

REVIEW ARTICLE



THE 2001 UK GENERAL ELECTION

Lots of Words About Little Change

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David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2001*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002.

£52.00/£18.99. 356 pp.

ISBN 0 333 740327 (hbk); 0 333 740335 (pbk)

Pippa Norris (ed.), *Britain Votes 2001*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. £16.99. 276 pp.

ISBN 0 19 851049 7 (pbk)

Robert Worcester and Roger Mortimore, *Explaining Labour's Second Landslide*. London: Politico's, 2001.

£20.00. 330 pp. ISBN 1 902301 84 6 (hbk)

Andrew Geddes and Jonathan Tonge (eds), *Labour's Second Landslide: The British General Election 2001*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002. £15.99.

272 pp. ISBN 0 7190 6266 7 (pbk)

Anthony King (ed.) *Britain at the Polls, 2001*. New York: Chatham House Publishers, 2002. US\$23.95. 241 pp.

ISBN 1 889 119 74 1 (pbk)

Time was – before the 1983 general election, which was going to break the mould of British politics but didn't (but which might have broken British psephology if some political scientists then associated with the Social Science Research Council had had their way!) – when there was just one author to whom we turned to understand what had happened at a UK general election: David Butler. Psephology was a small sub-field of British political science; within it, David Butler had nurtured a few students, several of whom acted as co-authors for particular projects, but his was very much a single – and impressive – voice. So much has changed over the last two or three decades, not least as a result of the expansion of British higher education and the rapid expansion of the study of politics and government therein. David Butler's is still a strong and influential voice in the interpretation of UK elections, but he has many 'competitors' (in the best sense of that term). And so, five books – with very similar titles – appeared within a year of the 2001 general election offering non-journalistic accounts of that contest and its outcome.

Butler and Kavanagh's book, the sixteenth in the Nuffield series, is a co-authored volume like several of its recent predecessors. Butler and Kavanagh are responsible for nine of the thirteen chapters in the current volume, however, which cover the core of the book: five other authors provide chapters on particular issues ('Politics on the air'; 'The press disarmed'; 'MPs and candidates'; and 'The local battle, the cyber battle'). In addition, the chapter on the national campaign has an appendix on Scotland by a further contributor (but nothing on either Wales or, more importantly, Northern Ireland), and there is the usual analysis of the results by John Curtice and Michael Steed.

The first two chapters provide overviews of the period since the 1997 election – on 'The political scene 1997–2001' and 'Labour in power', respectively – and are followed by a much longer discussion of 'The Conservatives'. Against the 27 pages allocated to the main opposition party, and 16 to the government, there are then just nine on 'The Liberal Democrats and others'. All provide useful overviews of the politics of the period, characteristic of this series of books, as do chapters on 'The coming of the election', 'The national campaign', and 'Public polls and private polls'.

Of the commissioned pieces, that by Kellas on Scotland tackles the intriguing issue of how the parties would campaign in a situation where many of the voters' day-to-day concerns were irrelevant, since they are now handled by the devolved Parliament in Edinburgh. In the chapters on broadcasting and the press, Harrison, and Scammell and Harrop, respectively, discuss an election in which coverage was much more muted than at the two previous contests. Ballinger discusses both local campaigning and cyber campaigning. On the former, the material is almost entirely descriptive – perhaps all that can reasonably be expected of something written so soon after the contest – with little attempt to evaluate the impact of what was done, and no reference to the now-classic work on this aspect of campaigns (Denver and Hands, 1997). On the cyber campaign, again the emphasis is

on what was done – though with no reference to Labour’s provision of policy-success claims on its website for each and every constituency.

Byron Criddle’s chapter on MPs and candidates is again a valuable resource on the profiles of the individuals involved. And, as ever, John Curtice and Michael Steed have provided a superb early analysis of the results, almost entirely, and necessarily, at the ecological level only, concentrating on features such as the fall in the turnout, social and regional variations in voting patterns, incumbency effects, tactical voting and the impact of the electoral system. Their sophisticated use of the data available at the time, and clear verbal presentation of their tests and findings, not only throws bright light on the results and provides the foundations for later, more detailed work, but also acts as a model for those who wish to present academic analyses to a general audience – and perhaps to students undertaking projects on election-related issues.

As well as providing the introductory material on context and campaign, Butler and Kavanagh provide summary chapters on ‘The campaign assessed’ and ‘Landslide again’ – though the latter relies significantly on Curtice and Steed. As in the previous books in the series, they have provided rapid yet well-crafted overviews of an election, another standard reference on a significant event in UK political history. But their presentation, and that of their contributors, is partial – necessarily to some extent because of the time-scale of the book’s production, but not entirely so. In Butler and Kavanagh’s own contributions, for example, you get the feeling not only that they were somewhat sympathetically inclined towards Hague – personally if not politically – but also that they had relatively little inside knowledge gleaned by trusted observers on which to draw regarding parties other than the Conservatives. And there are substantial lacunae, notably the lack of treatment of Northern Ireland, where (in relative terms especially) much more changed in the period after 1997 than anywhere else in the UK. And what of the importance of their local government base to the Liberal Democrats?

Britain Votes 2001 comprises a series of specialist chapters on major themes concerning the election, many of which overlap with, complement and extend those in Butler and Kavanagh’s book. As in previous editions, the book starts with a succinct overview of the main points by Pippa Norris, relying substantially on the database of constituency-level results and other material (including the 1992 and 1997 elections as well as 2001) which she produced and circulated immediately after the election. Her analysis is based on a theory of ‘policy moods and cycles’: the British electorate continued to be anti-Conservative in 2001, producing what she terms an ‘apathetic landslide’ marked by a low turnout but little overall change in the pattern of votes and seats.

The remainder of the book is in two sections. The first comprises eight chapters on the campaign, covering party ideologies (based on analysis of manifestos), the campaigns run by the three main parties, the opinion polls, the media, online campaigning and campaign finance. With one exception,

all are excellent first-cut descriptions and analyses of what happened (notably those by Seyd and Denver on Labour and Liberal Democrat campaigns, respectively, and a masterly, well-crafted critique of the opinion polls by Ivor Crewe). These illustrate the wealth of knowledge of the UK political system in the academic community, and its members' ability to write well to exacting deadlines – though there are annoying typos and places where more investment in copy-editing might have helped. The exception is a chapter drawn from outside the academic world, on 'Conservatives in opposition', by Collings and Seldon: unlike the others, this argues by assertion rather than analysis, and recurrently lapses into media-like rhetoric (such as 'the hard core of increasingly elderly committed Tory voters no doubt felt their spines tingle as they marched to the polling booths, honoured to play their part in the epic struggle for the pound's survival' – p. 66): perhaps it tells us something about British political science that no academic could be found to write on the Tories (though see the excellent chapters – with strong links to the University of Hull – in two of the other volumes)?

The second section of nine chapters is entitled 'The analysis of the results' – although Philip Cowley's chapter on the Commons sits uneasily there, as it deals (interestingly and compellingly) with back-bench behaviour during the previous Parliament. There are three chapters on various parts of the UK – Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – though nothing on England! The first two were clearly written to timescales that made detailed analysis and copy-editing difficult, and are somewhat disappointing, especially that on Scotland. But the chapter on Northern Ireland – by Mitchell, O'Leary and Evans – is excellent, providing substantial insights into the events in the one part of the country where major changes took place, and which have significant political implications.

The following two chapters are on women and race: the former (by Joni Lovenduski) is particularly valuable for its theoretical treatment; with respect to the latter, Shamit Shaggar was somewhat disadvantaged by an election in which, after some early concerns, race was largely uninfluential – although it is astonishing that he makes no mention at all of the performance of the British National Party in Oldham and Burnley, one of the few race-related components of the election. (Indeed, apart from the table listing the ethnic minority MPs elected in 2001, the chapter could have been written before the election was held.)

There follow two analytical chapters by the four Principal Investigators of the 2001 British Election Study (Harold Clarke, David Sanders, Marianne Stewart and Paul Whiteley) on two key features of the voting pattern – turnout and economic voting. On turnout, analyses at aggregate and individual level show that it fell most in Labour heartland seats, and at the individual level was highest among those most committed to politics and who thought that elected governments could make a difference. Unfortunately, the latter analysis could not account for changes in turnout, and their hypotheses regarding this may be difficult to evaluate – in part because survey

respondents are much more likely to vote than are the non-respondents, so that it is difficult through this form of analysis to find out who the abstainers are – and why they failed to vote (on which, see Crewe's chapter in King's book). On the economy, they discuss the paradox that John Major's government performed as well as Tony Blair's on most economic indices, but the former was roundly defeated in 1997 and the latter returned with a landslide four years later. The difference, they show, was in evaluations of the two governments' economic competence: Major's was considered incompetent after Black Wednesday 1992; Blair's was considered competent. But how many people were disappointed by Blair's performance, and were they more likely either to switch between 1997 and 2001 or abstain? Finally, John Curtice provides an excellent chapter on the electoral system. As in his work with Michael Steed, this is a compelling analysis, with the main argument (that the electoral system is 'biased to Blair') readily appreciated through sophisticated yet clear analyses.

The book by Worcester and Mortimore – *Explaining Labour's Second Landslide* – is the second they have written on an election, though one wonders about the division of labour: the Foreword is written by Bob Worcester alone, and there are several examples through the text of the first person singular. It is based almost entirely on MORI opinion poll data. There are just four main chapters. 'Blair's first term: the 1997–2001 Parliament' has two sections whose titles – 'Labour tries to lose' and 'Conservatives unfit to win' – reveal the general thrust. Labour couldn't lose because the Tories (who were badly led, and focused on the wrong issues) couldn't win. There is no mention of the Liberal Democrats in all this. The next chapter addresses and partly rejects a variety of possible causes of low turnout, including the possibility that voters felt elections in general do not matter, or that the 2001 election did not matter because the result was a foregone conclusion, or that they merely responded to a lacklustre campaign, or negative media coverage, and so on. But what was the answer? Worcester and Mortimore don't have one. The third chapter (on 'The result') is by far the shortest. It addresses class, gender, age, rural–urban, and religious differences, plus the success of the Liberal Democrats, but like the preceding chapters, comes to no conclusions – the chapter just stops. And then comes a long chapter on 'Pundits and pollsters', which is a defence of the polls – especially MORI's. The book's Conclusion is just one page long, following a brief fifth chapter on likely events in 'the second term': essentially, nothing happened between 1997 and 2001, and they predict that their 2005 book will be entitled *Explaining Labour's Third Landslide*.

Overall, the book is an easy read – the style is clear but non-academic – but it hardly does justice to the great amount of data available to the authors, not even those bits of it that they reproduce in tables. It has a clear focus – UK politics 1997–2001 (although Northern Ireland gets just three index listings) 'from the point of view of the voters themselves'. But most of those voters are irrelevant, it seems. They argue that only some 5 percent

of those who vote influence the result (the 20 percent of the electorate who are not committed to one party and who live in the 25 percent of the constituencies that might change hands) – and these are just 3 percent of the entire British electorate. The election was about ‘finding these three people in a hundred, identifying what it is that would make them shift from one party to another, and convincing them that they should or should not’ (p. 9). So why are most of the next 300 pages devoted to the results of national surveys; why not bring their pollsters’ skills to bear on that characterization of UK elections, that only a few voters in a few places really matter?

Geddes and Tonge are appearing in the field for the second time. Their volume (*Labour’s Second Landslide*) appeared slightly later than the others – with one clear benefit: I didn’t spot a typo until p. 105! Its organization seems a bit odd – even the reverse of what it should be. After a brief editorial introduction (with poor graphics) there is a chapter by David Denver analysing the results, and then three on the parties and their campaigns, followed by one on the media, five on major issues (the economy, public services, Europe, environment and transport, and law, order and race), two on the ‘devolved countries’ (one on Scotland/Wales; the other Northern Ireland), one on women MPs and voters, and a brief editorial conclusion. Shouldn’t the issues come first, the campaigns second and the results last? Each chapter also has appended to it a ‘constituency profile’ – chosen to illustrate a point made therein. (That on Dorset West includes a major arithmetic ‘boob’ in that the authors fail to note the difference between a percentage change and a change in percentage points.)

In general, however, the quality of the chapters is very high – especially given the absence of detailed survey data. Only one – by Fielding on Labour’s campaign – falls well below the general standard: it is thin on detail, much more journalistic in its presentation than the others, and over-reliant on a few newspapers for its information. Perhaps the book’s main strength – which certainly distinguishes it from the rest – is the block of five chapters on major issues. These – by Mark Wickham-Jones on the economy, David Dolowitz on public services, Andrew Geddes on Europe, Stephen Ward on environment and transport, and John Benyon on law, order and race – are by authors not normally associated with election studies in the UK, and thus bring different perspectives to a small and crowded field of psephologists. They set the election in a wider context than some of the other books, and provide deeper analysis of the major issues than Butler and Kavanagh’s treatment.

The book edited by Tony King (*Britain at the Polls, 2001*) is explicitly not just about the election, despite its title: its aims (p. x)

. . . are rather to provide students and general readers, in North America as well as Great Britain, with an analytic description of the whole of the 1997–2001 period, with accounts of the major developments within each of the major political parties, with a ‘first-cut’ explanation of the election outcome and with some reflections on the election’s long-term significance.

The first six chapters comprise the 'analytic description', with one chapter each for the other two aims. Tony King himself provides the first two chapters. That on 'Tony Blair's first term' is an excellent account, concluding that Labour were clearly going to win handsomely in 2001 not because they were popular with the electorate – despite their successful economic policies – but because they were much less unpopular than the Conservatives. His second chapter – 'Britain's constitutional revolution' – is disappointing, however. Prefatory comments (pp. x–xi) indicate that it is almost an aside, and it is referred to as a diversion from the world of party politics (p. 41). What happened with regard to the Human Rights Act 1998, devolution to Scotland and Wales, renewed devolution to Northern Ireland, city-wide governance for London, and 'reform' of the House of Lords are all fully described, but the analysis is not there. There is nothing on the origins, including the political origins, of many of the changes. On devolution, for example, there is no mention of the Joint Committee with the Liberal Democrats (though the reader can refer to David Denver's chapter on the Liberal Democrats for that) or the reasons behind it. Did Labour press ahead with plans for devolution because: (a) they believed in it; (b) the LibDems did, and so Labour was creating the basis for a government alliance if 1997 had not delivered a clear-cut Labour victory; and/or (c) it was part of the larger Blair–Ashdown project of rebuilding a left-of-centre hegemony?

There are four chapters on the parties – by Philip Norton on the Conservatives and David Denver on the Liberal Democrats, plus Patrick Seyd on government–party relationships under Labour and Colin Seymour-Ure on Labour's relations with the media: Plaid Cymru and the SNP are ignored – as too are parties in Northern Ireland. Norton and Denver, not surprisingly, discuss leadership elections in their relative parties in some detail, and the subsequent roles of the new leaders in opposition and during the 2001 campaign. Each is a substantial piece of easy reading, as are the two chapters on New Labour.

The final two chapters, by John Bartle and Ivor Crewe, deal with the election itself and longer-term interpretations of Labour's massive victories in 1997 and 2001. Both conclude that Labour's hold on power is less firm than might seem the case, and that when electors decide to vote again in large numbers at a contest where more of their votes will count – and when the main opposition party has rebuilt its credibility as an alternative government – then, as Bartle puts it, 'even the next general election is still wide open' (p. 202). His analysis of the outcome and the low turnout is well-crafted, as is Crewe's discussion of whether 1997–2001 means the onset of a substantial period of Labour hegemony. Labour has achieved much in winning a second full term, and the Conservatives have some hard work ahead finding a credible niche within Britain's current political space. It is a challenging conclusion to an overall excellent set of essays.

So, who wins? Neither students nor general readers are likely to plough through all five books, so which should they focus on? (And there are more

to come, such as Bartle et al. (2002) and Bennie et al. (2002).) In part, it depends on whether their main interest is in the election itself, or in the whole 1997–2001 period, with the election as the conclusion. The first three books reviewed here address the former. Butler and Kavanagh has many strengths – not least the Curtice/Steed analysis – but is less comprehensive than Norris’s collection: Worcester and Mortimore is unique and interesting but partial (in more than one sense of that term). And if the main interest is on the period 1997–2001 plus the election, King’s book probably is the ‘better buy’ because it has better analyses of the election itself: but several of the essays in Geddes and Tonge are excellent pieces, covering different ground from King’s essayists. In other words, there is no single ‘best buy’, but a plethora of riches. In particular, there are a number of essays which should not be missed: Bartle and Curtice/Steed on the result itself; Crewe on the polls and Labour’s potential hegemony; Seyd’s two essays on Labour; Mitchell, O’Leary and Evans on Northern Ireland; and several more.

But are we better served now with five (or more) books on the election rather than only one, which was the situation before the 1983 contest? The answer must surely be yes, if the quality is high – and that is my general conclusion after reading all five. After more than two decades of a neo-liberal political–economic agenda, we have perhaps been brainwashed into thinking competition is a ‘good thing’, but in this context I am sure it is. Academic psephology is thriving in the UK, and a range of voices offering differing interpretations is more desirable than a univocal monopoly – however good that voice might be. We know that in part the competition is a function of publishers identifying a niche market to exploit, but this is operating in the academics’ interest in this case: the books are not expensive, all should be in all libraries, and they provide insights for students and others from a range of perspectives on recent UK politics. This should be widely welcomed, and the editors and authors congratulated for producing such high quality products to tight schedules. As Andrew Gamble (2002: 142) has recently stressed, in so much political science there are some ‘facts’, but many more interpretations of events, and few truths: ‘since reality is constructed and experienced in so many different ways, determining what *actually* happened in any final sense is an aspiration impossible to achieve’. But it remains an aspiration, and is better pursued by a range of interpretations – out of which something close to the ‘truth’ may eventually emerge.

More than three decades ago, I heard David Butler give a seminar in New Zealand on the Nuffield series, which he referred to as ‘instant history’. Such exercises are valuable for the immediate insights that we are given, up-to-date information that is valuable in teaching about elections soon after they have occurred, together with evaluations and analyses that are more detached – and slightly less rushed – than those provided by political commentators in the media. They provide a preface to understanding not only individual elections but also electoral behaviour in the UK more

generally, and the 'analytic descriptions' of the context (as Tony King refers to them) show the strength of British political science in this area of endeavour.

But we rarely get beyond the preface. A year after the election was held, we have several books providing instant interpretations – alongside a second group by political commentators and journalists not reviewed here – but then interest wanes. Papers are written using the British Election Survey data which – until 2001, and then only just – are not available to inform that first generation of books, but where are the overviews written from the perspective of more information and the 'longer view'? Of course, major books have emerged from the British Election Survey – Butler and Stokes' (1969, 1974) pioneering volumes, Särilvik and Crewe's (1983) synthesis of a decade of change, and several from the CREST team (Heath, Jowell and Curtice, 1985, 2001; Heath et al., 1987; Evans and Norris, 1999). But with a few exceptions – such as Denver (1994), Catt (1996), Harrop and Miller (1987), Leonard and Mortimore (2001) – the substantial number of British social scientists interested in elections and voting behaviour have not sought to synthesize what we have learned from more than 50 years of studying elections in Britain, and some 40 years of academic surveys of the electorate. Why not? Surely it is time to go beyond the preface and to start writing the main body of the book – either by one or two authors producing a major work of synthesis or, as an interim statement, a collection of essays with a wider remit than just one or two elections (which Evans and Norris (1999) partially attempted). We know plenty about the short-term and the local; what we need is reflection on what that knowledge implies for theory and for longer-term developments. The material is there – both in the books and journal articles and in the raw material from surveys. Who will take up the challenge?

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