

**Whither the Conservatives? – When continuity politics is simply not enough***by Tim Morgan on March 1, 2013*

It is axiomatic that one should not draw too many conclusions from by-elections, where voters know that they can register a protest without affecting the national government. Sobriety (or is it just a sense of depressed resignation?) tends to reappear at the next general election. This said, the result delivered by the voters of Eastleigh should not be treated in the usual dismissive way. This result does tell us quite a lot, especially about the plight of the Conservatives.

First, let's ignore Labour (which is clearly what the Eastleigh voters did). Squeezed as its vote was between the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives and UKIP (the United Kingdom Independence Party), Labour never really had a chance.

The Lib Dems' retention of the seat reflected the party's organisational strength on the ground, and also showed that voters are less swayed by personality, gossip and 'scandal' issues than many in the Westminster bubble like to believe. Defeat in Eastleigh would have been a disaster, so the Lib Dems are entitled to breathe a sigh of relief. The result might not be an unalloyed delight for party members – it could mean that they are stuck with Nick Clegg for longer – but a win is always better than a defeat.

The Conservatives are the party whose problems were laid bare at Eastleigh. Their main objective – which has to be an outright majority in the next Parliament – had already taken a severe knock when their coalition partners petulantly torpedoed the redistribution of seats. To gain an outright majority, the Tories simply must take Lib Dem seats, especially in the South of England. Whilst opinion polls showing dismal national support for the Lib Dems might have raised Conservative hopes, Eastleigh has provided an unpleasant douche of reality.

One cause for Conservative worry should be that Eastleigh has reminded us, yet again, of the importance of party workers on the ground. Reactions to – for example – David Cameron's support for same-sex marriage might indicate de-motivational tendencies in a grass-roots party already disillusioned by a leadership increasingly bereft of substance.

Support for UKIP – which forced the Tories into third place – has to be the Conservatives' biggest worry, but not in the way you might think. Yes, UKIP can take votes from the Tories, but it can also take them from the other parties. In any case, UKIP's success at Eastleigh probably isn't replicable in a general election.

The big UKIP worry for the Tories is that Nigel Farage's party actually stands for something. “Love ‘em or loathe ‘em”, as the saying goes, you know what UKIP are about. Can you really say the same of David Cameron's Conservatives?

In the halcyon days of June 2010, it all looked so exciting. Back then, the Tories seemed determined to boost community autonomy and individual freedoms, rolling back the excesses of the arrogant, wasteful, bullying and incompetent state (in my terminology, the “[vampire squid](#)” of the permanent administration).

Any such libertarian agenda has long since gone up in smoke. The government seems to have become wholly assimilated by the squid. No heads have rolled over Stafford, or over

the Department of Transport's £50m West Coast rail bidding fiasco. Instead of being curbed, state power has increased. Government is living hand-to-mouth as the economy drifts and the deficit reduction agenda goes off the rails.

For the Tories to stand any chance of winning an outright majority at the next election, they need to decide what they stand for, and be prepared to upset some people by saying so. If all they represent is continuity, the public is entitled to wonder quite where "business as usual" (rather than radical restructuring) might lead in an economy that has grown in only one of the last five quarters.