

TALKING POLITICS

Det nærmer seg tiden for parlamentsvalg i Storbritannia. [ˌmæŋəˈziːn] har snakket med Richard Peel, engelsklærer ved Bjørkelangen videregående skole og mangeårig lærebokforfatter. Richard følger den politiske hverdagen i hjemlandet tett, og i dette

intervjuet gir han svar på noen spørsmål norske elever ofte har om valgsystemet, om noen av de britiske politiske partiene og ikke minst om mannen som står i sentrum for de fleste av begivenhetene: statsminister Gordon Brown.

M: *There seems to be a lot of talk about Gordon Brown in British newspapers at the moment. Why?*

R: Well, everyone is waiting for him to say when the next general election is going to be.

M: *Is it his job to decide?*

R: Yes. An elected Parliament in Britain can run for five years before a new general election is held, but the Prime Minister can, at any time within those five years, himself call a general election – or, to put it more formally, ask the Queen to dissolve Parliament.

M: *Really? How strange.*

R: Not really so strange. Other countries give their Prime Ministers this choice – Denmark, for example, although the limit there is four years, not five.

M: *I see. But what is the situation now?*

R: The last general election was in May 2005. The next general election must be held by early June 2010 at the latest. Most people expect Gordon Brown to choose a date in April or May.

M: *Has Brown any chance of winning?*

R: Before I try to answer that, we must have a look at how Britain chooses the people who run the country. This is, after all, what democratic politics is all about. If anyone asks me «What is politics?», I answer «Politics is all about who has power – how power is

given, and how it is taken away.» So here goes – a quick overview of the UK electoral system. Where shall I start?

M: *Tell us what a general election is and how it is organised.*

R: What a good idea! A general election is an election on the same day to every seat in the House of Commons, and there will be 650 seats in the next House of Commons. This may make it sound like a cinema, but in the House of Commons they talk about a Member of Parliament's «seat».

M: *So each Member of Parliament is elected as the representative of a particular district?*

R: Yes! It is called a constituency – rather a long word, but an important one. Most constituencies have between 50,000 and 60,000 people living in them who can vote – that is, people aged over 18 who are British,

Commonwealth or Irish citizens. These people are called the voters, or the «electorate».

M: *So Irish citizens can vote in British elections?*

R: Yes, they can, as long as they live in Britain. A lot of people think that's a bit odd, but there we are. If there were no odd things in life and politics how dull everything would be! How is an MP elected? We can best answer this question by looking at one particular constituency. We can choose the constituency of Stevenage, just north of London, and see what happened in the last general election in 2005. The winner in each constituency is the candidate who gets *most* votes. It's a «winner takes all» situation. In Stevenage, Ms Follett won the seat.

M: *But she got well under half the total votes.*

Results of 2005 election: Stevenage constituency

Candidate	Party	No. of votes	% of votes
Barbara Follett	Labour	18,003	42.9
George Freeman	Conservative	14,864	35.4
Julia Davies	Liberal Democrat	7,610	18.1
Victoria Peebles	UK Independence Party	1,305	3.1
Antal Losonczi	Independent	152	0.4

Turnout 41,934: 62.7 % of electorate (the turnout is the number of people who turn out to vote)



The Houses of Parliament. (© Getty Images)



Richard Peel

Results of 2005 election: Leeds Central constituency

Candidate	Party	No. of votes	% of votes
Hilary Benn	Labour	17,526	60.1
Ruth Coleman	Liberal Democrat	5,660	19.4
Brian Cattell	Conservative	3,865	13.2
Mark Collett	British National Party	1,201	4.1
Peter Sowards	UK Independence Party	494	1.7
Mick Dear	Independent	189	0.7
Oluwole Taiwo	Independent	126	0.4
Julian Fitzgerald	Alliance for Change	125	0.4

R: Quite right, but so what? She won the race and wins the seat. It's a hard life.

M: *Haven't I heard her name before?*

R: If you're interested in British politics, yes – of course you have. If you are not, you have probably heard her husband's name, Ken Follett. He writes best-sellers, by the way.

M: *Is Stevenage a safe Labour seat?*

R: No. But it is the sort of seat the Labour party simply has to hang on to if Mr Brown is to have any hope of winning the general election this spring. It is obvious that if a thousand Labour voters in this constituency swing to the Conservatives, and another thousand Liberal Democrat voters do the same, then the Conservatives will win.

M: *I have heard about something called a «marginal seat». Is that what Stevenage is?*

R: Quite correct! A marginal seat is a constituency where support is fairly equally divided, so that a small

swing can make a huge difference. It is in these constituencies where the decisive battles will take place. A «safe» seat is the opposite. Here, let me show you the 2005 election result from Leeds Central constituency and you will see what the result from a safe Labour seat looks like.

M: *Do local issues have much of an impact in a general election?*

R: Yes, sometimes. In 2005 one MP was elected simply because he wanted to stop a local hospital being closed. Two other MPs were elected for very small parties but they happened to be popular in their local constituencies. Otherwise, independents and tiny parties get very few votes. In a general election it is *national* politics that dominate, and the main

campaign is on national television, where interviews and debates with the Leaders of the parties take place.

M: *Who becomes Prime Minister?*

R: The leader of the strongest party in the new House of Commons is asked by the Queen to be Prime Minister on the day after the election.

M: *Supposing the Queen was on a visit to Spain or Spitzbergen or somewhere?*

R: She would have come home. Shall we move on and look at the main parties?

M: *Sure. I'm in a party mood.*

R: Very funny! We can start with the Labour party, since it is at present the largest party in the House of Commons. It was started to represent the industrial working class. For a long time it had a strong socialist element in its programme, but this

was watered down in the 1980s and 1990s, especially when Tony Blair was leader. Today the Labour party tries to appeal to «Middle England» and not just to the traditional working-class voters in the industrial cities.

M: *Middle England? Do you mean the Midlands?*

R: No I don't. Middle England means Mr and Mrs Average Living in a normal house with normal middle-class jobs, earning quite good money: not very rich, not poor. People in the middle.

M: *All right. I get your point. What about the Conservatives?*

R: The Conservative party (sometimes called the Tory party, by the way) does, as its name suggests – like change to come slowly. Business interests usually support it and it is strong in rural districts. Of course, it also has working-class supporters, just as the Labour party is supported by many well-off middle-class people. In 1997 the Conservative party suffered a huge defeat in the general election, and since then has changed leader four times and has been shaking off the hard uncaring image it gained in the 1980s. Like the Labour party, it is trying to present itself as a modern party for modern people.

M: *What about the Liberal Democrats?*

R: The Liberal Democratic party sees the individual and personal freedom as very important; it is strongly pro-EU. It is the only one of the three main parties to have opposed Britain's role in the invasion of Iraq. The Liberal Democrats' dream is to hold the balance between the two big parties: Labour and Conservative. They are very strong in some constituencies, and at the last election won altogether 52 seats, with a national total of about 18% of the vote. That was not too bad: 52 out of 646 seats.

M: *So where do the parties get their main support?*

R: Do you mean geographically? Well, get on the internet and find a map showing which seats the different parties won in 2005. The blue patches are Conservative seats; the red patches are Labour seats; the orange patches are usually Liberal Democrat seats. Well – the lesson is clear: Labour is strong in and around the great cities and the industrial heartlands; the Conservatives are strong in small towns and rural areas, but are very weak in Scotland; the

Liberal Democrats have three or four centres of popularity where they have built up a tradition of support. All this reflects the history and traditional attitudes of the parties.

M: *You haven't mentioned Scotland or Wales?*

R: Careless of me. Well, things are a little different there, and even more different in Northern Ireland. In Scotland, the Scottish National party (SNP) has a candidate in all constituencies, and in Wales the same is true of Plaid Cymru, the «Party for Wales». The SNP wants full independence for Scotland and is very strong in some parts of Scotland, but in 2005 it only won 6 seats. Plaid Cymru's goals are more moderate – it won 3 seats in 2005. In fact, these parties are not going to have a major impact in British politics unless their support makes unexpected leaps. Mind you, a lot of Scots would disagree with me there! In Northern Ireland the names and backgrounds of the parties are different, and many of the issues

are special to Northern Ireland. I don't think we have time to look at them today.

M: *Okay, we will have to get back to you on that! Now, what are the big stories in British politics today and what will happen in 2010?*

R: It is probably going to be a very close election. The Conservatives had a large lead in opinion polls through the whole of 2008 and 2009, and Brown was getting a lot of criticism from his own party and from newspapers. But in 2010 he and his party are winning back support in the country, and many experts are predicting that the result will indeed be a hung parliament. So *this* is the big story: who will win the election?

M: *Why did the Conservatives build up a big lead?*

R: Well, the Labour party has been in power since 1997 – first with Tony Blair as Prime Minister, and now Gordon Brown. Thirteen years is quite a long time, and a lot of people think a change would be good. The Labour



party is also unpopular because of the war in Iraq and all the problems at home after the global economic crisis. But we should remember that the Conservatives *supported* the war in Iraq, and remember that you cannot really blame *one* prime minister in one country for a *global* crisis. There have been two other big stories in newspapers the last few years. One is terrorism, but *all* parties are completely opposed to terrorism. The other is a long-running scandal concerning MPs' expenses – how much money they get for travel, taxis, improving their offices and houses, and so on. Several MPs have been «caught» claiming wildly extravagant expenses, but MPs from *all* parties. In other words, neither the war in Iraq, nor the financial crisis, nor the dangers of terrorism, nor the scandal of MPs' expenses, are good sticks for the Conservatives to beat Labour with!

M: *What do you think Labour's greatest failure has been?*

R: Well, official statistics show that

the gap between the rich and the poor in Britain has got bigger during the last thirteen years. In other words, the trend started by the Conservative government in the 1980s has not been reversed by Blair and Brown and their Labour governments. This is a major failure – the Labour party sees itself as the champion of the poor and under-privileged. However, this is *also* a difficult stick for the Conservatives to bash Labour on the head with, because no one, rightly or wrongly, really thinks of the Conservatives as the friends of the poor and the enemies of the rich.

M: *A chance for the Liberal Democrats?*

R: The Lib Dems certainly should be able to attack Labour on this rich-poor issue. They have also always been against the war in Iraq. So they really ought to be gaining more support across the country. But they are not, at least not at the moment. Perhaps their leader, Nick Clegg, has failed to register with the voters as an important politician. So we

have a fascinating situation. The Labour party is unpopular, but the Conservatives seem to be finding it difficult to profit from Labour's unpopularity, and their lead in opinion polls is shrinking!

M: *Is David Cameron the right man to lead the Conservatives?*

R: Some people call him a Conservative version of Tony Blair – fairly young, healthy-looking, quite good at speaking in public – all in all, an agreeable sort of bloke. But he went to Eton, which is England's most exclusive school, so he is hardly a man from «Middle England»! But then nor was Tony Blair, really. David Cameron is also, I think, having problems because, on the one hand, he wants to appear a good «family man», supporting the traditional family, but, on the other hand, he must be seen as a *modern* man with a social conscience.

M: *What about Gordon Brown? Surely he looks like a loser.*

R: He has his problems, yes. The London

Party Leaders (from left) Gordon Brown (Labour), David Cameron (Conservatives) and Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrats) (©Scanpix)



newspapers have decided he is a man of yesterday, and jump at any chance to criticise him. Another problem is that he has been treated coolly by his own party. Again and again prominent Labour politicians have tried to get rid of Brown, even though a general election is round the corner! Very strange – as if people are going to vote for a party that ditches its leader just before the big game! Everyone says how unpopular Brown is, but I suspect quite a lot of people around the country like him and admire the way he sticks to his guns and «does his best», as he said he would when he became Prime Minister. He has responded to the global financial crisis well, and he is genuinely interested in global climate problems. Still, I agree, he’s a bit dull. He’ll probably lose the election and resign!

M: *Oh, so you think the Tories will win?*

R: Of course, it is impossible to predict the election result. New «stories» emerge all the time. For example, in the last week in February accusations were made that Gordon Brown bullied people working for him: shouting at them, stressing them unfairly, etc. This could blow over as a lot of nonsense, or it could be shown to be true, with probably disastrous results for the Labour party. But, to answer your question, I think Labour will lose its overall majority in the Commons, and that whoever becomes Prime Minister will need the support of the Liberal Democrats. My own guess is that Cameron will emerge stronger than Brown, and that he, Cameron, will become Prime Minister.

M: *Are you putting money on it?*

R: Certainly not. But I’ll be following the election closely when it comes – probably in May I think.

Britain's opposition Conservative Party Leader David Cameron stands with his wife Samantha after delivering his keynote address at the party conference in October, 2009 (@Scanpix)



The Adventure of English: the Biography of a Language

by Melvyn Bragg

Reviewed by David O’Gorman

In 2003 ITV broadcast a series of talks by Melvyn Bragg on the history of the English language. The content of the eight episodes of the series, which is available on DVD, was then expanded and appeared in book form in the same year.

The first half of the book deals with the growth of English from the time of the Anglo-Saxon invasions until the age of Queen Elizabeth I. We follow Old English as it displaced Celtic languages and absorbed features from the speech of the Vikings, and learn how Alfred the Great played a key role in its development. It suffered a major setback when the Normans conquered England and French became the language of the rich and powerful. We see its resurgence in the form of Middle English after the loss of the English possessions in France, richer by the 10,000 or so words it had absorbed from Norman French and with a simpler morphology and more rigid syntax than it had had in Anglo-Saxon times. Bragg shows us how it evolved into a literary language and then once more became the language of English royalty under Henry IV.

In the chapter on Chaucer’s English, Bragg quotes David Crystal on the greatest English literary figure of the Middle English period: “In no other author ... is there better support for the view that there is an underlying correspondence between the natural rhythm of English poetry and that of English everyday conversation.” He also shows how Chaucer uses different dialects and registers to shape his characters, from the courtliness of the Knight’s English, for which Chaucer is indebted to the influence of Eleanor of Aquitaine, to the Yorkshire dialect of the Reeve.

English had ousted French, and the time was ripe to take on Latin, the language of the church, the court and learning. In the fourteenth century, says Bragg, “God spoke to the people in Latin.” There was no English Bible, only the Mystery Plays,