

MAJORITY RULES

Labour's challenge for 2015

Peter Kellner

To win the next general election, Labour must defy history, address some awkward numbers and overcome persistent weaknesses in the reputation of the party and its leader. Let us consider each of these in turn.

First, the history. David Cameron heads the ninth government to come to power from opposition in the past 80 years; and Ed Miliband is the ninth opposition leader to seek to lead his party back to office after a single parliament out of power. As Table 1 shows, the record is not encouraging. Only once, in February 1974, has a new government been thrown out at the following election. Edward Heath, the Conservative prime minister, effectively threw power away. He had been in office less than four years and had a perfectly viable majority in the House of Commons, but he had provoked a bitter dispute with the miners. Their strike had left Britain short of energy; every home suffered powercuts; and industry was forced to cut back to a three-day week. Heath decided he needed a fresh mandate from the electorate. The question he posed was: 'Who governs, parliament or the unions?' The electorate essentially replied, 'We're not sure, but not you.' Conservative support slipped to 39 per cent, its lowest since 1929.

TABLE 1: Winning back power after a single parliament

Party	Year it lost power	Year of next general election	Did opposition regain power?
Labour	1931	1935	No: Conservative landslide
Conservative	1945	1950	No: Narrow Labour majority
Labour	1951	1955	No: Increased Conservative majority
Conservative	1964	1966	No: Increased Labour majority
Labour	1970	1974 (Feb)	Yes, just: Minority Labour government
Conservative	1974 (Feb)	1974 (Oct)	No: Narrow Labour majority
Labour	1979	1983	No: Conservative landslide
Conservative	1997	2001	No: Labour landslide

Even so, Labour failed to secure an overall majority. Its vote fell too; in fact it won even fewer votes than the Tories. But it managed, just, to become the largest party in the House of Commons, and Harold Wilson returned as prime minister. In short, Heath blew it. Had he held his nerve and not called an election, he might well have won the following election. If we discount the special circumstances of the February 1974 election, there has not been a single occasion since 1930 when a new government has been thrown out at the next election. And even if we leave that election in, there is not a single time in more than 80 years when an opposition party has returned to power at the first attempt with an overall majority. If Miliband does head a majority government after 2015, Labour's victory will be the first of its kind in modern times.

The opinion polls provide equally salutary precedents. Table 2 shows the peak leads of opposition parties over the past half-century (omitting the short parliaments of 1964-66 and March-October 1974).

TABLE 2: Peak opposition opinion poll leads

Oppositions that went on to win	Oppositions that went on to lose
Lab 1959-64: 20% (June 1963)	Lab 1979-83: 13% (Jan 1981)
Con 1966-70: 28% (May 1968)	Lab 1983-87: 7% (June 1986)
Lab 1970-74: 22% (July 1971)	Lab 1987-92: 23% (March 1990)
Con 1974-79: 25% (Nov 1976)	Con 1997-2001: 8% (Sept 2000)
Lab 1992-97: 40% (Dec 1994)	Con 2001-05: 5% (Jan 2004)
Con 2005-10: 26% (May 2008)	

As those figures show, no opposition has gone on to win power without at some point achieving a lead of at least 20 per cent; and, as the story of the 1987-92 parliament shows, even a 23 per cent lead does not guarantee victory. (That was, however, a special case: in March 1990, Margaret Thatcher was presiding over the introduction of the poll tax. By 1992 the Tories had got rid of both an unpopular premier and a hated policy). At the time of writing, the biggest Labour lead recorded by any opinion poll during its current period of opposition was 16 per cent, recorded by TNS last September. My own judgement is that Labour's biggest lead in this parliament is around 12 per cent; higher leads in individual polls have been outliers. Either way, Labour has fallen well short of the 20 per cent that every successful opposition party in recent decades has achieved.

Second, the arithmetic. Labour won 258 seats in 2010. To win the next election outright, it will need 326. (This assumes that the next election will be fought on the same boundaries as last time. Labour's task would have been harder had the Conservatives succeeded in cutting the number of MPs and redrawing the boundaries according to new rules). So Labour must gain 68 seats.

At first sight this looks perfectly possible. On the UK Polling Report website, my YouGov colleague Anthony Wells provides a swingometer that allows us to translate votes into seats on the normal assumption of uniform swing. If we assume that the Liberal Democrats recover to 15 per cent support at the next election, then, as Table 3 shows, Labour needs a lead of just one per cent in the popular vote to reach its target.

TABLE 3: Labour's popular vote target

	GB vote share %	Seats	Change since 2010
Labour	38	326	+68
Conservative	37	273	-34
Liberal Democrat	15	26	-31
Others	10	7	-3
Northern Ireland	-	18	-

According to this scenario, Labour would gain 51 seats from the Conservatives, 14 from the Liberal Democrats and one each from the Greens, Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru.

However, that is almost certainly too optimistic. I would be astonished if Labour recaptured Brighton Pavilion from its Green MP, Caroline Lucas: she came through a crowded field last time; she has established herself as a popular local MP; the Greens have gained strength on Brighton and Hove council; and I would expect her to mop up most of the remaining votes won last time by the Liberal Democrats. Plaid Cymru's Hywel Williams and the SNP's Stewart Hosie may also be hard to dislodge from

Seat	Lib Dem lead over Lab in 2010 %
Norwich South	0.6
Bradford East	0.9
Brent Central	3.0
Manchester Withington	4.2
Burnley	4.3
Dunbartonshire East	4.6
Birmingham Yardley	7.3
Edinburgh West	8.2
Argyll and Bute*	8.9
Redcar	12.4
Hornsey and Wood Green	12.5
Cardiff Central	12.7
Cambridge*	14.9
Gordon	15.9

*Seats where Conservatives came second, so Labour needs to win from third place

Arfon and Dundee East respectively. They are worth targeting, but Labour would be unwise to assume victory.

As for the seats currently held by the Liberal Democrats, 14 gains look a stretch to me. Labour will almost certainly gain some, but most Liberal Democrat MPs will be able to rely on a personal vote to provide some, if not total, insulation from the national swing against their party. Were I a Labour strategist, I would target all 14 but be content on election night if eight are won back. Table 4 lists the 14 seats.

All this means that Labour will probably need to take 60 seats from the Conservatives to secure an overall majority at the next general election. The table opposite shows the 60 top Conservative-Labour marginals.

The regional distribution is noteworthy for being, well, not very noteworthy. Only four of the 60 seats are outside England; but we have

Labour will probably need to take 60 seats from the Conservatives to secure an overall majority at the next general election

known for some years that the Conservatives are especially unpopular in Scotland and much of Wales, and so have few seats to defend there. Within England, the key marginals are fairly evenly spread: 17 in the north, 16 in the Midlands, 23 in the south. However, we need to take into account that there are more MPs overall in the south (270) than in the north (158) and Midlands

(105) combined. The percentage of Conservative-Labour marginals as a proportion of all seats is highest in the Midlands (15 per cent), followed by the north (11 per cent) and south (nine per cent).

I would advise against fretting too much over these specific numbers. I set them out in order to make a broader point. Labour must gain votes in all parts of England in order to win the next election. Anything that reeks of an exclusively 'northern' or 'southern' strategy will fail. Labour's appeal must be national.

Rather, the party must attend to the underlying numbers. In order to win all 60 seats, Labour needs a swing of close to five per cent. In national terms this means converting the Conservative seven per cent lead in 2010 to a Labour lead of three per cent in 2015. We have already shifted the vote-share winning post up from a one per cent lead because of the possibility (I would say likelihood) of Labour failing to capture all the target seats currently held by the Liberal Democrats, Greens, SNP and Plaid Cymru.

But even three per cent may understate the lead Labour needs, and quite considerably. Here is why. It assumes that the swing to Labour in Conservative marginal seats will match the national swing. Past experience tells us that this assumption may be too optimistic. Fifty-nine of the 60 seats were Conservative gains in 2010. (The exception was Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale). Next time, 57 of them will be contested by candidates standing for the first time as sitting MPs, seeking re-election. (The other two are Corby, which was gained by Labour in last November's by-election, and Cardiff North, where Jonathan Evans has announced he is standing down in 2015). And recent history warns us that MPs seeking re-election for the first time can be hard to dislodge.

TABLE 5: Labour's vote share in 2001

Great Britain	-2.4
Seat gained by Labour in 1997, new MP seeking re-election	-0.2
Labour seats before 1997, Labour MP standing again	-4.1
Incumbent Labour MP standing down in 2001	-5.7

Source: British General Election of 2001 by David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, p.319 (analysis by John Curtice and Michael Steed)

TABLE 6: Top 60 Conservative-Labour marginals

	Con maj %		Con maj %		Con maj %		Con maj %
North East		Cleethorpes	9.6	Hove	3.8	Cannock Chase	7.0
Stockton South	0.7			Hastings and Rye	4.0	Warwick and Leamington	7.2
		East of England		Milton Keynes South	9.4		
North West		Thurrock	0.2			South West	
Lancaster and Fleetwood	0.8	Waveney	1.5	East Midlands		Stroud	2.2
Morecambe and Lunesdale	2.0	Bedford	3.0	Sherwood	0.4	Plymouth Sutton and Devonport	2.6
Carlisle	2.0	Ipswich	4.4	Broxtowe	0.7	Gloucester	4.8
Weaver Vale	2.3	Stevenage	8.0	Amber Valley	1.2	Kingswood	5.1
Warrington South	2.8	Watford	8.2	Lincoln	2.3	Swindon South	7.5
Bury North	5.0	Norwich North	9.2	Corby	3.5	Somerset North East	9.6
Blackpool North and Cleveleys	5.3			Northampton North	4.8		
City of Chester	5.5	London		Erewash	5.3	Wales	
Wirral West	6.2	Hendon	0.2	Loughborough	7.1	Cardiff North	0.4
Pendle	8.0	Brentford and Isleworth	3.6	High Peak	9.3	Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire	8.5
Rosendale and Darwen	9.5	Enfield North	3.8			Vale of Glamorgan	8.8
		Croydon Central	6.0	West Midlands			
Yorkshire and Humberside		Harrow East	7.1	Warwickshire North	0.1	Scotland	
Dewsbury	2.8	Ealing Central and Acton	7.9	Wolverhampton South West	1.7	Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale	9.1
Pudsey	3.4			Halesowen and Rowley Regis	4.6		
Keighley	6.2	South East		Nuneaton	4.6		
Elmet and Rothwell	8.1	Brighton Kemptown	3.1	Worcester	6.1		

Think back to 2001. Labour had gained more than 140 seats in 1997. After Tony Blair's first term, individual MPs as well as the party nationally faced the verdict of voters. The table opposite shows what happened to Labour's share of the vote.

Nationally, there was a two per cent swing from Labour to Conservative. But in Labour marginals there was a slight swing to Labour. That is why Labour lost hardly any seats, and secured almost as big a landslide as in 1997.

These figures suggest that incumbency brings a bonus, generally of 1,000-2,000 votes. When sitting MPs are ousted, their bonus disappears and the new MPs have the chance to establish themselves locally. The decline in strong party loyalties in recent decades has helped this process.

As parties matter less to voters, personal performance matters more. New MPs are able to attract approval for the way they serve their communities. Then, four or five years later, they can convert this approval into extra votes – not, usually, in vast numbers, but enough to make a difference in some seats. In terms of change, it is this second election when the bonus emerges: in subsequent elections Labour and Tory incumbents can expect to hold their bonus but not, normally, add further to it.

The same may well happen in 2015. In virtually all of Labour's target seats, Conservatives will be fighting as first-time incumbents. To illustrate the point, imagine the battle for the imaginary Conservative marginal of Midtown. Davinia Bluecoat captured the seat three years ago with a majority of 4,000:



Harold Wilson is the only opposition leader to return to power after one parliament

Conservative	21,000	Liberal Democrat	10,000
Labour	17,000	UKIP	2,000

Let us suppose that the national vote movements in 2015 are: Labour +9 percentage points, United Kingdom Independence party +2, Conservatives -2, Liberal Democrats -9. If Midtown swang in line with national trends, Bluecoat would lose her seat:

Labour	21,500	Liberal Democrat	5,500
Conservative	20,000	UKIP	3,000

But if Bluecoat has built a typical level of personal support from local electors, she can expect a first-time incumbent bonus of 1,500. That is, she would win 1,500 votes more than would be projected from the national swing. Suppose she draws 500 from each of her three opponents. If that happens, then she would retain her seat:

Conservative	21,500	Liberal Democrat	5,000
Labour	21,000	UKIP	2,500

That is a purely notional example. The performances of Tory MPs, and the level of their bonus, will vary according to the reputation they have managed to establish locally. But I would expect the average swing to Labour in these seats to be lower than in Britain as a whole. If we take 2001 as our guide, the swing could well be two per cent lower. This would be worth 20-25 seats to the Tories. Instead of needing a national swing of five per cent and a national vote-lead of three per cent, Labour could need a national swing of seven per cent and a national vote-lead of seven per cent.

None of these calculations are set in stone. The past can only ever provide an imperfect guide to the future. Perhaps new Tory MPs will enjoy no first-time bonus; perhaps the lack of a 20 per cent-plus poll lead will not hold Labour back; perhaps the impact of UKIP and the role of the Liberal Democrats in the coalition will render the historical precedents irrelevant. But Labour would be unwise to rely on any, let alone all, of these things happening of their own accord. If a political version of the cavalry is to gallop to Labour's rescue, the party must find its own horses and its own riders.

Third, the challenge. As Table 7 shows, one curious feature of this parliament's midterm has been the lack of net movement between left and right in YouGov surveys throughout the past 12 months:

Two separate shifts seem to have taken place: from Liberal Democrat to Labour and from Conservative to UKIP. In fact, there is always more

churn than those net shifts indicate. Some people have switched from Green to Conservative, and others from Liberal Democrat to UKIP, however improbable such shifts might seem. But the stability, in net terms, of the overall left-right division is striking. It contrasts with other midterms that have served as a prelude to a change in government. In the mid-1990s, polls and by-elections recorded big shifts from the Conservatives to New Labour – just as Thatcher won in 1979 on the back of significant midterm movements from Labour to the Conservatives.

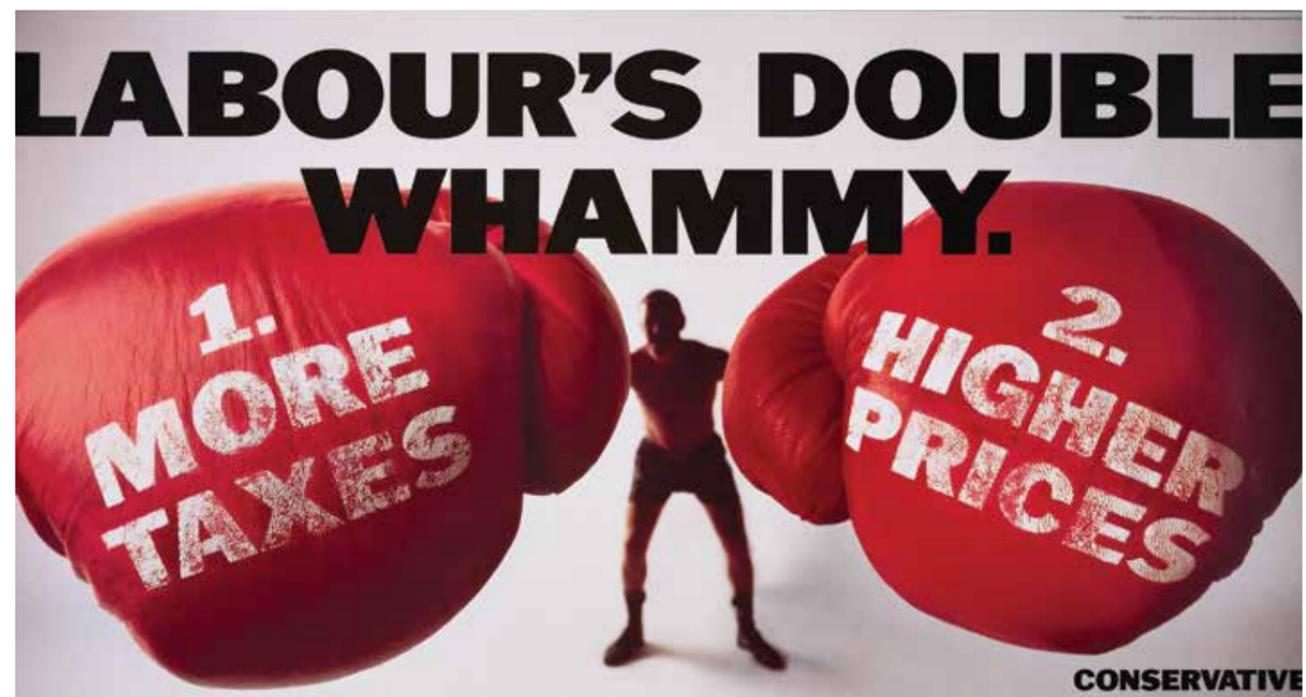
Labour has fallen well short of the 20 per cent that every successful opposition party in recent decades has achieved

Of course, things could change between now and 2015. The 54-40 division between left and right might change in either direction.

But if I were a betting man, I would expect the split to be fairly similar at the next general election. This suggests that Labour has three specific tasks if it is to make a 54-40 split work in its favour:

- Win the 'ground war' by identifying Labour supporters in the key marginals and making sure they turn out to vote. This is one thing that Barack Obama achieved in the United States in both 2008 and 2012.

TABLE 7: Political change since 2010		
	2010 %	2012-13%
Labour	30	43
Liberal Democrat	24	11
Total left-of-centre	54	54
Conservative	37	32
UKIP	3	8
Total right-of-centre	40	40



The Tory attack on Labour in 1992 caught the public mood and amplified it

- Hold on to the Liberal Democrat-to-Labour switchers in the Conservative-Labour marginals (but not the Conservative-Liberal Democrat marginals, where continued tactical voting would help reduce the overall number of Conservative seats and so make it that bit easier for Labour to become the largest party).
- Encourage disaffected Tories who have switched to UKIP to stay with UKIP. The more the right-of-centre vote is divided, the easier it is for Labour to unseat Conservative MPs with small majorities.

The first task, winning the ground war, is essentially a matter of organisation and resources – not least identifying every Labour supporter in every key constituency, getting to know them and understanding their concerns. And the more of them that cast postal votes in advance, the better. An extra leaflet, phone call or even candidate visit 10 days before polling day will not be enough.

The other two tasks are political. They must be tackled with care. Labour cannot say out loud: 'Vote Liberal Democrat in this seat to keep out the Tories', or 'Dear disaffected Tory, Nigel Farage is a sensible leader with lots of good ideas; he deserves your support.' Rather, Labour must learn from the central failing that caused its defeat in 1992 – an election fought in grim economic conditions that should have seen the Tories removed from office.

Then, the Tories' central message was that Neil Kinnock was a dangerous man who would lead Britain down the road to ruin. The Conservative poster, showing a pair of boxing gloves and the huge slogan, 'Labour's double whammy: higher taxes, higher prices', caught the mood and amplified it. The Tories won, and with the highest popular vote that any British party has ever achieved.

Five years later, the Tories tried the same trick and it failed utterly. It depicted Blair as 'Demon Eyes', with a suitably menacing picture. It failed, because voters regarded the depiction as ludicrous. Blair had reassured voters that their jobs, homes, pay and savings would be safe with him.

One does not need a crystal ball to know that the Conservatives will try return to its message of great danger in 2015. They want to sow seeds of doubt in the minds of former Liberal Democrat voters who now back Labour – and to cajole UKIP supporters into returning home to the Tories. The more the Conservatives can terrify voters into fearing a Miliband-led government, the closer they will come to achieving both objectives.

By the same token, Labour's main political (as distinct from organisational) challenge is to reassure both groups of voters. At other times, generating excitement might be a more attractive strategy, but, in these austere times, there are few opportunities to generate a positive buzz by promising to spend extra money on popular causes. Before persuading voters that better times are around the corner, the party needs to reassure them that there are no fresh horrors on the road ahead. The next election will be more about avoiding purgatory than entering paradise.

Getting the policy programme right is vital. Without the right measures, any party will deservedly be trashed during the election campaign. But policies are not enough. The judgements that swing voters make are about the brand image of each party and the perceived character of each leader. Are they up to the job? Are they on my side? Will they keep their promises? Can I trust them not to screw up the economy? Political scientists call these 'valence' factors. Labour's key task of providing reassurance is a classic valence project.

How does Labour currently stand? Fresh YouGov research for Progress suggests a mixed picture at best. When YouGov recently asked people a 'forced choice' question – would they prefer a Labour government led by Ed Miliband or a Conservative government led by David Cameron – the two options are level pegging: Labour 41 per cent, Conservative 40 per cent. Not only is this gap far narrower than Labour's normal

voting intention lead, it compares unfavourably with past oppositions. In March 2008, the same point in the last parliament, a Cameron-led Tory government was preferred to a Gordon Brown-led Labour government by 12 points, 47-35 per cent. In the general election two years later, the Conservatives secured a seven-point lead over Labour and failed to win an outright majority. In December 1996, less than six months before the 1997 election, a Blair-led Labour government was preferred over a John Major-led Tory government by as much as 35 points (60-25 per cent). Labour did, of course, win by a landslide, but the gap in votes was just 13 per cent.

One reason why the Tories do so much better on the 'forced choice' question just now compared with normal voting intention is that most UKIP supporters would prefer a Conservative to a Labour government. This suggests that the Tories may well be able to squeeze UKIP's support during the 2015 general election campaign.

Part of Labour's problem is that, while millions of voters think its heart is in the right place, they do not think it can run Britain properly. It is an old problem – in 1992, the election came down to the rival images of a 'nice but dim' Labour party versus a 'mean but smart' Conservative government. Given that choice, mean but smart trumped nice but dim. Naturally, every party wishes to be seen as nice and smart. Hence Labour's need, decade after decade, to demonstrate its competence – and

TABLE 8: EXCLUSIVE POLL: How the parties are seen

- a) Which of these statements comes closest to your view of the LABOUR party?
 b) Which of these statements comes closest to your view of the CONSERVATIVE party?
 c) And which of these statements comes closest to your view of the LIBERAL DEMOCRAT party?

	(a) Lab %	(b) Con %	(c) Lib Dem %
It's 'nice and smart' – its heart is in the right place and it has what it takes to get what it wants done in government	19	15	6
It's 'nice but dim' – its heart is in the right place and it does NOT have what it takes to get what it wants done in government	31	14	41
It's 'mean but smart' – its heart is NOT in the right place but it DOES have what it takes to get what it wants done in government	5	18	4
It's 'mean and dim' – its heart is NOT in the right place and also it does NOT have what it takes to get what it wants done in government	30	39	32
Not sure	16	14	17
Positives			
Total nice	50	29	47
Total smart	24	33	10
Negatives			
Total mean	35	57	36
Total dim	61	53	73

Source: YouGov; sample 3,934; fieldwork 19-27 February 2013

TABLE 9: EXCLUSIVE POLL: What the public expects from a majority Labour or Tory government

a) If LABOUR win a clear majority at the next election, do you think that, in general, they will or will not ...	(a) Labour			(b) Conservatives		
	Will %	Will not %	Net will	Will %	Will not %	Net will
Be on the side of people like you?	43	38	5	28	55	-27
Ensure that public services such as health, education and the police provide good value for money?	41	36	5	30	49	-19
Have a good understanding of the problems Britain faces?	40	42	-2	37	51	-14
Ensure that welfare benefits and social support go to those who really need it?	37	40	-3	31	48	-17
Govern Britain in the interests of people as a whole, not just their friends and allies ... in the trade unions (Labour) / among the rich (Conservatives)?	36	40	-4	23	57	-34
Protect those British traditions that are worth keeping?	33	40	-7	36	41	-5
Take the right decisions to help Britain's economy recover?	32	41	-9	32	44	-12
Have the courage, when necessary, to take tough and unpopular decisions?	32	42	-10	54	28	26
Defend the interests of the British people on issues such as Europe and immigration?	28	42	-14	33	43	-10
Learn from, and avoid, the mistakes they have made in the past?	31	46	-15	27	52	-25
Have a team of ministers who are up to the job of running the country?	26	43	-17	25	49	-24
Keep their promises?	21	47	-26	14	60	-46

Source: YouGov; sample 1,727; fieldwork 3-4 March 2013

▶ the Conservative party's regular attempts to shed its 'nasty party' image. YouGov's polling for Progress (see Table 8 on the previous page) shows how far they (and the Liberal Democrats) have succeeded.

In truth, none of the party leaders can be wholly satisfied. No party commands clear popular respect. This is one reason why smaller parties have been picking up extra support in recent times – not just UKIP but, sporadically, Respect and the Greens. The good news for Labour is that, by 50-35 per cent, voters regard Labour as 'nice' – but by a larger, 61-24 per cent, margin, 'dim'. Most people consider the Tories both 'mean and dim'; but more people regard the Tories as 'smart' than say the same about Labour.

To explore these broad images further, we asked people to consider what they expected to happen if (a) Labour won the next election outright, and (b) if the Conservatives won outright. We asked about a mixture of character issues and policy issues (see Table 9).

Those figures contain one piece of good news for Labour, but three pieces of bad news. The good news is that Labour beats the Conservatives on nine of the 12 measures. One is particularly significant. The charge that Labour is in hock to the trade unions has far less power than the charge that the Conservatives favour the rich.

Now for the bad news:

- Given the unpopularity of the government, and Labour's overall voting intention lead, one would expect Labour to be well ahead on most measures.

But on three the lead is uncomfortably small: the economy, learning from past mistakes, and having people who are up to the job of running Britain.

- In as far as Labour's figures look good, this is because so many people think badly of the Tories, rather than because of wide public enthusiasm for Labour. No opposition could be happy with the fact that, when the economy is flatlining, just one person in three thinks it would take the right decisions to secure greater prosperity. On just two measures do the optimists about Labour's prospective performance outnumber the pessimists, and then by only a modest five points: being 'on the side of people like you' (43-38 per cent) and delivering good value services (41-36 per cent). On all other measures more people think a Labour government would fail rather than succeed.

There is one issue on which the Conservatives hold a large lead, and it could be decisive in a tough election campaign. By two to one, voters think the Tories have the courage to take tough and unpopular decisions. By three to two, voters think Labour lacks that courage. Once again, this echoes what happened in 1992, and Labour's continuing vulnerability to the charge that it is 'nice but dim'. For a party whose greatest campaigning challenge is to appear reassuring, this should be profoundly troubling.

On one issue – standing up for Britain's interests on Europe and immigration – the Conservatives have a smaller lead than Labour might have feared.



Cameron's 'brand' has been severely tarnished

TABLE 10: How the public views the party leaders

Which of these apply to [leader]?	Ed Miliband			David Cameron		
	Jan 2011	April 2013	Change	Jan 2011	April 2013	Change
	%	%		%	%	
In touch with ordinary people	24	26	+2	11	7	-4
Honest	19	19	0	17	14	-3
Sticks to what he believes in	17	19	+2	26	25	-1
Decisive	10	10	0	27	15	-12
Strong	10	6	-4	23	15	-8
Charismatic	7	6	-1	30	18	-12
A natural leader	6	6	0	22	14	-8
Good in a crisis	5	4	-1	13	13	0
Average	12	12	0	21	15	-6
None of these	41	46	4	36	45	9
Don't know	23	13	-10	7	7	0

Source: YouGov surveys; fieldwork 16-17 January 2011, 28-29 April 2013

Pessimists outnumber optimists with regard to both parties, Labour by 14 points and the Tories by 10. But once again, one needs to remember the fact that Labour has a significant overall voting intention lead; so for the Tories to be ahead on any issue, however narrowly, should cheer Cameron and worry Miliband.

This brings us to the way voters view the party leaders themselves. YouGov regularly tracks their reputations by asking which of eight attributes apply to each. Table 10 compares the figures for Miliband and Cameron for January 2011, after both had established themselves in their current positions, with this March.

It is clear that the Cameron 'brand' has been tarnished over the past two years. He is seen as far less decisive and charismatic than he was after his first eight months as prime minister. The number who thought he was in touch with ordinary people was already low in January 2011, at 11 per cent. It is now a negligible seven per cent. Even Conservative voters are sceptical: just 22 per cent of them credit Cameron with being in touch. Miliband's attacks on Cameron, including the exchanges at prime minister's questions, that Labour's leader has won increasingly often, have plainly had a significant impact.

However, Cameron's decline has not been matched by any improvement in the Miliband 'brand'. In January 2011, his low ratings could be attributed to the fact that he had been leader for just over three months and millions of voters had not yet made up their mind about him. Only 36 per cent credited him with any positive attributes. More than two years later, that figure has crept up to 41 per cent. The 'don't knows' are down, but the number saying he lacks any of them is up. His average score is unchanged on just 12 per cent. Overall, the fact that Miliband has closed the gap with Cameron has everything to do with the prime minister's mounting unpopularity (with his average score down from 21 per cent to 15 per cent) and nothing to do with Miliband's own appeal.

This analysis has shown how high the mountain is that Labour must climb in order to win the next general election outright. It does not

show that the peak is beyond reach. To scale it, Labour must do six things (including the three tasks identified earlier):

- Hold on to the great majority of the voters who have switched from the Liberal Democrats since 2010;
- Convince voters that the Conservatives deserve to shoulder more blame than Labour for Britain's economic woes;
- Assure voters that it has learned from the mistakes it made last time;
- Reassure Tories who have defected to UKIP that they have little to fear from a Labour government – and so need not be driven by fear to return to the Conservatives;
- Win the 'ground war', with better information than the Conservatives about individual voters, more effective ways of communicating with Labour's actual and potential supporters, and more successful ways of ensuring that they actually turn out to vote;
- And, finally, Miliband must convince many more voters that he would be a competent prime minister who is able to take tough decisions.

If the party achieves those objectives, it will win the next election. If it can achieve some but not all of them, expect a close result.

Meanwhile, the central fact remains that no successful opposition in the past 50 years has gone on to regain power with such a weak image and without achieving much bigger voting-intention leads at some point in the parliament. Do these historic comparisons matter? Perhaps the fact of the coalition has changed the terms of trade, and rendered past comparisons irrelevant. Certainly a slump in Liberal Democrat support and a surge in UKIP's vote could both help Labour and damage the Conservatives.

However, it would be a remarkable achievement for Miliband to defy history and lead Labour to outright victory with an overall majority in the new House of Commons. Were he to do it, he would deserve enormous credit.

There is another possibility. Miliband might do in 2015 what Cameron did in 2010, and win enough support to become prime minister, but not enough to govern alone and unencumbered. Not only must Labour design a strategy to maximise its appeal over the next two years, it should give careful thought to what it would do should it end up as the largest party but short of an overall majority. ■

Peter Kellner is president of YouGov