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Election coverage: sweet victory or a new low for UK press?

May 9, 2015 3.45pm BST



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Morning after: how the nationals covered the election. Paperboy

So that's that, then. The pollsters got it **wildly wrong** and the UK did not wake up on Friday to endless debates about coalitions, minority governments and who would deal with whom. Instead a startled "national" press rushed out **early editions** which either greeted the Conservative victory with smug, euphoric glee (The Daily Mail and The Sun) or stunned resignation at the prospect of the bleak years ahead (the Daily Mirror and The Guardian).

Pretty much every serious political commentator had predicted days, may be even weeks of manoeuvring, right up until the exit poll landed moments after the polls closed at 10pm. Very quickly – and very eloquently – some journalists turned to analyse the unexpected.

In The Guardian online **Rafael Behr** coolly analysed the scale of the catastrophe that had befallen Labour which extended far beyond Miliband's difficulty in performing with easy aplomb in front of a camera. In The Independent, meanwhile, **Rosie Millard** reflected on a "brutal" night resulting in an SNP "tsunami" and the destruction of the Liberal Democrats.

By Friday lunchtime the online editions of all the major titles were straining to adequately cover the continuing fall-out from what the Daily Mail accurately described as an incredible night of political drama.

Balls was out, Clegg had quit and Farage had failed in South Thanet. Then Miliband was gone and Cameron – enjoying his "sweetest victory" – was on his way to see the Queen. The Daily Mail was erupting with schadenfruede and triumphalism.

Character assassination

This was a sweet victory for the Daily Mail and The Sun which will undoubtedly and repeatedly tell us that it was them wot won it. And this is very bad news for those who us who are appalled by the character assassinations endured by Ed Miliband at the hands of the Tory press.

Cameron's victory will embolden these titles to resort to such tactics again. The Sun will claim this victory as its own and the sadly iconic image of Miliband eating a bacon sandwich will be as much a feature of future election coverage as the Neil Kinnock "light bulb" image of 1992, when **The Sun** asked the last person leaving Britain to "please turn out the lights".

Indeed, for seasoned critics of The Sun and Daily Mail, the vindictive lies and slurs directed at Miliband during the final week of campaigning represented another occasion for them to lament a new low. After the wet bank holiday Monday and the two-day diversion of the royal baby, Wednesday saw the gloves well and truly off as far as the right wing press were concerned.

Headlines such those above drew widespread criticism and not solely from the traditional left-wing quarters. Having seen the papers in advance, Andrew Neil, former editor of the Sunday Times and now presenter of the BBC's Daily Politics, tweeted:



Mail in excelsis. Daily Mail



Singing from the same songsheet.



Some saw a “whiff” of anti-Semitism on the front page of Wednesday’s Sun. In the Guardian, Keith Kahn Harris wrote that Miliband could be the first Jewish-born prime minister since Disraeli and that:

Damning Miliband with porcine satire seems – like the Daily Mail’s exposé of his ‘Britain-hating’ Jewish émigré father – to radiate some nasty connotations.

No balance

Aside from the impressionistic, research conducted by the Media Standards Trust found that The Sun had gone after Miliband in a more ferocious manner than it went after Neil Kinnock in 1992. In its analysis of leader columns from March 26 to May 3 this year their research found that 95% of the leader columns in the paper were anti-Labour compared with 79% in 1992.

Over the whole the period the trust examined, The Sun ran 102 leader articles considered to be anti-Labour compared with just four that were critical of the Conservatives. Similarly, Loughborough University’s Communication Research Centre found that across the press, over the whole of the campaign, Labour experienced “extensive negative coverage”.

That we have such a Conservative (and conservative) newspaper industry is not news. But it doesn’t harm to be reminded of that fact now and gain. As Dominic Ponsford and William Turvill said in the Press Gazette, in this election the UK daily newspaper market backed the Tories over Labour by a margin of five to one. In terms of the Sundays, five out the 11 main newspapers backed the Tories working out at 66% of all the titles.

So Cameron is back in Downing Street and Miliband, the would-be scourge of Murdoch and the only party leader in generations to openly challenge the press barons, finds his career (for the time being) in tatters. And, whether or not we believe that newspapers influence their readers we are unlikely to see his successor behave anywhere near as pugnaciously.

It’s my guess that the analysts and advisers to the new leader will point to the sustained and co-ordinated negative coverage that Miliband has received and reason that therein lies part of the reason

for his failure. It won't at all matter if the evidence doesn't support that theory.

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