

UK SNAP ELECTION RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS: BREXIT AND OTHERWISE

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- I. Executive Summary: In a stunning miscalculation, the United Kingdom's Conservative Party was punished at the polls in the June 8 "snap election" called in April by Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May. May assumed both the Prime Minister's office and the Conservative Party leadership after former PM David Cameron's resignation in the wake of last year's Brexit referendum, which resulted in a decision by UK voters to leave the European Union. May, only two years into the electoral majority won by Cameron, called the election three years ahead of schedule in a bid to increase the Conservatives' parliamentary majority and strengthen its hand in the upcoming Brexit negotiations with the other EU member states. In the result, the Conservatives actually *lost* their parliamentary majority, placing May's premiership in jeopardy and changing UK domestic and Brexit dynamics going forward.
- II. Results: In the election result, the Conservatives lost their parliamentary majority but maintained their position by a considerable margin as the largest caucus in the House of Commons, with 318 seats (a loss of 13 seats) to Labor's 262 seats (a gain of 30 seats, with 326 seats needed for a majority in the 650 seat House of Commons). May, as the leader of the still largest party in parliament, has been invited by the Queen to form what will have to be a coalition government, and is in negotiations with the Democratic Unionist Party, or DUP, a Northern Ireland-based "social conservative" (in the American sense) and "liberal" (in the European economic sense) party that picked up 2 seats for a total of 10 in the incoming parliament, to join what is called a "confidence and supply" coalition, in which the DUP would support the Conservatives on key votes like the budget and votes of confidence, but would not be expected to vote with the Conservatives on every issue.
- III. Takeaways: The immediate takeaways from the election results are:
 - a. The Conservatives' losses probably should not be seen as a second Brexit referendum; Labor was also pro-Brexit, and its gain of 30 seats came at the expense of not only the Conservatives, but also the anti-Brexit, pro-independence Scottish National Party (the "SNC," which emerged with 35 seats, a catastrophic loss of 21, including that of its parliamentary leader, Alex Salmond). Scottish anti-Brexit momentum has been lost, with nearly half of SNC seats lost to pro-Brexit Conservatives and pro-Brexit Labor. The most popular member of the SNC, Nicola Sturgeon, who took over party leadership from Salmond after the "No" vote on the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, unaccountably did not stand for a parliamentary seat in the snap election, and, between not having a parliamentary base and the snap election result, has probably lost significant influence. The SNC debacle also bodes ill for any second Scottish independence referendum in the foreseeable future.

- b. On the other hand, the anti-Brexit Liberal Democrats, whose leader, Nick Clegg (former partner of David Cameron in their 2010 coalition government) also lost his seat, nevertheless gained 4 seats for a total of 12 in the incoming parliament. The LD's caucus is too small to signify any significant national dynamic, and its anti-Brexit stance would make it a difficult coalition fit for May, should the DUP talks fall through.
- c. Also, UKIP (the United Kingdom Independence Party), the leading pro-leave, populist, nationalist party, lost all its seats. Given the other results, it may be interpreted that a one-issue party has been rejected now that its solitary goal has been accomplished, or that there was a Brexit backlash at that level, but not enough to punish Labor as well as the Conservatives.
- d. May's prospective coalition partner, the DUP, is extremely pro-Brexit – more so than the Conservatives or Labor, overall – but reputedly most concerned that post-Brexit, there be no “hard border” between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; i.e., that Ireland be a mini-Schengen Zone, with no border crossing checkpoints, etc. There is no currency issue posed by Brexit; the Republic of Ireland is in the Eurozone; Northern Ireland, like the rest of the UK, is on the pound sterling. The DUP's oppositional stand on social issues like abortion and same-sex marriage, and on economic issues like taxation and social welfare programs may be difficult to dovetail with those of the Conservatives, who are far to the left of their American namesakes on most of those issues.
- e. May was probably weakened more by controversial austerity economic/budget/social welfare proposals and perceived inadequate response to terrorist attacks than by Brexit backlash (she was Home Secretary prior to becoming Prime Minister, and responsible for domestic security; in other words, all recent terrorist attacks have occurred on her watch). She has also been criticized for running an inept campaign and being a wooden candidate. She may face a Conservative Party leadership challenge, perhaps as early as this week.
- f. Brexit talks will continue, but May's push for a “hard” Brexit severing most EU ties has probably been blunted, with the new coalition government more likely to seek a “soft” Brexit that maintains access to the EU single market, customs union, and other continued institutional relations. There are precedents for this: for example, Norway is not in the EU, but is part of the European single market; Switzerland is not in the EU, but has a number of bilateral treaties with the EU that make a substantial body of EU law applicable to Switzerland and which give Switzerland EU member-like privileges in many areas. However, in the current climate, the

remaining EU member states are themselves inclined to push for a hard Brexit, meaning that requests by May for accommodation may fall on deaf ears.

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