

# **The mountain to climb: Labour's 2020 challenge**

**Andrew Harrop**

**May 2015**

Fabian Society  
61 Petty France  
London SW1H 9EU  
[www.fabians.org.uk](http://www.fabians.org.uk)

This paper, like all publications of the Fabian Society, represents not the collective views of the Society but only the views of the author. This publication may not be reproduced without express permission of the Fabian Society.

## **Key points**

- Labour will need to win at least 106 seats in 2020 to secure a majority, after taking account of the forthcoming boundary changes.
- The electoral swing required in marginal seats to win a majority will be over twice that which Labour needed for victory in 2015.
- This assumes a similar rate of progress in England/Wales and in Scotland; if Labour makes no gains in Scotland, the party would need to perform better in England and Wales than at any time since 1997.
- Around 4 out of 5 of the extra (net) votes Labour will need to gain in English and Welsh marginals will have to come direct from Conservative voters (in 2015 this figure was around 1 out of 5, because of the Lib Dem meltdown).
- ‘English Votes for English Laws’ no longer poses a separate challenge to Labour, over and above the task of winning a UK majority. It is actually slightly easier for Labour to win a majority of English seats than of UK seats.
- But an anti-Tory alliance led by Labour would find it harder to achieve a majority in England (under EVEL) than across the UK. An alliance of parties could achieve a UK majority by gaining 38 seats but would need to gain 71 seats for an English majority. This task would be easier if the Liberal Democrats were to stage a recovery in areas of England where Labour is weak.

## **5 political conclusions**

1. Labour needs to champion popular, big-tent politics to reach deep into middle England, revive support in Scotland and strengthen relationships with disillusioned voters in former heartlands.
2. The litmus test for Labour’s strategy is simple: can the party win over large numbers of people who voted Conservative and SNP in 2015?
3. In the debate on English devolution Labour can ignore party interest. It should seek reforms that reflect the national interest of England and of the UK.
4. The party needs to reflect with care on its approach to the Liberal Democrats. A Lib Dem revival in the South West is in Labour’s interests, but a comeback in Labour/Conservative marginals is not.
5. A hung parliament in 2020 could create very undesirable political and constitutional problems. This makes winning a Labour majority even more important; however an inconclusive outcome is likely and the party should start to consider the implications.

## An illustration of possible Labour 2020 target seats – before boundary changes (ordered by size of required electoral swing)<sup>1</sup>

	0 to 2.4%		2.5% to 4.9%		5% to 7.4%		7.5% to 9.9%		10% to 12.4%
1	Gower	21	Southampton Itchen	48	Norwich North	83	Aberdeen South	112	Filton & Bradley Stoke
2	Derby North	22	Keighley	49	Enfield Southgate	84	Carmarthen West & Pembrokeshire South	113	Stirling
3	Croydon Central	23	Warwickshire North	50	Stevenage	85	Camborne & Redruth	114	Midlothian
4	Vale of Clwyd	24	Carlisle	51	Cannock Chase	86	Battersea	115	Basingstoke
5	Bury North	25	Renfrewshire East	52	Morecambe & Lunesdale	87	Edinburgh South West	116	Bexleyheath & Crayford
6	Morley & Outwood	26	Leeds North West	53	Nuneaton	88	Redditch	117	Linlithgow & Falkirk East
7	Plymouth Sutton & Devonport	27	Halesowen & Rowley Regis	54	Dudley South	89	Gravesham	118	Kensington
8	Thurrock	28	Crewe & Nantwich	55	Finchley & Golders Green	90	Basildon South & Thurrock East	119	Rugby
9	Brighton Kemptown	29	Erewash	56	Worcester	91	Milton Keynes North	120	Ayr, Carrick & Cumnock
10	Bolton West	30	Hendon	57	South Ribble	92	Rutherglen & Hamilton West	121	Leicestershire North West
11	Weaver Vale	31	Ipswich	58	Rossendale & Darwen	93	Watford	122	Forest of Dean
12	Plymouth Moor View	32	Broxtowe	59	Dumfries & Galloway	94	Cleethorpes	123	Gillingham & Rainham
13	Bedford	33	Stroud	60	East Lothian	95	Ochil & South Perthshire	124	Derbyshire South
14	Lincoln	34	Northampton North	61	Swindon South	96	Clwyd West	125	Swindon North
15	Peterborough	35	Calder Valley	62	Preseli Pembrokeshire	97	Loughborough	126	Coatbridge, Chryston & Bellshill
16	Cardiff North	36	Blackpool North & Cleveleys	63	Pendle	98	Shrewsbury & Atcham	127	Burton
17	Sheffield Hallam	37	Pudsey	64	Paisley & Renfrewshire South	99	Paisley & Renfrewshire North	128	Monmouth
18	Corby	38	Amber Valley	65	Dover	100	Canterbury	129	Portsmouth North
19	Waveney	39	Sherwood	66	Reading East	101	Lanark & Hamilton East	130	Beverley & Holderness
20	Warrington South	40	Hastings & Rye	67	Scarborough & Whitby	102	Dunfermline & West Fife	131	St Albans
		41	Bristol North West	68	Warwick & Leamington	103	Kingswood	132	Glasgow North West
		42	Colne Valley	69	Aberconwy	104	Stafford	133	Wrekin, The
		43	High Peak	70	Crawley	105	Harlow	134	Dartford
		44	Edinburgh North & Leith	71	Vale of Glamorgan	106	Kirkcaldy & Cowdenbeath	135	Hornchurch & Upminster
		45	Harrow East	72	Arfon	107	Shipley	136	Putney
		46	Stockton South	73	Reading West	108	Chingford & Woodford Green	137	Staffordshire Moorlands
		47	Northampton South	74	Great Yarmouth	109	Edinburgh East	138	Uxbridge & Ruislip South
				75	Gloucester	110	Glasgow Central	139	Tamworth
				76	Carmarthen East & Dinefwr	111	Airdrie & Shotts	140	Welwyn Hatfield
				77	Thanet South			141	Glasgow South West
				78	Chipping Barnet			142	York Outer
				79	Stourbridge			143	Glasgow North East
				80	Brighton Pavilion			144	Glasgow East
				81	Elmet & Rothwell			145	Sittingbourne & Sheppey
				82	Milton Keynes South			146	Motherwell & Wishaw
								147	Dorset South
								148	Inverclyde

<sup>1</sup> A big thank you to Stephen Bush at The New Statesman for providing the data behind this table

## 1. The path to a majority

Labour's long road back to majority government lies through Harlow and Kircaldy. The Essex new town and Gordon Brown's former Fife bastion are Labour's 105<sup>th</sup> and 106<sup>th</sup> most winnable constituencies – and Fabian Society analysis shows the party must gain at least 106 seats to reach a majority. As things stand Labour has 232 MPs, 94 short of a majority. But that is before the scheduled boundary changes, which could reduce the notional number of Labour seats to 220 at the next general election – ie 106 fewer than the 326 seats needed for a majority of one.

Our estimate of 220 is derived from two independent assessments of the 2015 election results, re-calculated on the basis of the proposed 2013 boundary review constituencies. However for ease of comparison we have scaled-up these projections, to assume the new House of Commons retains 650 constituencies.<sup>2</sup> This estimate could be over-optimistic for Labour, as the new boundary review which will commence this December could prove even less favourable than the last one (particularly because it will be expected to equalise the number of electors on the basis of the new electoral roll, following the introduction of individual registration).<sup>3</sup> So 106 gains is the minimum that might be needed for victory, compared to the 68 that Labour needed for a majority this year.

And it gets worse, because when you look at electoral swing, the task of winning a majority will actually be more than twice as hard: to win the 106<sup>th</sup> target seat, Labour will need to achieve a swing of 9.5 percentage points; by contrast, in the 2015 election the swing required to gain the majority seat was just 4.6 points.

### Net seats Labour must win for a majority of 1 (after boundary changes)

	Uniform GB swing	Scottish recovery	Scottish stagnation
<b>Total seats required*</b>			
E&W seats	93	85	106
Scottish seats	13	21	0
<b>Required swing in marginal seats (ppts)</b>			
E&W seats	9.5	8.7	11.4
Scottish seats	9.5	11.5	0
<b>Implied UK vote share</b>	40	39	42

\* Assumes House of Commons of 650 MPs

Achieving a shift of around 9.5 percentage points in the pivotal marginal seats will almost certainly require a similar shift nationwide. That implies that Labour will need to earn around 40 per cent of the vote to win a majority of one, since it starts from a 2015 vote of 30.4 per cent. This is a remarkable reversal of electoral fortunes

<sup>2</sup> Estimates by Electoral Calculus and UK Polling Report

<sup>3</sup> Baston, L, [Electoral Collision Course?](#), Constitution Society, 2014

for Labour, which used to require fewer votes than the Conservatives to win a majority. In 2005 Labour won a 66 seat majority with 35 per cent of the vote, while now it may well need 40 per cent to have any majority at all. By contrast, after the boundary changes, the Conservatives will be able to retain their majority with around 36 per cent of the vote.

These calculations are not firm projections because they do not take the relative performance of the other parties into account. And they will obviously need revision once the boundary review is complete. But they give a sense of the mountain Labour has to climb. A recovery on this scale is achievable because it has been done before. Labour won a similar swing between 1992 and 1997, when the shift between the Conservatives and Labour was around 10 percentage points.

## **2. What about Scotland?**

So far this analysis has assumed that Labour is able to recover at the same pace in Scotland as in England and Wales. But that assumption could prove incorrect. If Scottish Labour staged no recovery at all, then all 106 seats would need to be won south of the border. That would mean achieving a swing of around 11½ percentage points in marginal seats to win constituencies like Burton. Translated into a national result, that would imply Labour would need to win around 42 per cent of the vote, something no party has achieved since 1997.

On the other hand, Labour might recover faster in Scotland than elsewhere, considering the party is starting from such a low base. If Labour could achieve a swing of around 11½ points in its Scottish target seats this would deliver 21 seats in Scotland, leaving 85 to be won in England and Wales. It would still be a very tall order, but a Labour victory would become possible with a swing in the decisive English marginals of under 9 per cent. Victory would require taking seats like Watford; and the required national share of the vote would be around 39 per cent. This is still a very big number, but slightly less daunting as a target.

## **3. Not so EVEL...**

Labour is now so weak in Scotland, that 'English Votes for English Laws' (EVEL) is no longer something the party needs to fear. In another extraordinary twist, Labour is now stronger in England than it is in the UK as a whole, in terms of its share of seats (39 per cent of English constituencies) or share of votes (32 per cent). This means that (on paper) it is now easier for Labour to achieve a majority in England and control English legislation than to form a majority UK government.

We estimate that Labour would enter the 2020 election defending a notional 195 seats out of 544 English seats (again, the calculations are based on the 2013 boundary review, but scaled to 650 seats). A majority of one would therefore require Labour to

gain 78 seats in England, which could be achieved on a swing of 8.9 percentage points in the relevant marginal constituencies. This compares to the 9.5 point swing needed to secure a UK majority.

#### 4. The declining role of smaller parties

Unlike in 2015, in English and Welsh marginal seats there will be few ‘low-hanging fruit’ in the shape of non-Conservative voters who can be squeezed. This year Labour was able to make progress against the Conservatives, outside Scotland, because it gained Lib Dem voters (despite everything else that went wrong, Labour won over twice as many ex-Lib Dems as the Tories did). But that was a one-off dividend arising from the coalition.

#### Majorities needed in Labour/Conservative marginal seats to win a majority – and available voters

	Required swing	2015 majority to overturn	2015 Lib Dem /Green votes	2015 UKIP votes
<b>England and Wales</b>				
<b>Scottish recovery</b>	8.7	8,400	4,400	6,900
<b>Uniform GB swing</b>	9.5	9,400	4,900	6,700
<b>Scottish stagnation</b>	11.4	11,400	4,600	7,900
<b>England</b>				
<b>EVEL majority</b>	8.9	9,000	5,100	7,400

Note: to account for local variation, each row reports the average votes for a cluster of 10 constituencies

In 2020 Labour will only be able to achieve a big swing in Tory marginals by winning over large numbers of (net) votes directly from the Conservatives. In part, that’s simply because the number of votes required is so great, but it is also because (unlike in 2015) there appear to be few opportunities to benefit from the misfortunes of other parties:

- **Liberal Democrats and Greens:** together the Lib Dems and Greens won only 12 per cent of the UK vote, and slightly less in most of the marginal seats Labour now needs to win. Lib Dems and Greens will therefore be too few in number to have a major effect on key seat results, relative to the size of current Tory majorities. Moreover squeezing significant numbers of voters from either party could prove challenging; if anything, Labour may struggle to restrict the combined Lib Dem/Green vote to its 2015 level, for example if there is a modest Lib Dem recovery.
- **UKIP:** UKIP may maintain its current strength; it may continue to grow; or it may implode. But whatever happens, it is hard to see Labour being a significant net beneficiary, relative to the Tories, since UKIP takes votes from both parties. For example, Labour could only expect to gain significant votes directly from

UKIP if the party self-destructs; but in this case, the Tories would probably benefit in a fairly similar way.

In each marginal seat, perhaps Labour will be able to gain 1,000 or so non-Tory votes (over any gains the Conservatives make themselves). But that means at least 4 out of 5 extra votes will need to come from a (net) shift from current Conservative voters. This is broadly the opposite of 2015, when around 1 in 5 of the (net) gain Labour needed for a majority had to come directly from Conservatives. It goes without saying that this has significant implications for the party's political strategy.

## 5. Plan B: governing in partnership

Labour can and must aim for a majority – in England and the UK. However, with such a huge mountain to climb, it needs some intermediate objectives too, even if they only feature in the party's private thinking. While a majority should be the target, Labour should also consider what it will take to deprive the Tories of power. Even this will be far harder than it might have been in 2015: after the boundary changes the notional Conservative majority will be around 52, so the Tories would need to lose 26 seats for there to be a hung parliament.

Labour will need to gain 53 seats to be able to govern in some sort of partnership with the SNP (and this would exclude any seats won from the Nationalists themselves). This implies achieving swings of a little over 5 percentage points in Conservative marginals and a national vote of around 36 per cent. The threshold for success is only marginally lower if you include the smaller left-leaning parties and the diminished rump of the Liberal Democrats: to assemble a UK majority with the support of all the smaller parties of the centre and left, Labour would probably need a higher vote share than the 35 per cent the party achieved in 2005.

### Net seats a Labour-led alliance must win for a majority of 1 (after boundary changes)

	United Kingdom			England	
	Labour/ SNP	Labour/ SNP/small parties	Labour/ SNP/small parties/LDs	No LD recovery	LD recovery
<b>Labour seats required</b>	53	46	38	71 (Eng)	55 (Eng)
<b>Labour swing in marginal seats (ppts)</b>	5.3	5.1	4.8	7.5 (Eng)	6.5 (Eng)
<b>Implied UK vote share for Labour</b>	36	36	35-36	38	37

Small parties: Green, PC, SDLP

And it would be harder still to win a majority in England, under EVEL: an anti-Conservative alliance would need to gain 71 seats. For Labour to win these seats alone, without any gains by the Liberal Democrats, it would require a swing in the key English Lab/Con marginals of 7.5 percentage points. The task would be easier if the Lib Dems and Labour were each able to make gains in England, in seats where

they face the Conservatives. If both parties achieved a swing of around 6.5 points this would be sufficient for them to achieve a combined majority in England (Labour would gain around 55 seats; and the Lib Dems 16). This suggests that it is strongly in Labour's interests for the Lib Dems to stage a recovery in those parts of England where Labour is not competitive, such as the South West.

Looking at these numbers, it is clear that the task of eliminating the Conservative majority could be relatively achievable, even after the boundary changes; while the task of winning a UK Labour majority will be very difficult. This means there is a good chance that no party will win a UK majority in 2020: Labour will need to give careful thought to the many possible scenarios arising from a future hung parliament. EVEL hugely complicates the picture, because it creates the possibility of an anti-Conservative alliance being able to secure a UK majority but not an English majority. Indeed it is possible to imagine an outcome where neither large party is capable of securing majorities for both England and for the UK.

## **6. Political conclusions for Labour**

This analysis leads to five key political conclusions for the Labour Party:

1. Labour needs to champion popular, big-tent politics to reach deep into middle England, revive support in Scotland and strengthens relationships with disillusioned voters in former heartlands.
2. The litmus test for Labour's strategy is simple: can the party win over large numbers of people who voted Conservative and SNP in 2015?
3. In the debate on English devolution Labour can ignore party interest. It should seek reforms that reflect the national interest of England and of the UK.
4. The party needs to reflect with care on its approach to the Liberal Democrats. A Lib Dem revival in the South West is in Labour's interests, but a come-back in Labour/Conservative marginals is not.
5. A hung parliament in 2020 could create very undesirable political and constitutional problems. This makes winning a Labour majority even more important; however an inconclusive outcome is likely and the party should start to consider the implications.