The election everyone lost

What infuriated me most about this general election was that never has so much been missed by so many.

By the day, my ire rose against the inanity of the press and the paucity of political debate. Even the BBC was woeful. And as media coverage shifts into a detailed scrutiny of winners and losers, few will acknowledge that this was an election without a big picture, without a vision, without a narrative that lifted anyone’s hearts.

Much of the press coverage looked no further than the playground politics of who's gang might join with whom to form the biggest posse in Parliament? It's the sort of tittle-tattle the media loves. But it turns the public off, big time.

So, before the next round of Trivial Pursuits starts, let's look at some of the bigger issues that, like it or not, will hit the new parliament.

The Dis-United Kingdom

Forget the SNP. The most certain way of breaking up Britain would be a Tory/UKIP government. Cameron's toxic back-benchers hate him, and will probably dump him soon (for certain if he loses). Obsessed with the SNP, the press completely ignored the threat to Britain from a resurgent 'Tea Party' Toryism, held at bay only by the terms of the last Coalition Agreement.

Freed of such constraints, the country would be fed to the rich. Tax cuts, service cuts, benefit cuts and a fire-sale of public assets would be the order of the day. In Scotland this, and this alone, would re-open the Independence question.

Where Scotland led, the Welsh would soon follow; and large parts of the North might want to join them too. Forget the delusions of an English Parliament. In such a liberalised free-for-all, huge parts of the country would not wish to remain in a kingdom rapidly being reduced from England to Poundland.

All the scare stories about 'the SNP threat' had little to do with nationalism or separatism. However many seats the SNP win, it will have been on a manifesto that was essentially 1945-Labour. This is what the Establishment is so afraid of. For them, it is the challenge to austerity, not the threat of Independence, that they want the new parliament to avoid.

The Labour campaign paddled in the anti-austerity direction, but fell into the trap of saying more about who it wouldn't talk to rather than 'what' it would welcome support for. This is the real choice we face. Ultimately, it is only an anti-austerity programme that will hold Britain together. The sooner we say this, and celebrate it, the better.

Ironically, it is what Cameron's "all in this together" actually means.

The Recovery that isn't

I do not want to minimise the extent to which public services/the NHS would face existential threats from a Tory government committed to doubling the current level of spending cuts. It's just that Britain's economic problems go much much deeper.

The Cameron/Osborne rallying cry of "Don't let Labour ruin our recovery" was so laughable it made me want to cry.
Britain is not in a recovery, at least not a sustainable one. We have created a cappuccino economy; where growth has become almost entirely dependant on 'shopping'.

It is actually embarrassing to see how far Britain's (declining) growth figures have come to rely upon the performance of 'shops, cafes, restaurants and hotels' within the UK service sector.

Britain has forgotten how to make (and mend) things, and therein lies the root of our problems.

The roots of confusion

Of course the banks were responsible for the current crisis, but this had been coming since the 1980's when Thatcher dumped manufacturing in favour of money. Blair And Brown maintained these delusions; trying to build growth on (expensive) off-balance sheet accounting, and lauding liberalised financial markets that were to 'float everyone's boats' on a rising tide of prosperity.

It worked, until everything started to sink. Only then did we grasp that the poor had been left with the leakiest boats, and the rich had sailed off-shore.

Over the last 35 years, the richest on the planet have cornered most of the world's 'liberalised' wealth. Corporations have usurped the rights of citizens; including the right to sue both people and parliaments, should their profits be threatened. Welcome to the world of corporate feudalism.

And into this maelstrom we have to throw a recognition that planet itself has got fed up with the global 'loot and pollute' economics. By land and sea and air and soil, the Earth is beginning to pass back the full costs of our avarice and short-termism. This is payback time, and the bills will either be huge or really huge.

Did any such realities surface during the election campaigns? You wish.
Today's global economic model is a fundamentally broken one. This election should have been about the choices of what must replace it. Rarely were the electorate offered more than chewing-gum repairs.

The next economics

Even if the economics that follows has to be about 'payback', it does not have to be about austerity, or devoid of hope. This is what today's politicians have yet to grasp.

An economics beyond 'consumption without consequences' will almost certainly be circular in character. But what does this mean to the kid on the street? Where do we fit within it? Let's begin with some outlines.

During the election campaign Elon Musk launched his domestic-scale battery storage system for home-produced electricity. It doesn't matter whether this turns out to be the ultimate answer or not. It is a game changer.

Marketed in conjunction with Wall Mart in the USA, and partnering with Lichtblick in Germany, Musk aims to turn 'storage' into the same mass market product that solar has become.

No less significant was the Fraunhofer Institute's launch of their 'plug and play' solar roofs, that can be installed in an hour and at a cost of around £1/watt.

Sod your everlasting subsidies to nuclear. Sod your obsessions with oil and fracking. Sod the market mechanisms that (expensively) prop up old energy cartels. This is already a past more likely to turn up in car boot sales than in successful economies.

The biggest changes in tomorrow's energy systems aren't even waiting for politicians. Soon, homes will have generation and storage systems that are as 'normal' as central heating. We will be heading away from today's centralised energy cartels and into a different era of energy democracies.

Add to this the technology partnerships across Germany (and in Manchester!) that are creating local power 'systems' (virtual power plants) to serve whole towns and cities, and you begin to get a picture of a different energy economics; one that will deliver massive increases in employment, energy security and interconnectedness.

Clean 'heat' networks will follow next. And within it all, communities will compete around reduced carbon footprints and lower consumption.

All in the soil

At a lower-tech level, we will also begin to grasp what Oxford researchers recently told us; that the best carbon capture and storage technologies already exist. They are called soil and trees.

Today's economics has taken us to the point at which we are losing some 30 football pitches of fertile soil per minute. Just pause and think about that.

The world subsidises soil-destroying agriculture more to feed agri-cartels than to feed the planet. The hidden costs come as flooding, lower resilience to storms and droughts, pollution of water courses and the contamination of foods. Across the planet, we are seeing the emergence of next-generation movements promoting more localised, sustainable food systems, along with a new global safety-net system of food security.

It can take 1,000 years to create just 1cm of fertile topsoil...and we can destroy it within a decade. The UN says that 40% of the world's agricultural topsoils are now seriously degraded. Focussing
on what we put back, what we nurture, and how we work with the planet's own ways of storing and using carbon, will be key elements in a new economics of interdependency.

Ah, but the debt, the debt. What about the debt?

This was the only political question that obsessed the commentariat during the election.

Labour found itself being chased with questions about when (within a single parliament) debts would be repaid? Whatever the answer, it was never soon enough. Yet no one questioned the absurdity of the question.

Was anyone insisting that the banks pay back all the Quantitive Easing they have had, within the next parliament? Or the public be limited to 5 year mortgages? We aren't even treated to a grown-up discussion about debt.

Labour's post-1945 social housing programme was based on 60 year repayment periods, through the Public Works Loans Board. Hospitals were built on similar lines. Yet today, the biggest millstone round the neck of the NHS is the plethora of PFI schemes that have first call on all NHS income. So where was the press clamour to dump the 40 year contracts, at rip-off rates of interest, that PFI demands?

This is the first debt Labour should promise to get rid of; buying the assets back - at current prices - and financing them through new, low interest, public sector loans. At least the NHS could then breathe for itself rather than pay out to private predators.

The real burden of debt that Britain faces is for its burgeoning Corporate welfare state. The 'too cheap to meter' nuclear industry has passed its clean-up costs over to the public. Now it wants 35 year guarantees (at twice the market price) for any new power it produces. Frackers, and offshore oil, want new tax incentives for extracting what we should be leaving in the ground.

Welfare payments to industry (to bolster low pay) outstrip welfare payments to the unemployed. Housing subsidies are hoovered up by private rentiers not private tenants. Only the caricatures of dependency remain.

The lopsidedness of what we now call 'a modern economy' went completely unchallenged throughout the election campaign. The opportunity for different 'sustainable' financing, through long-term pension and insurance schemes, went unexplored. The prospects of a new era of Public-Public Partnerships, putting common ownership back onto the table, never even hit the radar.

And the planet? Well, the planet wasn't even canvassed. All it got was a "Sorry you were out" card.

So, as you digest the results, just remember that this was an 'out to lunch' election. History will record it as the day we all lost.

Alan Simpson
8th May 2015