

Australian Political Exchange Council

United Kingdom Study Tour

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Executive Summary

The aim of the study tour was to gain a better understanding of the United Kingdom's political structures and to deepen the contacts and connections between our two political systems.

Specifically I wanted to look at a number of distinct areas of interest within United Kingdom (UK) politics these were:

- Policy development, specifically the process of policy development that is inclusive of branch membership;
- Party Membership, recruitment and retention;
- Scottish devolution and the current debate of Scottish independence;
- Think tanks and other organisations that are close to Parties but not formally part of Party structures or rules, these include movements such as Blue Labor and the Christian Socialist movement;
- Anti-smoking policy and specifically the issue of plain packaging within the UK;
- Acting for long term goals within UK politics; and
- British Media and the Lord Leveson Inquiry.

I also took the opportunity to travel to the city of Corby to see firsthand the preparations underway for the vital by-election in that may further destabilise the current governing coalition. Through this process I travelled to Glasgow, Edinburgh, Corby and London, interviewing and meeting with representatives of political parties,

think tanks, trade unions and other organisations. This report is organised around some of the major themes of the study tour. I wish to express my gratitude both to the Australian Political Exchange Council and to the individuals from the UK that took the time to sit down and thoughtfully answer my questions so that I might better understand the UK's political system.

UK Political Overview

The UK is governed by a coalition government lead by Prime Minister David Cameron of the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democratic Party. This is as a result of the 2010 election that provided no clear majority for any one Party. Current opinion polls are not favourable for the Cameron government with a majority of polls giving a clear lead to the opposition Labour Party. In some polls the Labour Party has a double digit lead that would easily give the party an absolute majority in the Parliament. This polling puts pressure on the Prime Minister and on the structure of the fragile coalition. Already a number of Conservative MPs have put forward the Mayor of London, Boris Johnston, as an alternative to Prime Minister Cameron. Splits and divisions between the LDP and the Conservatives have been made more public over the issue of House of Lords reform with Prime Minister Cameron being unable to deliver the promised votes to deliver a 100 per cent proportionally elected House of Lords to replace the current appointed House. Further, by-election losses by the government such as in the upcoming Corby by-election may put further pressure on the coalition relationship.

The Liberal Democratic Party is suffering badly in the polls as it is seen as giving up its values and policies for the benefit of the stronger Conservative Party. The Liberal Democrats emanated from a merger of the Liberal Party and a centrist Labour split off party, the Social Democratic Party. For those from the Social Democratic Party the coalition with the Tories is a particular problem and there are already

groups within the Liberal Democrats arguing for a Lib-Lab coalition.

The UK economy has not performed well before or since the 2010 election. The UK economy has once again entered a recession and the 'double dip' is widely blamed on the Cameron Government's policy of budget austerity and a goal of returning to surplus.

The record deficits leave the UK Government with the unenviable job of either increasing budget austerity measures and further slowing growth or postponing the promised deficit reduction timetable that had been promised by the Government and especially the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne.

The UK election is not due until June 2015 which allows the incumbent government some time to re-establish their economic credentials and deliver growth in the UK economy.

While there is pressure on the coalition there is little incentive for the either party to bring down the Government while both parties are in a position that is weaker than the 2010 election.

Party Recruitment, Involvement and Policy Development.

The Australian Labor Party is looking carefully at the way in which it engages with members to campaign, develop policy and sustain the activity of the Party. With this challenge in mind I sought to speak to the Labour Party in the UK about its activities to engage with membership and maintain the health of its Party.

I spoke extensively with members of the UK Labour Party about the way in which they engage with their membership to keep their base active and engaged. The Labour Party has, like the Australian Labor Party, recognised the challenge of falling membership and has recently published a new guide titled “Refounding Labour”, which recognises the challenge of rebuilding the Party, equal to the struggle to found the Party in the late 19th Century.

A Labour Party Organiser talked me through the document and the associated rule changes as well as the technical online support for Labour Party constituency bodies.

These include new ways of organising around community based campaigns, re-engagement with the union movement, new subscription rates and training and development. This was especially revolved around organisers ensuring that the CLP or constituency Labour Party was an active and healthy organisation that held events, discussed policy and made a powerful campaigning team. The document “Refounding Labour” and the associated discussions around the initiatives will be valuable in the discussions for the ALP future.

A Policy Development Unit in the UK Labour headquarters, talked to me about the three stages of policy development that the Party goes through to develop policy through the electoral cycle. The five year electoral cycle gives the Party more time to spend in the policy development stage than in Australia.

I also spoke to another officer about the structure of the Labour Party headquarters and the role of the Labour Party's International division. The UK Labour Party and the Australian Labour Party are both members of the Socialist International (SI). The UK Labour Party with the support of the Australian Labor Party to see changes within the SI. The International office also has a role in the place of the UK Labour Party within the European Parliament and more concrete and direct cooperation and liaison with neighbouring Social Democratic Parties in Europe.

I also discussed the working functions of the UK Parliament at Westminster and the modern Portcullis office that is an annex to the historical buildings. As well as seeing the chambers and historical halls, we also saw the modern rooms used for committees and offices – the working parts of the modern Parliament.

In our discussions, we contrasted the UK practice of a once a week (only when sitting) questioning for one hour of the Prime Minister in the parliamentary chamber, with the Australian Federal and State practices of making the Prime Minister and Premiers open to questions each day of the Parliamentary sitting, making them face questions four times as often as the UK. The UK process, while making the UK Prime Minister less accessible to open questioning, means that the Prime Minister can spend more time directly governing the country than facing Parliament. While more used to the openly robust structures of questioning in Australian Parliaments I can see some benefits to the UK system.

I also gained an insight into the Labour Party's online campaign and Party management tools. The UK's voting system and the ability of the Party's volunteer workers to ensure that known supporters actually turn up to vote being a vital part of any UK campaign.

Party officials emphasized that real community connection and volunteer work in local communities were very much the key to political success.

In Scotland I spoke with a Labour party member involved with the campaign review process that the Scottish Labour had undertaken into their recent campaign at the Scottish Parliamentary elections.

The process of Branch member participation, forums and some of the suggestions were similar to the process and results of the Queensland Labor Party's review into the recent elections. Although many of the challenges that the Scottish Labour Party faces are similar to the challenges the Queensland Labor Party faces, the approaches to the problems had some different answers and the exchange of views over the review process and recommendations was very worthwhile.

Non Party Organisations

I came to the UK with a particular interest in the growing force of non-Party organisations that work directly with or attempt to influence Party members or Party structures. This area is assisted by the growing political influence of online organisations, blogs and email newsletters. This allows new political ideas to be presented to the membership of parties, the media, politicians and the public at low cost, potentially allowing these outside of political Party structure organisations to be very influential.

I had followed with interest the Blue Labour organisation, and have done considerable reading of its recent web e-books that helped define the movement. The essence of the Blue Labour movement is to reconnect the Labour Party with its traditional elements of working class tradition and communitarian cooperative values that are traditionally English or British. I spoke with a person associated with of BlueLabour.org at the British Library about the movement. The Blue Labour movement, or associated people, have been influential in shaping the policy development process in the Labour Party as well as opening up discussion on the identity of the Party.

Progress is a think tank and magazine that is strongly identified with the Blair New Labour movement and its new interpretation of centrist Labor politics. I spoke with officers of the organization. They both spoke to me about the active role that Progress has in publishing their magazine, *Progress Online* and holding active events. Progress is also active in advocating for Labour candidates including at the recent UK Labour Leadership ballot.

I meet with a member of the Christian Socialists, an organisation that does have official status within the Labour Party. It is a directly Christian organisation that takes the social teachings of the Christian churches and calls upon Christians to have an active role within shaping the society through a formal role in politics.

I talked to a member of the Fabian Society, which is a socialist society

of long standing that continues to have a place within the Labour Party forming ideas, events and policy.

Sarah Vero of the Citizens United- Living Wage Campaign talked me through the history and formation of Citizens United and its campaigns. From humble starts in East London the organisation is growing as it organises communities in the greatest need. It has a community organiser model where the community itself decides the campaigns the local community will focus on. Recent election forums held by the group were attended by all the Party leaders during the 2010 election.

Geoff Mawdsley of Reform Scotland has a background within the Scottish Conservative Party. His think tank puts market and centrist ideas on the agenda working with a variety of other organisations and parties.

Director of the organisation Unions21, spoke with me about the organisation's role advocating within and researching for the union movement to better prepare unions for industrial and societal change. Unions21 recently conducted quantitative research on the views of UK workers towards their workplaces and the unions that could represent them.

Scottish Devolution and the Scottish Independence Referendum

The Scottish National Party (SNP) has, for the second successive election, formed government in the Scottish Parliament created by the Blair Government's reforms to devolve power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

SNP policy is to have an independence referendum and having won for the second time, this time with an absolute majority rather than just being the largest Party, the SNP has announced that it will hold a referendum. The UK Conservative Party Prime Minister acceded to the SNP by setting a date for the Scotland wide referendum in autumn 2014. The exact nature of the question and structure of the referendum is yet to be finalised.

The last referendum on the issue held in 1979 saw a majority of Scottish voters vote in favour of the referendum but the referendum was lost because of the need for at least 40 per cent of Scottish voters (as a whole, rather than as a percentage of participants) to vote for change.

An alternative to independence has been an expansion of the powers of the Scottish Parliament's powers. These expansion of devolution known as 'Devo Plus', 'Devo Light' or 'Devo Max' are also being discussed as an alternative to Scottish independence.

The Labour Party, and in particular the Scottish Labour Party branch, has successfully created devolution, while the Scottish Parliament opposed the independence of Scotland.

Much debate in Scotland has occurred over the details of an independent Scotland. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) opposes the independence of Scotland but is supportive of devolution. The LDP has traditionally had a presence within Scotland but lost many representatives at the last Scottish Parliamentary elections to the SNP and is widely expected after their forming a coalition

with the Conservative Party in Westminster to struggle with retaining seats in Scotland with pressure both from the SNP and the Labour Party.

The Conservative Party is also opposed to the independence of Scotland and supports a more unity structure of the United Kingdom. The Party would not be actively advocating further devolution but this is balanced by a need to retain a coalition with the Liberal Democrats in Westminster.

The Scottish Conservative Party has never won a majority of Scottish seats and the Party's antecedent Party, the Scottish Unionist Party, last won a majority in 1955 and has been in decline since. This means that paradoxically, the Conservative Party, while opposing the independence of Scotland, would be the big electoral beneficiary of a Westminster elected without Scottish MPs.

The Labour Party would find it difficult to form a UK government without the benefit of the 41 seats that it holds compared to the LDP's 11 seats and SNP's six. The Conservative Party holds just one seat in Scotland. With the LDP decision to form government with the Conservative Party, the LDP is expected to lose seats in Scotland and the SNP and Labour would be expected to gain ground, further eroding the coalition's presence in Scotland.

Most observers see that the SNP would, after seeing the electoral damage done to the LDP, be very unlikely to support any form of coalition containing the Conservative Party. This would effectively mean a 50 seat loss to the Labour Party if Scotland were to become independent and have no presence in Westminster.

This issue may be one that profoundly changes the electoral contest in the United Kingdom as the UK Labour Party would be quite different in outlook to a Welsh-English Labour if Scotland were to become independent.

During my time in Edinburgh and Glasgow I was able to speak with a

variety of people from across the political spectrum about the challenges Scotland faces both economically and socially, however, in all discussions the question of a resolution about independence or an acceptance of a model of further devolution tend to block the full and frank discussion of Scotland's economic and social needs either in Scotland or at Westminster. It remains to be seen the resolution of Scotland's place either as an independent nation in Europe or as a devolved entity within the United Kingdom.

I also had the special opportunity to participate with Labour campaigners going door-to-door speaking with ordinary Scottish voters about their ideas about the coming referendum speaking to them on their reasons for their views.

To discuss the independence and devolution issues in Scotland I interviewed, Geoff Mawdsley Director of the Edinburgh based think tank Reform Scotland, the Edinburgh Branch, Fabian Society, Trade Union Unison and Toby Fenwick, Liberal Democratic Party Associated think tank Center Forum.

London Olympics 2012

The 2012 Olympics occurred while I was in the UK, however I was unable to attend any sporting events. This major international event was successfully staged, though not without some debate over issues such as the contracted security company being unable to provide the required security and the UK government having to step in to provide military security at Olympic venues. United States presidential candidate Mitt Romney's criticism of the Olympics, seem to galvanise support of the British Press around the games and the stunning success of British athletes ensured that the games will be regarded as a success in the UK.

I spoke with two workers behind the scenes of the Olympics. Kate Moore and Collin Adams who explained their roles in the Olympics and the processes of the major bureaucracy that organises the games. The planning for the games means that a core of the team has been

working from their Docklands headquarters for some years with several ramp-up phases for staffing. I was told that many of those in senior positions were Australians with experience from the Sydney or Beijing Olympics and that the Sydney models of administration were a big part of the planning processes for the Olympics.

One major issue that did occur during the Olympics were the number of tickets reserved for VIPs of the Olympic 'family' that were not used even at some sold out events. This issue was quickly addressed with new less conservative calculations made for the number of tickets required for different events for such VIPs.

Plain Packaging of Tobacco Products

The issue of plain packaging of tobacco products was one that was relevant as the legislation for plain packaging regulation had recently been passed in Australia and the debate was closely followed by the UK media, health campaigners, the tobacco industry and UK politicians.

While I was in the UK, the tobacco companies' High Court action against the Australian legislation was decided in the Government's favour, clearing the legislation to go forward in Australia. This was reported in the UK media. Previously the UK Health Secretary had stated that he would follow the Australian process closely and consider introducing similar legislation to the UK. In April, the Health Secretary launched a consultation process on the idea of plain packaging. In response the tobacco companies had encouraged the campaign based around the web site of the smokers' lobby group Foresthandsoffourpacks.com collecting 235,000 signatures against the campaign. Tobacco companies make the claim that plain packaging would encourage illegal tobacco sales as packaging would be easier to copy. They further say that the campaign won't reduce smoking rates and that packaging doesn't encourage children to smoke. Angela Harbutt of the web site agreed to meet with me but unfortunately clashing timetables meant we were unable to meet to

discuss the issue.

I did have the opportunity to meet with Martin Dockerell, the Director of Policy and Research at Action on Health and Smoking (AHS), a lobby group against smoking. Martin spoke to me about the role of the Australian Health Minister Nicola Roxon promoting plain packaging at Commonwealth health ministers' forums, and that the anti-smoking organisations in the UK worked closely with their counterparts in Australia on policy, research and ideas.

The current Health Secretary had made a strong push on the issue and has stated that if there was a ministerial change then the issue might once again be on the back burner in the UK. The organisation AHS tried to provide politicians with research about both the health benefits of anti-smoking measures such as plain packaging and the public's reaction to policy initiatives regarding smoking restrictions.

Research in the UK showed clearly that support for smoking restrictions in pubs, though dividing public opinion at the time of implementation, increased in support after implementation. Support especially increased amongst smokers. The organisation AHS provided research showing that plain packaging support increased significantly (around ten per cent) once a person had actually seen or handled a model of the recommended plain packaging so they better understood what the government was attempting to do.

This was an argument that plain packaging would like restrictions on smoking in pubs and clubs gain even stronger support after implementation. Since the government began actively campaigning to reduce smoking in the UK, smoking has, as in Australia, reduced considerably. The campaign now knows that the anti-smoking campaign will enter a new phase as smoking becomes a much reduced minority activity and they have launched the document "Beyond Smoking Kills" to look to this future phase of the anti-smoking campaign.

Corby By-elections

The resignation of Conservative MP Louise Mensch in the seat of Corby in Northamptonshire, north of London, presents a challenge to the Conservative Party. While it is only one seat, the delicate nature of the coalition based Government lead by the Conservatives means that even one Conservative seat lost changes the balance in the minds of the media and possibly their coalition partners the Liberal Democratic Party.

I travelled from London to Corby by train and I spoke with one of the local Labour campaign organisers, about the approach of Labour in the seat. Already Labour had moved from their temporary campaign office from the Labour club to offices near the main shopping precinct in Corby. Corby itself is a former iron ore mining town that had been the sight of a major expansion into a steel milling town with considerable migration from Scotland to work in the steel mill. While the mill has been considerably reduced in capacity the nature of the town itself still holds on to its Scottish nature. The local Labour organiser, explained that the campaign was working hard. The Labour Campaign wants to maximise their advantage in the town of Corby and improve the Labour vote in the smaller villages that make up the rural part of the electorate in East Northamptonshire. Labour's candidate Andrew Sawford was from the area with roots in the steel making of the area and had promised to be 'a full-time MP' working hard locally.

To emphasise the importance of the campaign I spoke with Toby Fenwick of the Liberal Democrat aligned think tank Center Forum who had recently written a blog post that media had referenced on the Corby by-election's national importance. The blog post argued that if the balance of MPs changed then the decision of the Liberal Democrats to form a coalition with the Conservatives could be revisited. While he stated that he felt the change 'unlikely' it certainly strengthens the hand of the Liberal Democrats within the coalition as

an alternative structure becomes more viable. The Conservative Party certainly wouldn't want many more candidates who had been hand chosen by the Prime Minister Cameron (such as Louise Mensch) to depart in the same way to make the possibility of a midterm change of government more viable.

If a recently released poll conducted by the major Conservative Donor Lord Ashcroft which showed a Labour leading the Conservatives by 15 per cent a swing of 18 per cent it would indeed be a very strong message to both members of the Coalition.