British American Security BASIC Information Council

The British Election: What Happened and What Does it Mean?

Event summary by BASIC Program Director Anne Penketh

May 7, 2010

Britain's "Mick Jagger election," at which nobody got any satisfaction, was the topic of this joint BASIC event with the Center for Transatlantic Relations. The event took place at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, EU Center of Excellence in Washington, DC.



The event was held only hours after it became clear that there would be a hung parliament after the 6 May poll, with the Conservative Party having the largest number of seats although without an overall majority. According to the final results, the Conservatives have won 306 seats - or 307 including a previously Tory-held seat where the election was postponed after the death of a candidate - Labour has 258 and the Liberal Democrats 57.

It fell to Klaus Larres, adjunct professor of European studies at SAIS, Johns Hopkins University, to explain the fallout from the dramatic events overnight. As well as reprising the Mick Jagger aphorism, he added that "the electorate spoke but nobody knows what they said."



He said that the first hung parliament since 1974 had arisen after Lib Dem leader Nick Clegg, the shooting star, was "done in by the last TV debate" because he was "more pro-European than the majority of the population." He examined the possible coalitions or political arrangements between the different parties represented in Westminster and predicted that Britain "will be in for a long period of unstable and weak government."

The consequences for the United Kingdom will be negative, Prof. Larres said. "Only a strong government would have stabilized markets."

Paul Ingram, Executive Director of BASIC, agreed there were no winners from the election. Addressing the security issues that featured in the campaign, he said there was a sense that the future government of Britain would continue with the Trident nuclear deterrent. He said that foreign policy is unlikely to change as it is the subject of a consensus among the political parties standing for a liberal interventionist model and promoting democracy and freedom around the world.



Mr. Ingram was surprised how little the war in Afghanistan had played in the campaign. "For a country that's at war, it's remarkable."



Joanna Spear, Director of security policy studies program at George Washington University, said that the main issue during the campaign was the economy. On the issues "you could probably slip a credit card between the parties." On Afghanistan, no party is talking about withdrawal, she said. Dr. Spear warned that the real challenge would be to cut the defense budget at a time when "there is not a lot of fat there."

Prof. Larres said that from a financial perspective, Britain was in a "very dire situation" and that both Trident and the war in Afghanistan were unaffordable.

Amb. Kurt Volker, senior fellow and CTR managing director, pointed out that President Obama had "pushed Afghanistan off" the agenda until July 2011.

The panel, moderated by BASIC Chair Trevor McCrisken, Associate Professor in American Politics and International Studies at Warwick University, discussed why Britain needs nuclear weapons. Prof. Larres said that the nuclear deterrent was seen as valuable for Britain's image -



allowing the country to punch above its weight and be projected as a great power.

Speakers agreed that the Lib Dem call for the introduction of proportional representation was unlikely to be enacted. Dr. Spear said that when the voting pattern was analyzed, people "are moving away from throwing their votes away", which had led to an increase in the vote of far-right parties such as the British National Party. "With PR, they would have got seats."

The panel discussed the ramifications of the first past the post system producing a result that looked like one under the PR system. Questions also focused on whether Britain would move further way from Europe as a result of the Conservative vote. Dr. Spear said that after the scandal of MPs expenses last summer, "the next expenses scandal will be that of MEPs, which will fuel anti-Europe feeling in Britain."

The panelists concluded by saying that a hung parliament would be unsustainable, and that new elections were likely to take place within a year.

British American Security Information Council

In the United Kingdom The Grayston Centre, 28 Charles Square London, N1 6HT +44-(0)207 324 4680 In the United States 110 Maryland Ave., NE, Suite 205 Washington, DC 20002 +1 202 546 8055

On the Web http://www.basicint.org