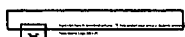


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From The Sunday Times
 February 28, 2010

Gordon Brown on course to win election

David Smith and Jonathan Oliver

GORDON BROWN is on course to remain prime minister after the general election as a new Sunday Times poll reveals that Labour is now just two points behind the Tories.

The YouGov survey places David Cameron's Conservatives on 37%, as against 35% for Labour — the closest gap between the parties in more than two years.

It means Labour is heading for a total of 317 seats, nine short of an overall majority, with the Tories languishing on a total of just 263 MPs. Such an outcome would mean Brown could stay in office and deny Cameron the keys to No 10.

The poll result presents the Conservative leader with one of the greatest challenges of his leadership today as he makes the keynote speech to his party's spring forum.

In an interview with The Sunday Times, Cameron defied his right-wing critics who believe the party's modernisation has gone too far. He said: "Some people say to me, 'Play things safe; try to win by default — the government is in a mess.' I say, 'No. This is the Conservative party that is offering radical change. I'm doubling up on change'."

With the expected May 6 election now just over two months away, Cameron will seek to reconnect with voters through a series of pledges, including a plan to restore discipline in schools. In an echo of the speech that won him the Tory leadership in 2005, he will address the Brighton conference without notes.

"This is very, very clear," he said. "I've made my choice. There is no going back. This election is about change and we will be offering change."

Cameron insisted he was unconcerned about the collapse in Tory support. "The polls move around a lot," he said. "The voters tell us that they want change. They want to know the Conservative party itself has changed."

The narrowing of the Conservative lead has been dramatic and rapid. Until January the Tories held close to a 10-point lead. But a week ago a Sunday Times YouGov poll put the gap at six points, suggesting a hung parliament, with the Tories still on course to become the largest party.

In the last election, in 2005, support for the parties generally held steady in the run-up to polling day. YouGov polling for The Sunday Times showed Labour leads of between two and five points from January through to the June election. Labour's margin of victory was three points.

In today's poll, Labour has risen two points on the previous week, from 33%, while the Conservatives have dropped two from 39%. The Liberal Democrats are unchanged on 17%.

The collapse in the Tory poll lead will put pressure on the pound in financial markets tomorrow by adding to fears that a hung parliament will mean insufficient action is taken to cut Britain's budget deficit.

The last time the gap between the two main parties came this close and the Tory support was so low was in autumn 2007. That was before Brown's honeymoon ended with his failure to call a snap general election. The Conservatives went on to peak in May 2008 with a 26-point lead.

Today's poll suggests recent claims about Brown's tantrums and his intimidation of staff may have actually helped him.

Just 28% of people believe the prime minister is a bully and 50% agree he has a "strong sense of right and wrong".

The survey disclosed growing concerns about Cameron's elite background and lack of empathy with ordinary families. Just 25% think that Cameron understands problems faced by "people like me", compared with 35% for Brown.

Furthermore, only 28% think the Conservative leader wants to do the best for "all groups in Britain", against 39% for the prime minister.

Peter Kellner, president of YouGov, the Sunday Times pollster, said that while individual polls could throw up unexpected shifts, the recent trend had been for a significant narrowing of the Tory lead.

"Our daily polls should be regarded a bit like the FTSE index: a 100-point rise or fall in a day might be a blip or a trend — often we can't tell for a few days," he said.

"I am confident the Tory lead is down this weekend but I can't promise whether the latest movement will be sustained, increased or reversed in the days ahead. One of the reasons for doing daily polls is to monitor these fluctuations."

The Tory lead of 6%, which was first reported in The Sunday Times, was maintained in YouGov's polls in The Sun last week. The increase in support for Labour on Thursday and Friday, as the latest Sunday Times poll was being conducted, came as figures showed a strengthening economic recovery.

Under the British parliamentary system, the prime minister remains in office after a general election until he either tenders his resignation or is defeated in a Commons no confidence vote.

If the election result leaves Labour just short of an overall majority, Brown is likely to battle on, with Labour running the country as a minority government. The party would seek to do deals with minor parties such as Ulster's Democratic Unionist party or, if necessary, Nick Clegg's Liberal Democrats, to get its legislation through parliament.

If repeated in a general election on the basis of a uniform swing in all constituencies, today's poll would leave Labour just nine seats short of the 326 needed for an overall majority in the new 650-seat House of Commons.

The Tories would be well behind on 263 seats, with the Liberal Democrats on 41. Kellner calculated that, even allowing for a larger swing to the Tories in marginal seats, where the party has spent millions of pounds on campaigning, the poll was consistent with Labour being by far the largest party.

He suggested that in such a scenario Labour might win 300 seats, with the Tories on 270 and the Lib Dems on 50.

Labour will believe it is benefiting from the upturn in the economy. For the first time in a YouGov poll since July 2007, before the financial crisis, people trust Labour more than the Tories to run the economy.

YouGov, which began polling after the 2001 election, has developed a reputation for accuracy. Its final Sunday Times poll in 2005 was precisely right, and it accurately predicted Boris Johnson's victory in the 2008 London mayoral election and the results of last year's Euro elections.

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