

# Turning Japanese?

BRITAIN WITH A PERMANENT  
PARTY OF GOVERNMENT

Edited by

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## Britain's Japanese Question: 'Is There a Dominant Party?'

*Brendan O'Leary*

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Britain's Japanese question arose from the Conservatives' fourth successive general election victory in April 1992. It suggested to many that competitive party politics, the hallmark of vibrant liberal democracy, had given way to a dominant party system, the post-war badge of Japanese democracy. The heyday of British social democracy, the era which lasted from the end of the Second World War until the termination of James Callaghan's government, had seen very effective party competition for votes and seats. True, the Conservative party won three parliamentary majorities in a row, in 1951, 1955 and 1959, but in 1955 and 1959 their margin of victory over Labour in the popular vote was relatively small (3.3 per cent and 5.6 per cent respectively), while in 1951 it actually won less votes than Labour. That the Labour party could have won each of these three elections in the 1950s was entirely 'thinkable', even if Jeremiahs suggested otherwise. In this post-war period 17 years of Labour governments (1945-51, 1964-70, 1974-79) matched 17 years of Conservative governments (1951-64, 1970-74). Proportional tenure of governmental office existed across the two main parties, if not proportional representation of all parties in parliament. Moreover, between 1945 and October 1974 the average gap between the share of the votes won by the Conservative party and the Labour party was less than four per cent.

In contrast in the four general elections since 1979 the Conservative party's margin of victory over Labour has averaged over 10 per cent of the vote. The Conservatives' share of the vote has remained very stable across the last four elections, and in 1992 they won a fourth outright single-party majority government, unprecedented in the epoch of universal suffrage. In the 1980s it was 'unthinkable' for all but the most wishful that the Labour party would win an overall majority, while in 1992 the 'thinkability' of a Labour victory, amongst both the party's

supporters and opponents, was inflated by imperfect polling. In April 1992 the Conservatives' past longevity in office conveyed an air of future invincibility. They looked set to emulate the pre-eminence of the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan. That is one reason to ask 'Is Britain Turning Japanese?' Has the British political system, once the exemplary model of competitive party politics, once a quality export demanded by its former colonies and other allegedly benighted lands, become spoiled by a dominant party? And if it has, what are the implications for its democracy?

Political scientists are often like politicians: we rarely open our mouths without subtracting from the sum of human knowledge. However, we know what we mean by a dominant party in democratic conditions. First, it must be a party which is dominant in number: it must regularly win more legislative seats in parliamentary or congressional elections than its opponents. The Conservatives have been in this position for the last four elections. Secondly, this party must enjoy a dominant bargaining position. It must be able to stay in government on a regular basis. If it must share power with smaller parties, as the Italian Christian Democrats did for half a century, it is nevertheless the key agent in the political system, with privileged access to the principal executive and legislative posts. Thirdly, as the citation of the Christian Democrats suggests, a dominant party must be chronologically pre-eminent. It must govern continuously for a long time, although analysts might differ over whether three or four general election victories, and whether a decade or a decade and a half are the crucial benchmarks of dominance. Finally, a dominant party must be ideologically dominant: it must be capable of using government to shape public policy so that the nature of the state and society over which it presides is fundamentally changed. This feature of a dominant party was singled out as definitive by the first political scientist to name the phenomenon:

A party is dominant when it is identified with an epoch; when its doctrines, ideas, methods, its style so to speak, coincide with those of the epoch. ... A dominant party is that which public opinion believes to be dominant ... Even the enemies of the dominant party, even citizens who refuse to give it their vote, acknowledge its superior status and its influence; they deplore it but admit it.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed we might go one stage further, and declare that a dominant party must be capable of so establishing the rules of the game that it transforms its political opponents, in the manner, for example, in which the Swedish Social Democrats successfully managed to make all its opponents into *de facto* social democratic parties in the 1970s.

Everyone will have their own views about the extent to which the Conservative and Unionist party's recent electoral successes meet the

four criteria for a dominant party. Proponents would point to the victories of the Conservatives in elections, in monopolising the cabinet, their longevity in office, and their double success in defining free market ideology as the orthodox in public policy and in re-shaping the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats. Sceptics would point to the precariousness of the Conservatives' electoral successes and their failure to alter the British public's stubborn adherence to welfarist values. However, if we accept the contestable premise that the Conservatives have become a dominant party, certain obvious questions follow:

- why has the UK developed a dominant party?
- is the dominance of the Conservative party an artefact of the electoral system?
- what are the consequences of a dominant party system?
- how can the dominant party system come to an end?

The *why* question poses many imponderables. Is the Conservative pre-eminence, as New Rightist intellectuals insist, the logical outcome of the structural crisis of British social democracy in the late 1970s, the local resultant of the wider collapse of socialism? Another version of this argument suggests that the Conservatives' eminence is the consequence of a transformed class structure and the electoral corollary of a more individualist and less generous society. Numerous political scientists, historians and sociologists have shared these assumptions, whether or not they are sympathetic to the cause of Labour. The obvious alternative perspective is that the Conservative pre-eminence is merely apparent, superficial, the contingent consequence of three election victories that might so easily have been defeats. Had the Conservatives not been so skilful, and not so luckily endowed with the Falklands, North Sea Oil, and the effective leadership of Margaret Thatcher, and had their opponents had not been so divided and inadequately led, then things might have been so very different. However, this voluntarist and contingent perspective, the staple fare of 'high politics' and effervescent journalism, is less persuasive on the morrow of an election won by a political party led by a man called John Major. His victory brings to mind the famous adage of Charles de Gaulle, 'Since politicians never believe what they say, they are surprised when others believe them'. The election in 1992 suggested that the domination of the Conservatives, and their credibility, are more deeply rooted than Major's leadership gifts or Neil Kinnock's alleged deficiencies.

The next question is whether Conservative dominance is an artefact of the electoral system. Plurality rule, or first past the post, is associated with dominant party systems, at a national level, as with the Congress party in post-independence India, but especially at a regional level – as with the Democratic party in the deep south of the USA from the

1880s until the 1960s, and with the Ulster Unionist Party in Northern Ireland between 1921 and 1972.<sup>2</sup> However, there is no axiomatic relationship between plurality rule and a dominant party: plurality rule can co-exist with competitive party politics and alternations in government; and non-plurality systems do not preclude a dominant party. One clear case of a nation-wide dominant party outside the UK, of course, was that of Japan between 1955 and 1993; and the hegemony of the LDP was facilitated by a peculiar non-proportional electoral system – the single non-transferable vote in multi-member constituencies. However many of the best-known cases of a dominant party in a democratic system have developed despite the existence of proportional representation. The ascendancy of the Swedish Social Democrats between 1932 and 1976, of the Italian Christian Democrats from 1948 until the present, and of the Israeli Labour Party from 1948 until 1977, developed under party list systems of proportional representation. In the Republic of Ireland, Fianna Fáil has twice enjoyed sixteen year periods of office under the single transferable vote system of proportional representation (1932–48 and 1957–73), although it has never won three successive periods of power as a majority government. These observations suggest that the explanatory power of the electoral system in facilitating the dominance of the Conservatives is not straightforward, a point which I elaborate in a later chapter with my colleague Brendan O'Duffy.

The third major question is whether we should be disturbed by the consequences of a dominant party, and the lack of alternation in government. What are the consequences of a dominant party system? One possibility is that once dominance is established the governing party becomes 'de-ideologised'. We might therefore expect or look forward to the withering away of New Right ideology, something which appears evident in the disappointment of rightist think-tanks with the Major government, and the rediscovery of traditionalist conservative virtues by weathervane intellectuals like John Gray and David Willmetts. The prediction of the ideological deprogramming of the dominant party follows from Duverger's pioneering analysis, which suggested that for the dominant party 'the continued exercise of responsibility for government diminishes demagoguery and the need for innovation ... Domination takes the zest from political life, simultaneously bringing stability'.<sup>3</sup> If this analysis is right we might expect the Conservatives to become conservative in all senses, gradually de-radicalised, abandoning the full-blooded market-programme of the New Right while trying to cement their position as the natural party of government.

Another possibility is that one-party dominance engenders wider and more extensive corruption. If there is one dominant party there is only one party which is worth joining if one seeks worthwhile patronage, only one whose political elites are worth buying (before or after they

become ministers), and only one whose coffers are worth swelling. The 'factionalisation' of the dominant party and the opening of the factions to external corruption, was obvious in other dominant right-wing parties, like the LDP in Japan and the Christian Democrats in Italy. Can we expect the same here? The vista of wider and more deep-rooted corruption, although famously absent from most accounts of twentieth century British government, may be encouraged given that party dominance now co-exists with a continuous transformation of public administration – in which Weberian norms are not being abandoned in favour of the 'new public management'<sup>4</sup> and in which quasi-governmental agencies are continually replacing government by elected officials. Effective political competition may be just as necessary as effective market competition to ensure the honourable delivery of effective goods and services, a point that is often lost in the Conservative press, with the honourable exception of the *Economist* magazine.

These speculations raise others. Does one-party dominance further weaken the alleged autonomy and neutrality of other public institutions – the civil service, the judiciary, the police, the public broadcasting media, the agencies of quasi-government and the health and educational subsystems? Does one-party dominance produce sporadic riots and anomie discontent amongst those excluded from influence within the system? Does one-party dominance simultaneously encourage both extremist opposition of the type proudly advertised by Arthur Scargill, and utterly tame and overly cautious opposition as Bryan Gould suggested had become true of the Labour Party before he left it for New Zealand?

Finally, there are the questions of how and why dominance comes to an end. Dominant parties can wear themselves out in office, lose their vigour, harden their arteries with too much of the food of success, and become so arrogant and corrupt as to make themselves contemptible. This outcome is not uncommon, and we have seen something like it occur in the case of the Italian Christian Democrats. Duverger suggested that every system of domination bears within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Perhaps he was right. Intra-party strife and interecine rivalry to succeed John Major to the premiership may well undermine the Conservatives. As the saying goes 'A government is the only known vehicle that leaks from the top'.

Since a dominant party must rely on, and continually aim to preserve the fragmentation of the opposition, its opponents know it is mortal. A dominant party can forge the conditions for its own collapse by compelling the opposition to renew themselves, to redefine the salient cleavages and issues in political society, and even to forge electoral alliances. Albert Camus wrote in *The Rebel* 'The future is the only kind of property that the masters willingly concede to their slaves'. If the opposition under

dominant party systems are analogous to slaves we know they must work co-operatively to accomplish their collective emancipation.

#### Notes

1. Duverger, M., *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State*, Methuen, London 1954, p 308-9.
2. O'Leary, B. and McGarry, J., *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland*, Athlone Press, London 1993.
3. *Op. cit.*, Duverger 1954 p 312.
4. Hood, C. 'A Public Management for All Seasons', *Public Administration* 69(1), pp 3-19, 1991.

## Why Do the Conservatives Keep on Winning?

*John Curtice*

Lightning, it is said, never strikes twice in the same place. So if a party wins power four times in a row, as the Conservative Party has done since 1979, it is difficult to argue it has simply benefited from good fortune. It would seem to have some inbuilt advantages over its opponents.

Claims that the British electorate has become inherently more pro-Conservative have not been short on the ground. This chapter reviews a number of these arguments, using evidence from the substantial academic literature on electoral behaviour, to see whether the results of the last four elections are a reliable guide to what might happen in the foreseeable future. Do the Conservatives now enjoy such long-term structural advantages over their opponents that defeat seems inconceivable in the near future? Or is there need for a little caution about assuming that the past is the best guide to the future?

### Social Change

Probably the most important of the claims that have been made is that social changes during the 1970s and 1980s have produced an electorate which believes its material interests are more likely to be served by a Conservative than a Labour government. This thesis comes in a number of different, and in some respects contradictory, forms.

It has long been argued that the main, and indeed only, social division in British politics is social class.<sup>1</sup> But in the early 1970s the claim began to emerge that social class was declining as an influence on voting behaviour.<sup>2</sup> The premise of this argument, which is known as the 'class de-alignment' thesis, is that social class has declined as an influence in people's social lives. Increased social mobility, widening education opportunities, greater geographical mobility and growing