

Britain: The Tory press and “democracy”

By Julie Hyland
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In the 24-hours leading up to installation of Conservative leader David Cameron as prime minister, the campaign by the right-wing Tory press to bundle Gordon Brown out of Number 10 went into overdrive.

For days following the inconclusive May 6 general election, Murdoch’s *Sun* newspaper and others supporting Cameron ran banner headlines denouncing Brown for “squatting” in Downing Street.

When, on Monday evening, Brown signalled Labour was to explore a potential coalition with the Liberals, the cacophony of complaints became vituperative, even incendiary.

In its editorial on Tuesday, the *Sun* raged, “In the space of five tumultuous days, Britain has gone from democracy as we know it to the brink of dictatorship.”

“The result of the General Election has been shoved aside by Labour,” it said and Cameron faced being “robbed of victory”.

The *Daily Telegraph* described talks between Labour and the Liberal Democrats as “A very Labour coup” and an attempt “to nullify the result of last week’s general election”.

In the *Daily Mail*, Richard Littlejohn said that the discussions represented “nothing less than an attempted coup.”

“It could not have been more blatant had he [Brown] ordered the tanks to roll down Whitehall and train their guns on the meeting of the Parliamentary Conservative party, assembling at the Palace of Westminster.”

It is instructive, given the role to be played by the Liberal Democrats in the new coalition government, that it was party leader Nick Clegg who first set-out the mantra so quickly embraced by the Tory press.

On April 20, Clegg had told the *Daily Telegraph* that “It would be preposterous for Gordon Brown to end up like some squatter in No 10 because of some constitutional nicety.”

Clegg’s deriding of “constitutional nicety” is

especially noteworthy in light of the conspiratorial manner in which a new administration has been patched together and then imposed from on high.

That Labour is widely detested is beyond question. It deservedly received its worst vote share since 1983. What created the electoral impasse however, is the fact that none of the official parties were able to benefit significantly from Labour’s collapse.

The election results themselves are hugely distorted. This is not only the product of Britain’s anti-democratic “first past the post” system, but more fundamentally is due to the fact that one-third of the electorate saw no point in voting at all, and that for many of those who did, their “choice” was between parties whose only difference was over the timing of massive austerity measures which they were all agreed upon.

What stands out above all from the results is the alienation of the majority of the population from the official parties.

Research by the International Relations and Security Network (ISN) of the May 6 poll backs this up, by examining the votes cast for Conservative and Labour as a share of the total number of people eligible to vote, rather than those who did.

On this criteria, the Conservative Party won 23.5 percent and Labour 18.9 percent—giving the two parties “a mere 42.4% of the electorate between them”. While the slight increase in turn-out meant this was a rise from the 41.3 percent recorded in 2005, itself a post-war low, it is still less than half of those eligible to vote.

Even if one accepts the ballot result as an imperfect measure, however, Cameron was not the “victor” as claimed by the *Sun*. The ten million votes cast in favour of the Conservatives is outweighed by 15 million or so obtained by Labour and the Liberal Democrats, largely on the basis of keeping the Tories out.

For the likes of Murdoch and other representatives of the financial oligarchy, these votes are illegitimate and not worth counting. That is exactly what happened in practice in several areas of the country—and exclusively in major urban centres—with hundreds being denied the right to vote and turned away from polling booths.

The media was particularly incensed as to the possible involvement of the smaller nationalist parties in any arrangement between Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Their crime was that they may try to limit the impact of public spending cuts in order to shore up their own electoral base.

The *Sun* denounced the “ragtag collection of MPs in Scots, Welsh and Ulster seats,” whose price for political support would be “that their countries are spared cuts.”

The *Telegraph* took up the same refrain. Such a coalition would mean “the English taxpayer will be expected to keep those parts of the UK in the heavily-subsidised style to which they have become accustomed. This at a time of economic distress when deep cuts in the public services in England are inevitable.”

“Just as pertinent,” it continued, “England voted decisively for the Tories last Thursday (297 seats to Labour’s 191), yet is to be effectively disenfranchised by the Brown/Clegg stitch-up.”

In reality, Cameron’s “advantage” in England masks significant variations. The Conservatives lost out to Labour in almost all the major cities—not only in North East and North West England, Yorkshire and Humberside but in London too.

That newspapers which usually present themselves as the guardians of the “Union” should so openly identify themselves with “English tax-payers” against supposedly freeloading malcontents in the rest of the UK is extraordinary.

But it speaks to the class interests being defended. The *Sun* was entirely satisfied with Labour when it was opening up the economy to speculators, swindlers and crooks.

It applauded the invasion of Iraq, claiming that good government involved going against the popular will.

And it supported the hand-over of billions of pounds in tax-payers money to the City of London, i.e., to the self-same bankers and financial institutions whose actions precipitated an economic crisis that threatens

the jobs and living standards of hundreds of millions worldwide.

When the media complains about having to fund “heavily-subsidised” areas of the country, this is just a code-word for workers jobs, wages, health, education and welfare provision.

When they complain about “dictatorship”, it is only because they fear they may not get the one of their choice.

Just hours after Brown had submitted his resignation as prime minister to the Queen, the same newspapers were describing his quit statement as “moving” and “dignified”. Meanwhile, the anointing of a prime minister whom most of the electorate voted against, as part of a government about which the public knows nothing, was cynically described as “democracy in action”.

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