	
	Number of seats	Share of seats (%)	Number of seats	Share of seats (%)
Conservative Party	304	46.8	303	46.6
Labour Party	257	39.5	257	39.5
Liberal Democrats	57	8.8	56	8.6
Democratic Unionist Party	8	1.2	8	1.2
Scottish National Party	6	0.9	6	0.9
Sinn Fein	5	0.8	5	0.8
Independents	3	0.5	5	0.8
Plaid Cymru	3	0.5	3	0.5
Social Democratic and Labour Party	3	0.5	3	0.5
Alliance	1	0.2	1	0.2
Green	1	0.2	1	0.2
Respect	1	0.2	1	0.2
Speaker	1	0.2	1	0.2
TOTAL	650	100	650	100
Women	146	22.5	147	22.6

Source: House of Commons Information Office.

Table 4 House of Lords membership

Party	1 January 2013		31 December 2013	
	Number of seats	Share of seats (%)	Number of seats	Share of seats (%)
Conservative Party	212	27.9	222	28.5
Labour Party	224	29.5	220	28.2
Liberal Democrats	90	11.8	99	12.7
Crossbenchers	178	23.4	181	23.2
Archbishops and Bishops	25	3.3	22	2.8
Other	31	4.1	36	4.6
TOTAL	760		780	
Women	172	22.6	182	23.3

Source: House of Lords Information Office.