Marginal difference: Who Labour needs to win and where

Lewis Baston

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Progress
Labour's Progressives

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Introduction

Over the summer of 2012 a debate took place within Labour circles about electoral strategy. To put it most simply: where should the party be focusing its energies in trying to expand support from the low share of the vote that it gained in 2010? Where did the voters who left Labour's coalition between 1997 and 2010 go? And what is the best way of getting them back?

This paper is a contribution to and a commentary on that debate. I hope it can provide some facts, and some analysis and thoughts about what these facts mean. I am not committed to any particular school of thought in the debate and, although Robert Philpot of Progress commissioned this work and Progress has made other useful contributions towards a Labour victory, I have also benefitted from the help of Emma Burnell and Stuart Wilks-Heeg. Part of the purpose of this paper is to argue that the debate is ill-served by a simplistic polarisation between 'missing millions' and 'Tory switchers' positions. A successful strategy should use both sets of insights, complex though it is to synthesise them into a coherent overall narrative and set of policies.

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The alternatives on offer to Labour

Labour's dilemma is that there are several alternative plausible electoral strategies for it, each with their own policy implications.

1. 'Steady as she goes'

This approach starts from a couple of observations. First, that the Conservative share of the vote in 2010 (36 per cent) was low for a governing party. Not since 1955 has a party increased its share of the vote after anything like a full term in government (indeed, 1955 is the only example of this ever taking place). It is more usual for governing parties to hold more or less steady (as the Conservatives did in 1987 and 1992), drop a couple of percentage points in public support (as in 1979, 1983 and 2001) or suffer a worse fall in support (1974, 1997, 2005 and 2010). In order to beat the Conservatives, even given the obstacles in terms of new constituency boundaries (which now look somewhat unlikely) and changes to the voter registration system, the bar is not very high for Labour.

The decision of the Liberal Democrats to enter the coalition with the Conservatives, and to sacrifice key policies on VAT and tuition fees, and their lack of differentiation from other Conservative messages on the economy in particular, has gifted Labour five

to six percentage points of disillusioned leftwing former Liberal Democats, taking the party's baseline up to around 34-35 per cent. This assumes that anyone who voted Labour in 2010 is a hardcore loyalist who is not going to stray now.

The combination of the existing progress that Labour has made with former Liberal Democrats and the potential that exists among the five million 'missing voters' who stopped voting Labour between 1997 and 2010 was highlighted by Andrew Harrop in a Fabian Society study of 'Ed's Converts'. Public opinion research of those who had switched towards Labour since 2010 showed that the policy preferences of this group were to the left of the Liberal Democrats (which is unsurprising) but also to the left of the established Labour vote (more surprising). Forty per cent of them, for instance, supported higher taxes for better public services (a position that was very much a minority one after a long period of Labour government but which was mainstream in 1997), compared to 35 per cent of Labour voters and 22 per cent of all voters. About half of the new converts seemed absolutely determined to vote Labour and would not consider drifting back to the Liberal Democrats. This suggests that the new adherents to Labour are not the classic midterm discontented floating voter, but a significant new pillar of support.

Historically, these voters may well have deserted Labour because of the Iraq war and opposition to public service reform. It may, Harrop argues, be possible to win from a position a bit to the left of where Tony Blair took the party because there are no strong competitors for leftwing votes and the centre-right is divided between Liberal Democrats, Conservatives and, increasingly, the United Kingdom Independence party.[1] Harrop points out that support for the Conservative party is a distinct minority position among the

1 Indeed, it is notable that two of the three out of Labour's worst results in midterm elections, for the Scottish parliament and the Bradford West by-election, have been when Labour has been outflanked to the left by the SNP and Respect (the other was for the mayor of London).

electorate, supported by just 36 per cent of voters and 24 per cent of electors in 2010, and people who are floating between it and other parties are significantly to the right of the median British voter.

Add in the demographic fact that the most loyal Conservative group (the old) die and are replaced in the electorate by a strongly Labour group (young people), and Labour should be able to count on a significantly increased vote in 2015 and a general upward trend. Putting it crudely – and one will not hear this argument made so complacently – Labour does not have to do anything much to pull more or less level with the Conservatives in public support at the next election.

Of course, it is not quite that simple. Labour needs to keep hold of its new former Liberal Democrat supporters, as they might otherwise go Green, stop voting, or in some cases revert to the Liberal Democrats if the party manages to reposition itself after 2014. Labour needs, the argument runs, to be sensitive to the concerns that put them off voting for it in 2010. Labour should be more liberal on matters such as civil liberties, free expression and higher education, and apologise for Iraq. However, this may risk alienating other supporters: for instance, traditional Labour voters who liked the party's 'tough on crime' policies when it was in power.

"Labour should be able to count on a significantly increased vote in 2015 and a general upward trend"

However, there is another risk to this as well, based on historical precedent. Each time Labour has been ejected from government since 1945, it has lost support at the election following the first Tory term (1955, 1974 and 1983). This has largely been because the party has been divided and sometimes extreme in the wake of defeat, in a way it has not been since 2010. But it also reflects the fact that

there are some voters who stick to the party at the end of a term of government, either because they generally trust incumbents more (particularly on foreign policy and economic management issues) or because they are afraid of what a Tory victory will bring. Labour will lose a few 'trust incumbents', voters who supported Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling as safe pairs of hands in 2010 but who, now the Conservatives are in power, will stick with what they know in 2015 rather than take a risk with Ed Miliband and Ed Balls. Labour needs to work at keeping these, as well as the new recruits from the Liberal Democrats. There is also the risk in Scotland of a sudden big loss of votes and seats to the Scottish National party as happened in the Scottish parliamentary election in 2011.

So although a crude calculation suggests that an electoral strategy is almost unnecessary, the immediate policy consequences of 'steady as she goes' have risks attached to them – they might alienate other voters – and there are risks that voters (2010 Labour and former Liberal Democrats) on whom this model is counting to be firm for Labour will end up being less reliable as polling day approaches, either being vulnerable to appeals from other parties or not turning out at all.

2. Mobilising the 'missing voters'

The biggest drop in Labour support between 1997 (or, indeed, 1992) and 2010 seems to be attributable to people stopping voting.

Mobilisation of people who had previously not turned out was part of the pattern in the elections in 1987 and 1992 (on both sides) and partially in 2010 (mostly for the Conservatives, although there do appear to have been some people who dropped out in 2001 and 2005 who came back to Labour in 2010). There is clearly a considerable pool of people who were sympathetic to Labour who stopped voting and if they could be recovered (without the lost

Tories also returning to the voting pool) Labour would sweep in.

However, the inescapable problem with this approach is that it is difficult to achieve.

The first challenge is to ascertain what the 'missing voters' want – by their very nature, people who do not vote are difficult to analyse. From the demographics, they appear to be younger people, particularly among the working class. Some of these people will have been disillusioned with the record of New Labour in government and would respond to a more leftwing mix of policies, although they will probably be difficult to convince that the party can actually do anything to satisfy their demands.

But the risk of that is that in chasing after leftwing potential voters, many of whom live in safe Labour seats anyway and who might not turn out in the end, Labour adopts policies that put off the floating voters in the middle, and stimulates Tory turnout (as in 1987 and 1992). In this year's mayoral election, Ken Livingstone did reasonably well, for a local election, in persuading Labour's reluctant core voters (younger voters, people on low incomes and ethnic minority voters) to turn out, but still lost the election because he was not convincing enough for the middle ground. Some of the 'missing voters' themselves will not be so much leftwing as alienated, with a policy mix that does not reflect the offer from any party (a hard line on crime, immigration – perhaps with racist undertones – and benefits but favouring well-funded public services and strong trade unions).

The next challenge is persuading people who have lost the habit of voting (or never had it in the first place) to participate in the political system. Every time it is studied, it is obvious that there is a deep degree of alienation between people and the political system, that political discourse is confusing and offputting and that people feel that politics

cannot do much for them. Conquering these broad perceptions of the whole system is probably beyond the efforts of one party alone.

The question also depends to some extent on what one believes happened in the catastrophic drop in turnout that took place between 1997 and 2001. Was it a sudden step-change into a world where turnout is always going to be lower than it was before, or was it more a response to the nature of politics in the post-New Labour world that would be reversible if somehow we could recapture some ideological contrast between the parties and a sense of class and identity politics rather than lukewarm shopping around between parties?

“Some commentators deride it as an obviously stupid idea to ‘aim an election campaign at people who don’t vote’, but this is too cynical”

The government’s intention to bring in a system of ‘individual electoral registration’ offers a further complication. All data and expert opinion suggest it will result in many of the most vulnerable (young people, flat-dwellers, private renters, recent immigrants) disproportionately dropping off the register. Labour, from Ed Miliband downwards, has spoken ambitiously about making voter registration a key part of the party’s activity in future. However, if the authorities have trouble contacting such people, it is likely to be even more difficult for a political party. It may well be very costly but disappointing in its impact. Some commentators deride it as an obviously stupid idea to ‘aim an election campaign at people who don’t vote’, but this is too cynical. Contact with a political party, even on the level of a registration campaign, is likely to produce more positive reactions than being ignored by the parties.

A common objection is that the parties ‘all sound the same’

and this is part of the reason for mass abstention from voting and votes for protest and extreme parties. But a mainstream party that is a bit different, seemingly 'on your side' rather than part of an interchangeable elite, may have potential for gaining support from people who have previously been disengaged.

A relevant historical reflection is that when it is in office Labour is actually quite good at retaining middle-class support, while it tends to shed working-class support. This was the pattern in the election losses of 1970, 1979 and 2010 – the middle-class element held up well but working-class votes bled away to abstention (particularly in 1970), the Conservatives (particularly in 1979) or both. The general election of 1951 is an exception – Labour's working-class vote was as strong as it has ever been, but it lost a chunk of the middle class.

When Labour has regained power narrowly, in 1964 and 1974, a large part of the victory has been because of working-class mobilisation. In the landslide wins of 1945 and 1997, though, there were cross-class movements involving significant inroads into the middle-class vote. Social change has, of course, meant that the traditionally envisaged working class – male manual workers – has declined in number, but also that the 'routine non-manual' workers, such as call centre workers and shop assistants, and public sector professionals like nurses and teachers, have become increasingly proletarianised.

There is much to commend this view of electoral strategy for Labour. It is true that rerunning the Blair strategy from 1997-2007 is not necessary to win a future election. Because of an expected higher turnout, the level of support for Labour in 2005, indeed, would be insufficient to win an election in 2015. Mobilisation helped both Barack Obama and François Hollande win their elections, so it is a strategy that can work (and while Obama was fairly moderate,

neither he nor Hollande were third way candidates in the mould of Bill Clinton, Blair or former French prime minister Lionel Jospin).

But the mobilisation strategy requires a lot of energy for the party organisation to deliver and it depends on voters (beyond the leftist former Liberal Democrats) whose attachment to political participation is weak, and it has the risk of provoking a Conservative countermobilisation. It is a familiar political science finding that turnout variations between elections are related to both the perceived closeness of an election and the perceived difference between the parties. Mobilisation above all requires optimism – the 'hope' of the Obama campaign in 2008, a sense that a different sort of society is possible and that the party can go some way towards making it happen. But the dominant mood in 2012 seems one of despair, bewilderment and pessimism – a sense that the economic, social and political system is failing but that there is nothing that can be done about it.

Somehow Labour needs to lift the gloom and cynicism that currently pervade British discourse before the mobilisation strategy can really reach its potential.

3. The 'centre-ground' approach

Elections are won in the centre-ground of politics and Labour needs to recapture territory among swing voters from the Conservatives. Underpinning this theory are a couple of further observations. One is that in terms of winning marginal seats from the Conservatives, gaining swing voters counts double (by reducing the Conservative vote by one and increasing Labour's by one) compared to mobilising new voters or gaining converts from the Liberal Democrats. Another is that we know swing voters are likely to vote. Finally, there is the notion that by offering a 'centre-ground' set of policies,

Labour will reduce the determination of weak Tory supporters to go out and vote Conservative, because they will not fear a radical Labour government (in contrast to 1987 and 1992 when effective Labour campaigns both increased the Conservative vote – as Tories thought their votes were necessary – as well as the Labour vote).

There is a risk that this strategy devolves simply into triangulation, although this certainly need not be the case, and advocates of the 'centre-ground' view such as Liam Byrne stress the need for genuine popular policies based on a consistent ideology rather than splitting the difference. Triangulation was partly successful in the 1990s. It involved contrasting a New Labour (or equivalent) philosophy and approach to governing with both the conservative right and with 'the old-fashioned statist left'. It could yield huge electoral dividends for the leader identified with the strategy. However, it also came at the price of devaluing one's own party (making the transition from the first third way leader somewhat difficult) and also sometimes abandoning ideology in favour of, on the one hand, ultra-pragmatic policymaking ('what matters is what works') and, on the other, opinion poll-driven opportunism. Moreover, critics argue that navigating a midpoint between two other political forces is an unimpressive compromise that gives up on one's ability to shape the political environment and stand by values.

The more intelligent version of this strategy as promoted by Byrne recognises that times have moved on and the political environment has changed, and also that, at its best, a centre-ground approach involves more than taking an average between two other positions. The perfect example of this was Blair's creative synthesis of 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' – tying together right and left approaches to a social ill in an effective and popular way. But such breakthroughs are not common. The third way

economic settlement, dependent on the tax receipts from strongly growing and lightly regulated sectors of the economy (mainly financial services in the UK) in order to fund social and public services improvement, has completely collapsed since 2007.

Byrne's sketch of the new centre-ground has some merit, aiming for: balanced public finances; a new settlement between government and industry and support for small businesses against vested interests in order to generate good jobs, material progress and a revival in tax receipts; a welfare state that enables people to get jobs (by, for instance, recognising the social changes that mean that 'care' for other family members is something potential workers need help with); 'civic inventiveness', ie devolution of power; and continuing public service reform on the model practised under New Labour.[2]

More generally, the 'centre-ground' route would also mean talking about issues that are difficult for Labour's instincts, but which caused significant losses of votes in 2010 – immigration and the benefits system. On both of these matters, there was a loss of trust in Labour and the party lost ground (to abstention and smaller parties as well as to the Conservatives) to parties which stood to its right.

4. 'Progressive majority'

The 'progressive majority' strand of Labour opinion starts from the (probably correct) proposition that there is a long-term downward trend in the support for the two main political parties and, indeed, for a model of government which simply alternates between the two. Labour, therefore, will find winning outright in 2015 a difficult task, although there are also similar obstacles to an overall Conservative victory. Labour needs to think seriously about how to manage a hung parliament and work on the basis of a 'plural left'

2 Liam Byrne 'The New Centre Ground' for ***Progress*** January 2012.

including other parties, even the Liberal Democrats. The electorate is increasingly non-tribal and Labour needs to be less tribal and exclusive in its attitudes.

This was quite a popular line of analysis before the 2010 election, although for obvious reasons it has fewer supporters now. It is often associated with a relatively leftwing attitude to policy. In terms of political strategy it means going relatively easy on the Liberal Democrats, building bridges with some of the more leftist elements within that party and seeking common ground with the Greens and Plaid Cymru and perhaps – assuming the independence debate is out of the way after 2014 – the Scottish National party. It implies a reforming approach to the constitution and decentralisation. The foreign model would be the plural left and anti-establishment political sector in Germany – the SPD, Greens, Die Linke and Piratenpartei. But even in Germany, where the electoral system is more propitious to cooperation between larger and smaller parties, the only force with whom the SPD can work is usually the Greens.

“The electorate is increasingly non-tribal and Labour needs to be less tribal and exclusive in its attitudes”

Electorally the argument is that it is better for Labour if the Liberal Democrat party retains some of its vote, because the alternative in many of the seats it holds is the election of a Conservative MP. By chipping off so many south-western and suburban constituencies from the Conservative block, the Liberal Democrats make it harder for the Tories to win outright. In short, a complete collapse of the party is undesirable for Labour.

Despite being grounded in a perfectly sensible desire to be prepared for a hung parliament, this is probably the least convincing

of the strategic narratives on offer. It seems to lack ambition, and almost to see a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition as a preferable option to a single-party Labour government, a position that lacks support within the party and often seems politically unrealistic given the tone of Liberal Democrat criticisms of Labour. However, it is, of course, possible to think this way in the long term but doubt its relevance for 2015.

But what do the numbers say?

The raw numbers of voters for each party, and abstainers, in the last eight general elections in Great Britain are given in the table below.

Number (million)	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010	1987 to 2010	1992 to 2010	1997 to 2010
Con	13.7	13.0	13.8	14.0	9.6	8.4	8.8	10.7	-3.1	-3.3	+1.1
Lab	11.5	8.5	10.0	11.6	13.5	10.7	9.6	8.6	-1.4	-3.0	-4.9
LD	4.3	7.8	7.3	6.0	5.2	4.8	6.0	6.8	-0.5	+0.8	+1.6
Nat	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.7	+0.2	-0.1	-0.1
Anti-EU	-	-	-	-	0.9	0.6	0.6	0.9	+0.9	+0.9	0.0
Others	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.9	1.1	+1.0	+0.7	+0.7
Abstain	9.6	11.2	10.3	9.3	12.2	17.7	16.7	15.3	+5.0	+6.0	+3.1
Total	**40.1**	**41.1**	**42.1**	**42.2**	**42.7**	**43.2**	**43.1**	**44.4**	**+2.3**	**+2.2**	**+1.7**

The overall movements since Labour's landslide in 1997 to the hung parliament of 2010 show, in round numbers, five million lost Labour voters. The biggest increase is among people not voting at all (up three million) with smaller increases for the Liberal Democrats (1.5 million) and the Conservatives (one million). The total size of the electorate has also increased. Compared to where things stood in the third Thatcher election of 1987, the biggest net switches are

from both the main parties to abstention and voting for minor parties.

It is important to note that all these movements are net. They reflect a complex web of flows of the vote.

There is natural change to the total electorate, reflecting people newly qualified to vote by reason of age and people leaving the electorate through death. The eligible electorate in the 2015 election, assuming it takes place as planned, will contain some electors who were not even born at the time of the 1997 election, and any electors who were in the 65+ age group in 1997 will be beating the actuarial averages if they are still around to cast a vote in 2015.

There is also change arising from immigration and emigration. Immigrants, provided they qualify for the franchise, are added to the electorate (as, of course, are their children in due course). While emigrants are not disqualified for the first 15 years after leaving, there will be some who lose the franchise by having been away 15 years and a large proportion who drop off the register because overseas registration is more difficult. These are retirees, workers and young people away travelling.

Another source of change is variation in the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register. Most authorities agree that the quality of the register has deteriorated, with two particularly sharp movements in the early 1990s (following the poll tax) and in the early 2000s. Incomplete registration is a particular problem in metropolitan areas and for young people.

As well as these flows in and out of the electorate changes in voting behaviour are never entirely simple. There will be movements in and out of all the parties. If we simplify by regarding all 'other' parties as the same for this analysis, we have four parties (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat and Others) and two non-voting options,

ie not being on the register and being on the register but abstaining. There are therefore six 'no change' possibilities, and 30 options for changing between these possibilities. The matrix of possibilities for the voters is much more complex than in a pair of elections like 1951 and 1955, and with the decline in class-based block voting there are probably more cross-currents now than ever before. Measurements like swing and turnout mask quite complex patterns of churn.

Let us try to simplify the picture a little. The following table restates the vote and abstention numbers in Great Britain but expresses them as percentages of the whole electorate.

% of electorate	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010	1987 to 2010	1992 to 2010	1997 to 2010
Con	34.2	31.6	32.7	33.3	22.5	19.3	20.4	24.1	-9.2	-9.2	+1.6
Lab	28.8	20.6	23.8	27.4	31.7	24.8	22.2	19.4	-4.4	-8.0	-12.3
LD	10.8	18.9	17.4	14.2	12.3	11.1	13.9	15.4	-2.0	+1.2	+3.1
Nat	1.6	1.1	1.3	1.9	1.8	1.5	1.4	1.5	+0.2	-0.4	-0.3
Anti-EU	-	-	-	-	2.1	0.9	1.4	2.1	+2.1	+2.1	0.0
Others	0.9	0.5	0.3	1.0	1.0	1.4	2.1	2.5	+2.2	+1.5	+1.5
Abstain	23.8	27.3	24.5	22.1	28.5	40.9	38.7	34.6	+10.1	+12.5	+6.1

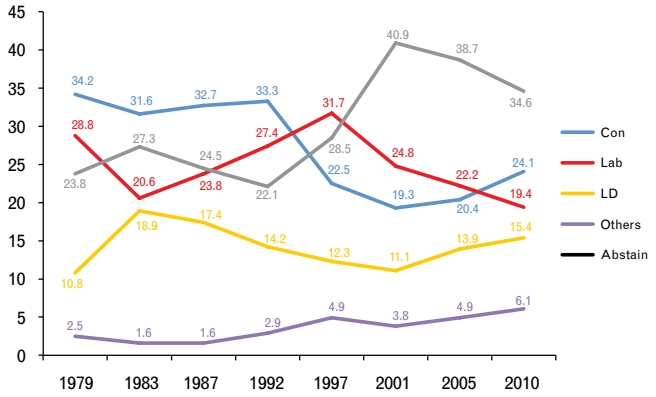
Looked at in terms of the whole electorate, 2010 was Labour's weakest performance since it became a proper national party in the early 1920s – it won a higher percentage of votes cast than in 1983, but because turnout was so much lower the party's share of the total electorate was actually lower. But this was not because the Conservatives had done well – their share of the electorate was also low by past comparison. It was up from where it was in 1997-2005, but below their previous recent low point (26.8 per cent in October 1974). The proportion of abstainers in particular was historically high, but there had also been a clear upward drift in votes for fourth parties.

Where Labour might look for new recruits for the 2015 election is to some extent a matter of optics. Taking a 1997-2010 perspective, Labour has suffered the worst net losses to abstention, and then to the Liberal Democrats. The Conservatives have picked up only slightly since their ejection from power in 1997. Taking a baseline of 2001 or, in particular, 2005, it looks a lot more like a net switch to the Conservatives. But even so, the direct Labour-to-Conservative switch will be smaller than the net figure, because there will have been movements from Labour to abstention (and other parties) and people who abstained or voted for other parties in 2005 who came out for the Conservatives in 2010.

In terms of winning the next election, Labour does not need to go all the way back up to its recent peak in 1997. The party won twice with considerably lower shares of the electorate in 2001 and 2005. However, Labour will probably have to do rather better than in 2005 when 22.2 per cent sufficed. The reason is that one can expect turnout to be higher, and the Liberal Democrat vote in particular, to be lower next time than in 2005. Forty per cent of a 65 per cent turnout (ie 26 per cent of the electorate or around 11 million votes) is probably enough for a working majority.

The key question arising from this fairly basic analysis is: which pool should Labour be fishing in? In other words, should the party concentrate on nailing down people who voted Liberal Democrat in 2010 but as of 2012 are supporting Labour? Should Labour try to persuade people who were Conservative supporters in 2010, and may have supported the party in previous elections, to come over to it next time? Should it look among the many people (both individuals and social groups whose individual members have changed over the years) who stopped voting altogether after 1992 and 1997?

Percentage of electorate voting (or abstaining) by party 1979-2010



Three main questions arise from this:

- Which voters will do Labour most good in terms of winning the seats the party needs for an overall working majority?
- Which voters are, politically, easiest to add to Labour's ranks in 2015?
- What are the net effects of adding from each group of voters, ie is there a downside to attracting particular voters? Will adding them subtract other voters from Labour's coalition or encourage non-Labour voters to turn out to vote against the party?

The next section analyses the first of these questions. We shall come to the other two later.

The 'missing voters' in the marginals

Opponents of the 'missing voters' argument can, with some justification, point out that many of those voters Labour has lost since 1997 have been in areas where there are no marginal seats. For instance, in south Yorkshire Labour's vote fell from 392,835 in 1997 to 273,199 in 2005 and 247,337 in 2010 without losing the party any seats (except for one arising from boundary changes and the decline in the electorate in the area). There are, of course, problems with regarding the loss of votes in core areas as unimportant. However, let us put these aside and focus rigorously on the marginal seats that make the difference between the 2010 result and a working majority similar to that which Labour won in 2005.

We shall simplify the process by assuming no boundary changes between 2010 and the next election – it is too complicated otherwise, it is unlikely to make a huge difference to the argument, and, at the time of writing, the odds are that it will not happen. In the interests of round numbers, let us examine the 100 marginal seats that Labour needs to gain relative to 2010 in order to win 358 seats (and thereby a majority of 66), and look back at the difference between the 1997 and 2010 results in these seats.

First, we should remove a few seats which are being defended by the SNP, Plaid Cymru or the Greens. Let us also remove a couple that had no

recognisable predecessor in 1997.[3] The remainder are 88 Conservative and 12 Liberal Democrat seats. Two Scottish Liberal Democrat seats (Argyll & Bute and Edinburgh West) have never voted Labour, but the other 98 were Labour in 1997 and most were also Labour in 2005.

Boundary changes between 2001 and 2005 in Scotland and between 2005 and 2010 in the rest of the UK will affect the detailed figures for constituencies affected, but do not make a significant difference to the aggregate.[4]

The table below shows the net changes in vote between 1997 and 2010 in these 100 marginal seats, and breaks them down further into the 88 Conservative and 12 Liberal Democrat marginals. I have rounded to the nearest thousand to reflect the imprecision that the 2005-10 boundary changes introduce.

	100 marginals	88 Con-Lab seats	12 LD-Lab seats
Conservative	+136,000	+154,000	-18,000
Labour	-994,000	-897,000	-96,000
Liberal Democrat	+324,000	+222,000	+102,000
Nationalists	+3,000	+4,000	-1,000
UKIP*	+4,000	+6,000	-2,000
Others	+143,000	+125,000	+17,000
Abstainers	+556,000	+484,000	+72,000
Total electors	+172,000	+97,000	+75,000

* UKIP figure in 1997 includes vote for the Referendum party.

The last row of the table reflects the awkward fact – sometimes apparently forgotten in these discussions – that the electorate is not a fixed stock of potential voters but has large flows in and out over time. As well as the flows that affect the national number of voters cast for each party, the net gains and losses in the marginal seats are also affected by boundary changes and population movements within the UK itself.

3. These are Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale & Tweeddale and Filton & Bradley Stoke. There are arguments also for excluding Lancaster & Fleetwood and Ealing Central & Acton because of radical boundary changes that have altered the political complexion of the seats concerned, but they more or less cancel each other out so I have left them in. Brent Central is also a very dubious match but remains in. A further stage of the analysis will attempt to break down the changes into three steps: 1997-2005 electoral change, boundary changes, and 2005-10 electoral change.

4. The 2010 boundary changes' contribution to the change in share of the electorate for the main parties overall is of the order of +/- 0.1 per cent.

Looking only at the 88 Conservative-Labour seats, it is clear that net additions to the Conservative vote have played a relatively small part in the Conservatives' gains – what has happened is a slump in Labour votes, even in the group of constituencies where one might most expect a significant move to the Conservatives. Indeed, the Liberal Democrats have gained more votes in this group of seats than the Tories, and the gain for 'Others' (not including Eurosceptics) is nearly as big as the gain for the Tories. The biggest gain is, of course, in the number of abstentions.

Among the 12 Liberal Democrat seats in the sample, there is a much clearer pattern of a direct switch from Labour to the Liberal Democrats than in the Tory seats.

Stripping out the contribution of changes in electorate size, one can put all of this into percentage terms. In comparison, it is worth recalling the national (GB) percentages:

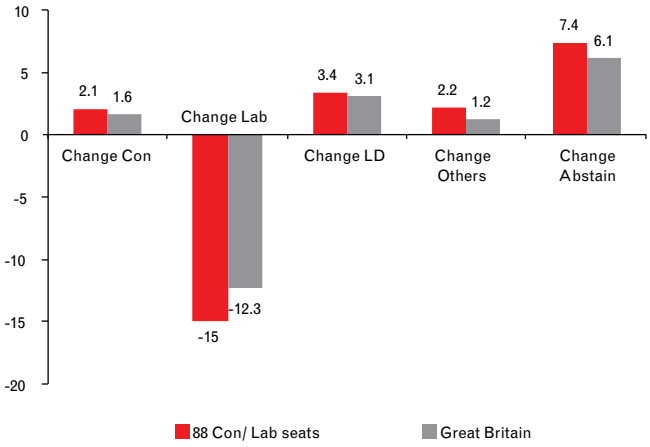
Great Britain	**1997 %**	**2010 %**	**Change %**
Conservative	22.5	24.1	+1.6
Labour	31.7	19.4	-12.3
Liberal Democrat	12.3	15.4	+3.1
Nationalist	1.8	1.5	-0.3
Anti-EU	2.1	2.1	0.0
Others	1.0	2.5	+1.5
Abstainers	28.5	34.6	+6.1

Top 100 marginals	**1997 %**	**2010 %**	**Change %**
Conservative	24.2	25.5	+1.3
Labour	37.3	22.4	-15.0
Liberal Democrat	9.0	13.4	+4.4
Nationalist	0.5	0.5	0.0
Anti-EU	1.9	1.9	0.0
Others	0.7	2.7	+2.0
Abstainers	26.3	33.6	+7.2

88 Con-Lab	1997 %	2010 %	Change %
Conservative	25.3	27.2	+2.1
Labour	37.6	22.6	-15.0
Liberal Democrat	8.4	11.8	+3.4
Nationalist	0.2	0.3	+0.1
Anti-EU	2.0	2.0	+0.1
Others	0.7	2.7	+2.0
Abstainers	25.9	33.3	+7.4

12 Lib Dem-Lab	1997 %	2010 %	Change %
Conservative	15.4	11.9	-3.5
Labour	35.5	20.8	-14.8
Liberal Democrat	13.9	25.0	+11.1
Nationalist	2.9	2.5	-0.3
Anti-EU	1.2	0.9	-0.4
Others	1.3	3.2	+2.0
Abstainers	29.8	35.7	+5.9

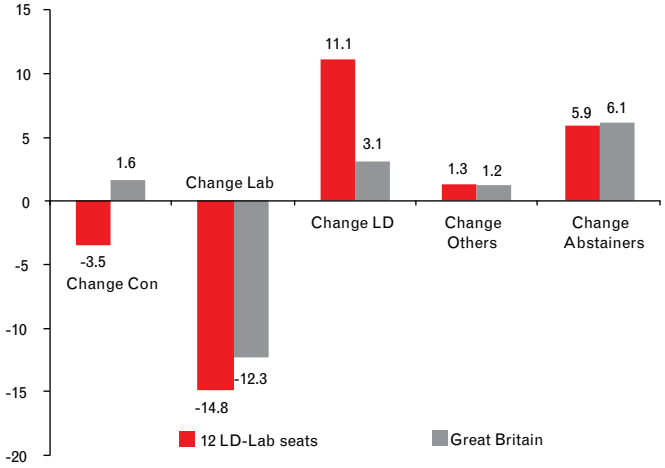
Percentage point change in share of the electorate by party, 88 Conservative-Labour marginal seats and Great Britain, 1997-2010



Compared to the national changes in voting behaviour, it is apparent that the main difference is that the Labour vote dropped rather more in the marginal seats. The benefits in the Conservative-Labour marginal seats were scattered between the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and abstention. In the Liberal Democrat-Labour marginals the Liberal Democrats gained more votes from Labour and also managed to take votes from the Tories and slightly reduce the losses to abstention. The Conservatives gained a bit more in the Conservative-Labour marginals than nationally, but not hugely so – the bigger difference was in the Labour change.

These numbers suggest a complex pattern of loss for Labour in the Conservative-Labour marginal seats, although probably a fairly straightforward switch in the seats where Labour needs to win against the Liberal Democrats.

Percentage point change in share of the electorate by party, 12 Liberal Democrat-Labour marginal seats and Great Britain, 1997-2010



It is possible to do a little thought experiment looking at each of the Conservative-Labour constituencies. For each of these constituencies at this stage of the analysis, changes directly caused by the last set of boundary changes (ie the difference between real and notional results in 2005 for England and Wales) are stripped out.

What if in each constituency the Conservative share of the electorate falls back to where it was in 1997 (remember, in terms of share of the electorate this is not a big decline) and Labour gains by the same amount? And also, what if we do the same – in the Conservative-Labour seats – to the Liberal Democrats' gains since 1997? Which helps Labour more in these key Tory-Labour marginals?

The answer is that the effect is pretty much the same. Thirty-four seats would fall as a result of the Tory switchers (who are fewer in number, but they count double in gaining Tory seats), and 34 as a result of Liberal Democrat switchers. The Liberal Democrat switch would in addition win nine of the 12 Liberal Democrat seats.

In the table below the last column is an index of how much more good it would do Labour if the Conservatives' gains since 1997 were reversed compared to reversing Liberal Democrat gains, taking into account the fact that gaining votes from the Tories has double the impact on the Tories' majority compared to gaining votes from Liberal Democrats. The larger, and more positive, the figure, the more important it is to regain votes from the Conservatives.

	Con switch	LD switch
Norwich South		GAIN
Bradford East		GAIN
Brent Central		GAIN
Manchester Withington		GAIN
Burnley		GAIN

Dunbartonshire East		GAIN
Birmingham Yardley		
Edinburgh West		
Argyll & Bute		
Redcar		GAIN
Hornsey & Wood Green		GAIN
Cardiff Central		GAIN

Interestingly, quite a few of the Conservative-Labour seats involved are different in each scenario. The following seats are in order of marginality.

	Con switch	LD switch	Net Con switch advantage
Warwickshire North	GAIN	GAIN	5.3%
Thurrock	GAIN	GAIN	8.2%
Hendon	GAIN		2.0%
Cardiff North	GAIN	GAIN	-3.7%
Sherwood	GAIN	GAIN	7.6%
Stockton South	GAIN	GAIN	-0.1%
Broxtowe		GAIN	-5.4%
Lancaster & Fleetwood*		GAIN	-6.5%
Amber Valley		GAIN	-4.4%
Waveney	GAIN	GAIN	-0.4%
Wolverhampton South-west		GAIN	-9.5%
Morecambe & Lunesdale			-3.5%
Carlisle	GAIN	GAIN	4.8%
Stroud			2.1%
Weaver Vale	GAIN	GAIN	4.8%
Lincoln		GAIN	-3.9%

Plymouth Sutton & Devonport	GAIN	GAIN	-3.8%
Dewsbury	GAIN	GAIN	-1.4%
Warrington South		GAIN	-8.4%
Bedford		GAIN	-2.7%
Brighton Kemptown		GAIN	-12.3%
Pudsey		GAIN	-4.3%
Corby	GAIN	GAIN	3.8%
Brentford & Isleworth		GAIN	-8.8%
Hove		GAIN	-9.2%
Enfield North			-0.8%
Hastings & Rye	GAIN		23.8%
Ipswich	GAIN		0.9%
Halesowen & Rowley Regis	GAIN	GAIN	3.8%
Nuneaton	GAIN	GAIN	9.3%
Gloucester		GAIN	-3.8%
Northampton North		GAIN	-11.6%
Bury North		GAIN	-9.4%
Kingswood	GAIN		11.0%
Erewash		GAIN	-6.2%
Blackpool North & Cleveleys			-2.2%
Chester, City of		GAIN	-3.6%
Croydon Central			-5.3%
Worcester			-3.7%
Keighley			0.9%
Wirral West			-4.2%
Cannock Chase	GAIN		5.0%
Loughborough			-3.9%
Harrow East	GAIN		5.0%
Warwick & Leamington*	GAIN		8.8%

Swindon South			0.8%
Ealing Central & Acton*	GAIN	GAIN	8.2%
Pendle	GAIN		2.8%
Stevenage			0.3%
Elmet & Rothwell	GAIN		8.1%
Watford		GAIN	-13.8%
Carmarthen W & Pembrokeshire S	GAIN		15.5%
Vale of Glamorgan			0.0%
Norwich North	GAIN		4.3%
High Peak		GAIN	-3.9%
Milton Keynes South			-4.4%
Rossendale & Darwen	GAIN		3.0%
Cleethorpes			1.5%
Somerset North-east			0.7%
Great Yarmouth			2.3%
Dudley South	GAIN		9.8%
Dover	GAIN		5.3%
Colne Valley		GAIN	-1.0%
South Ribble			1.0%
Peterborough			-5.6%
Stafford			-3.1%
Stourbridge			4.3%
Harlow	GAIN		9.1%
Aberconwy	GAIN		20.2%
Ilford North			0.2%
Preseli Pembrokeshire	GAIN		16.3%
Brigg & Goole			4.0%
Crewe & Nantwich	GAIN		19.3%
Bristol North-west*			-9.9%
Battersea			2.6%

Finchley & Golders Green			-3.4%
Calder Valley			-4.8%
Crawley	GAIN		8.0%
Reading West			-2.9%
Rugby*			-4.6%
Burton			-3.1%
Basildon South & Thurrock East			5.0%
Tamworth			-0.4%
Redditch			-1.7%
Chatham & Aylesford			7.6%
Swindon North			3.3%
Derbyshire South	GAIN		9.7%
Leicestershire North-west	GAIN		10.1%

* indicates very large boundary changes since 1997 may make the figures less reliable.

What emerges from this analysis is that different marginal constituencies will probably react differently to alternative political strategies. The marginal seats Labour needs to gain from the Conservatives divide into two (and possibly more) groups. There are a number in which the loss of the seat does seem to have had a lot to do with people voting Conservative in 2010 who did not in 1997. From this one can reasonably conclude that winning back people who have switched to the Conservatives is a good way of regaining these seats (although there may be other movements going on, such as, for instance, a move from Labour to abstention netting off against Conservatives who sat out the 1997 election coming out to vote in 2010).

But there is another group of seats where even if all the Conservative increment since 1997 swings over to Labour, it still would not be as useful as picking up Liberal Democrats (Brentford

& Isleworth, Gloucester, Hove and Watford, for instance). In some of these seats the Conservative share of the electorate actually declined between 1997 and 2010.

The seats where Conservative switchers appear to make the difference run a bit further down the table of marginals than the ones that would be won by recouping all the Liberal Democrat gains. It suggests that merely holding the Liberal Democrat converts is good enough to make it impossible for the other parties to form a non-Labour government but not enough for Labour to win a working majority. To go further than this requires voters from somewhere else, either from getting Conservative switchers back or recovering voters from abstention.

A very high proportion of the constituencies where the Conservatives did better at getting votes in 2010 than in 1997 fall into a few groups socially and geographically:

- Midlands working-class town and semi-rural areas (a swath of them around where Warwickshire, Staffordshire, and Leicestershire meet);
- some of the most traditionally working-class seats in the south (Chatham, Dover and Thurrock);
- the New Towns; and,
- semi-rural Wales.

The extent of Conservative gains in votes since 1997 in these seats reflects a couple of factors, leaving aside two seats where the result was affected by a by-election (Crewe & Nantwich and Norwich North).

One is that these areas have a lot of swing voters and the parties devote resources to them. In these constituencies one will probably find a lot of people who wanted a Labour government in

1997 and a Tory government in 2010. Places like Cannock Chase, North-west Leicestershire and Dudley South often seem to exceed national average swings. Another is social and demographic change. Some of the seats have been trending Tory for a long time, and many of them (New Towns and Midlands semi-rural areas) have seen new, more Conservative-inclined areas built around an older Labour core (Church Langley, near Harlow, is one such example). Electoral change resulting from social change is not easily reversible; the electorate in many of these seats is not the same as it was in 1997.

“Electoral change resulting from social change is not easily reversible; the electorate in many of these seats is not the same as it was in 1997”

However, there are also a considerable number of seats, particularly those that are at the easier end of the spectrum for Labour to win, where the Conservative gain in votes since 1997 is either non-existent or a minor factor compared to additional votes gained by the Liberal Democrats. The bulk of them are basically suburban constituencies, mostly dependent on big cities (Bristol North-west, Broxtowe and Pudsey, for instance). Additionally, there are a few with many new developments (Milton Keynes South and Warrington South), and a few metropolitan liberal enclaves (Brighton, Hove and Lancaster). These losses may be easier to recoup, as they are political rather than demographic in origin.

But what about the ‘missing millions’?

So far, this analysis has concentrated on the differences between ‘steady as she goes’ and ‘centre-ground’ strategies. It has had little to say about the ‘missing millions’ thesis. This is in part because the

numerical analysis indicates that the 'missing voters' problem is just as severe, if not more so, in the key marginals than it is in the country as a whole. This was a somewhat unexpected conclusion, given that the hypothesis that there would be more switchers and fewer 'missing voters' in the marginals seems a rational one.

The 'missing voters' problem in the Conservative-Labour marginals is, one must again emphasise, a net one. It is plausible that the Conservatives have themselves also lost more voters than average to abstention but replaced them by successfully recruiting former Labour voters.

There is therefore no arithmetical, electoralist reason to reject a 'missing voters' approach. There may be other objections – on the grounds of it being difficult or risking a Conservative countermobilisation – but this one is not sustained by the aggregate data of what happened in the marginal seats between 1997 and 2010.

It may be a cliché to end a section of an academic (or quasi-academic) paper by saying that more research is needed, but more research is needed, both aggregate and at individual-level, through analysis of the British Election Study and other data.

Conclusion

Each of the alternatives can be argued in a plausible way and has evidence to back it up. Each of them also has weaknesses that opens them up to criticism. This paper has perhaps enabled us to see more clearly that the possible approaches have different degrees of ambition to them. 'Steady as she goes' and depending on former Liberal Democrats can only get Labour so far, but then Labour does not need to get very far at all to be in power in 2015 – even if in coalition or without a working majority. Winning back Tory switchers seems to be the recipe for a fair-sized working majority (provided it is not done in a way that is repellent to former Liberal Democrats and 2010 Labour voters). Mobilising the 'missing millions' (provided one does not also mobilise a lot of Tories) is the only route to another landslide. Much also depends on the response of the Conservatives to their own strategic dilemma, and the balance in their own calculations between preventing losses to UKIP and attempting to gain more of the centre-ground from the Liberal Democrats and Labour. It is quite possible that both parties are in an environment where there is no reliable pathway to an overall majority and that rational strategies pursued by each will tend to end in stalemate.

The easy answer may appear to be to adopt aspects of all of them, but the problem is that each of the strategies has implications for

policy which are not consistent with each other. It may be possible to work them into a synthesis but the party has not reached that point yet. It still seems to be combining the different approaches on an ad hoc basis.

> "It may be most productive for the party's thinkers in future to concentrate on how to make a coherent, popular synthesis of the different approaches than continuing to argue their relative merits"

To some extent that has been the course of action pursued at the highest level of the party. Miliband has done well at articulating opposition to establishment vested interests, although a party just two years out of government will inevitably have itself come close to those vested interests in the past. There is a more left-of-centre, oppositional rather than accommodating, tone to Labour under Miliband than some 'centre-ground' advocates would wish, reflecting a 'mobilising' approach to the general question of where Labour should stand. In terms of campaigning and party organisation, Labour's leader seems to be very much in the mobilising camp, stressing the need to reach out to previous non-voters and make sure electoral registration is as full as possible.

However, there are other aspects of the Labour leadership's approach that come from the 'centre-ground' playbook. In terms of economic strategy Ed Balls has earned himself unpopularity among the trade unions by refusing to promise to reverse all the cuts and also by pledging to hold down public sector pay. On the sort of policy discussion that Labour needs, Miliband has also been doing a lot of what the 'centre-ground' advocates would suggest: talking in apologetic terms about immigration (an issue on which traditional liberalism and economics say one thing and

public opinion another), and benefits (linking abuses at the top and bottom of society as both being unacceptable). He is probably the most genuinely pluralistic leader Labour has had, coming from the 'progressive majority' strand of thinking within the party and understanding the case that it may be necessary to work with the Liberal Democrats in future.

The 2010 election bequeathed Labour problems and dilemmas of electoral strategy which will be difficult to reconcile. But, compared to those left by elections such as 1979 and 1992, these problems are not as bad as they might be. Even a fairly weak strategy ('steady as she goes') might still be just about enough, provided it is pursued competently. It may be most productive for the party's thinkers in future to concentrate on how to make a coherent, popular synthesis of the different approaches rather than continuing to argue their relative merits.

Progress

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