

Political Thinking Meeting Report No 42

Chiltern U3A 'Political Thinking'

Meeting No 42 Monday 18th November 2019

Topic for discussion; Brexit and the General Election

Should the General Election have been called without attempting to complete the passage of the EU withdrawal Bill?

Did the Parliament (with a majority assumed to be for Remain) do its job in preventing Brexit? Were constitutional democratic processes therefore effective?

In respect of the election campaign the party manifestos describes the policies which each party intends to pursue as the basis on which we make our choice and vote. What are the major policy differences between the parties and what are the similarities? Will it be a Brexit election or will other issues be important?

A political party winning a majority will claim that it therefore has a mandate to pursue the policies it describes. To what extent should a party be bound by that mandate?

With respect to local politics, the Chesham and Amersham constituency is considered a "safe" Conservative seat. We would therefore expect little local political activity. However in the referendum result there was a 55/45 majority for Remain. How will voting patterns in our local constituency be affected?

What do we consider the General Election result is likely to be?

Discussion Summary

The main lessons to be drawn at the conclusion of the Parliamentary session were that referendums do not fit well into a Parliamentary system, therefore should be used with extreme caution, and that unless there is a majority Parliament is ineffective.

With respect to the current general election there was an extended discussion about the historic accountability of politicians for the achievement of their election manifestos, concluding that as there appeared to be no accountability, election manifestos did not seem to be a reliable basis for voting.

With respect to local politics, whether the Remain preference expressed at the referendum will translate into a Remain vote at the GE is not known.

Most of the group expected the GE result to be a small Conservative majority

Discussion.

With respect to the referendum and the subsequent Parliamentary impasse, it was noted that a vote in a GE is a vote for a person and indirectly for policies, whereas a referendum vote is directly for policy; a vote very different in nature. There seemed to be little enthusiasm in the group for the idea of extending direct voting for policies, as practiced to some extent in California and Switzerland. The use of modern technology would facilitate regular popular votes on policy matters and some advocate that this is the direction that democracy should take. However the referendum experience did not seem to encourage the group towards direct democracy.

Another political development noted was that people in general are now more interested in politics than they were; failure to deliver the referendum is seen as a failure of democracy. Whether the interest will be sustained and lead to higher participation rates remains to be seen.

None of the manifestos were available at the time of the meeting. Of the policy issues that had been raised to date nationalisation appeared to be the most controversial, stimulating intense group discussion. Essentially those in favour did not accept the argument that state ownership necessarily causes inefficiencies and that provision of utilities in particular would be better run this way, with some social goals as well as financial ones. High speed broadband is a clear example, other countries providing exemplars of different policies leading to better broadband coverage than UK.

With respect to party manifestos and election promises, an example of an election promise in 2016 in respect of starter homes was introduced; although funds had been allocated a NAO report indicated that had none actually been built. The suggestion was that this is evidence that there is no accountability for manifesto commitments.

Some suggested that election promises should be considered as “ambitions” or “aspirations” rather than commitments; and indeed were part of the normal political processes of building support for favoured policies. Others considered that track record or previous achievements would be a better basis for casting a vote.

Overall it was agreed that what is said at elections is not firm foundation for voter choice; but no better alternatives were suggested.

With respect to predicting the GE result on Dec 12th, about two thirds of the group expected a small but adequate Conservative majority and therefore resolution to Brexit. The rest (with one abstention who thought it was unpredictable) expected a hung Parliament, a continuation of the impasse or possibly a coalition.