

## The British General Election of 2015

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*Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley*



# The British General Election of 2015

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To Robert John Cowley,  
whose early arrival almost derailed publication





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# Preface

This volume is the nineteenth in a series of books which originated in 1945 in Nuffield College, Oxford. The originator of the series – Ronald McCallum – had always been infuriated by what he saw as the constant misinterpretation of the 1918 election, and he wanted to place on record the events of the 1945 contest before similar partisan myths took root. Thus began what is now the longest-running national election series in the world. This is the second volume in the series where neither of the authors is based at Nuffield, but the aim remains the same: to create an accurate and, as far as possible, impartial account and explanation of the general election.

For this volume, we conducted over 300 interviews with key players from all the main parties, and unattributed quotes in the volume are taken from those interviews. People gave generously and willingly of their time, and were very open with us, and we are extremely grateful to them. We deliberately do not list them here, as many spoke to us on conditions of strict confidentiality, but we hope they will recognise the picture we paint – even if not all of them will agree with our conclusions. Some also agreed to look at draft chapters, helping to suggest improvements and challenging our judgements, and again we are very grateful, as we are to the many friends and colleagues who also read early drafts of the book. All responsibility for any remaining errors rests with us alone.

For a long time, the authors of this series operated within a two-party and then a three-party system, from which (usually) a single-party winner emerged. By 2010, the fragmentation of the party system seemed to have inaugurated a new norm of hung parliaments and coalitions. That was certainly the widespread expectation in 2015, given the level pegging of the main parties in the polls and the rise of UKIP, the SNP and the Greens. The different party battles in different parts of the UK also made for greater complexity. Life is harder for politicians trying to navigate this system. It may be harder for voters, too, although they may welcome the greater choice. It is certainly harder for those who write about politics.

Nor is this any longer the only book on the election. We have, in various places, been able to draw on a series of excellent books already

published, including Andrew Geddes and Jon Tonge's edited collection *Britain Votes 2015*, Owen Bennett's account of the UKIP campaign, *Following Farage*, Joe Pike's volume on the contest in Scotland, *Project Fear*, and Iain Watson's examination of Labour's failure, *Five Million Conversations*. Tim Ross's *Why The Tories Won* was, alas, published too close to our submission date for us to engage with properly, although it is clear that whilst we agree on some aspects of the campaign, we reach a different conclusion on others. We also await another book-length study of the UKIP campaign by Matthew Goodwin and Caitlin Milazzo, which is expected to be published just before this volume. This too all makes life more challenging for those writing about politics, but since no single book can tell the whole story of the campaign it is good news for those who like to read about it.

Like most of its predecessors, our story ends with the announcement of the result. Time will tell whether the 2015 election will prove to be a turning point in modern British politics, but there are plenty of talking points, including the comprehensive failure of the polls to anticipate the Conservative majority, the transformation of Scotland and the Scottish party system, and the scale of Labour's defeat. The fallout from the defeat and Ed Miliband's resignation will reverberate for the rest of the Parliament, and beyond.

One reviewer of the last book in this series deprecated the occasional use of industrial language in the various quotations from politicians. But much like voters, politicians do occasionally say rude words, and all we do here is to reproduce faithfully what they said to us. We estimate that out of around 185,000 words, some 0.005% of what you are about to read might not be suitable for minors.

We have a debt to all our contributors whose names appear in the table of contents and who met demanding deadlines and repeated editorial requests. In addition to writing Appendix 1, John Curtice, Stephen D. Fisher and Robert Ford also supplied the data from which Appendix 2 has been compiled. This book follows the broad structure of previous volumes in the series. But each election is different. For the first time since the volume on the 1979 election, we have included a chapter specifically on Scotland, which had, even after devolution, mostly been a fairly predictable and uneventful part of the Westminster battle. Not this time. Attentive readers will also note the absence of a column on the Communist vote in the Table on page 432. An ever-present feature in all volumes since the first in 1945, it is no more.

We are indebted to all those who supplied, or allowed us to reproduce, material. Labour, the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats, the SNP,

the Greens, Plaid Cymru, UKIP and the National Union of Students all generously allowed us to reproduce campaign posters or images. Martin Rowson, Steve Bell, Howard McWilliam, Morten Morland and *The Telegraph* (for Adams, Matt and Bob) granted us permission to print their excellent cartoons. The majority of photos in the plates come courtesy of either Getty or Alamy, although other pictures, some thanks to the now-ubiquitous camera phone, come from Plaid Cymru, Gary Gibbon, the Conservative Party, the Liberal Democrats, Europa Productions, North News and Pictures, Alexandra Coyle, Tom Hamilton and Jonathan Dean. Other photos come from the National Union of Students, Reuters and Niall Paterson. The photo of Labour's results board in Chapter 8 comes from someone who would prefer to remain anonymous. Mirrorpix supplied the content for Figure 8.1, and Populus, YouGov and Ipsos MORI all provided polling data. The Polling Observatory team kindly supplied the graph for Figure 1.1 and Lizz Loxam from the BBC provided help with election data. We are grateful to all of them.

The social media data used in Chapter 5 draws on a project on Scottish independence funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in conjunction with the Applied Quantitative Methods Network (AQMeN) as part of the 'Future of the UK and Scotland' research programme. The research in chapter 12 was supported by a grant from the British Academy/Leverhulme Trust (grant reference SG142216). We also acknowledge help from the British Academy small grants scheme (SG141982). Matthew Bailey, Abigail Taylor, Gemma Rosenblatt, Eilidh Macfarlane and Melissa Lee provided research assistance.

The team at Palgrave have been supportive and encouraging, and have allowed us to tell what we think is a fascinating story.

*Philip Cowley  
Dennis Kavanagh  
October 2015*