

## Comment

# A melancholy people, but mad for footie at its fiercest



## Tom Horan Notebook

Most of last week I was blissfully distant from the election, 7,000 miles away in Buenos Aires. It was my first visit and I was captivated by the place. The locals, known as *porteños* (port people), were surprisingly interested in Cameron v Clegg v Brown. But they were more interested in the consuming passions of *porteño* life: football, afternoon tea and neurotic introspection.

There are said to be more psychotherapists here than anywhere on earth. Even on a four-day visit, this seemed eminently plausible. There is a seductive melancholy in the air, and more bookshops than in any other city I know: shelves of Lacan, Paul Auster and Thomas Mann, yards and yards of guides to self-analysis. Many shops have a bar, and *porteños* settle down with a litre bottle of the local beer, Quilmes, served in an ice-bucket like champagne, while they flip the pages and ponder the futility of existence.

All this erudition makes your average citizen formidable company. At a party, the man next to me asked for a cigarette. Making conversation, I asked him what he did. "I'm an intellectual," he said. I'm planning to try this line here, although I may have to gen up on a few key topics first.

Certainly, the hustlers of Buenos Aires know their market. At the traffic lights on one of the city's vast, majestic boulevards, a boy approached my taxi, touting something. Was it chewing gum? Flowers? Cigarettes? No. "Solamente 20 pesos, señor!" Wooden chess sets, in fetching shades of coffee and cream.

Anglophilia was everywhere and a fascination with an ancient kind of Englishness. Emulation of our glorious past reaches its zenith at the Alvear Palace, said to be the most luxurious hotel in the Americas. In three magazines, I had been baffled to come across articles devoted to the

subject of scones, or "scons", as the Argentinians call them. But settling down to afternoon tea in a conservatory full of society matrons – a marathon session of doilies, silver strainers and three-tier cake-stands choreographed by waiters in starched white jackets – the demand for up-to-date information on small Scottish cakes became much easier to understand.

But it wasn't all Darjeeling and fondant fancies. In Buenos Aires, World Cup mania is already at boiling point, and the more the high-tea tendency advised me against going to a game the more determined I was to do it. With the help of a fearless, Spanish-speaking friend, I fetched up outside the ground of Independiente for their grudge match against Boca Juniors, the team that produced Diego Maradona. In fact, all Argentinian matches seem to be grudge matches, which only adds to the danger and excitement.

It took two hours of frankly terrifying negotiations and a 200-peso backhander to get us through the turnstiles. Moody policemen sported pump-action shotguns, machine-guns, handguns; the touts weren't far behind. Inside, each set of *fanáticos* massed around a core of 50 drummers and trumpet players, tens of thousands of bodies jumping up and down in unison. As the players emerged through an inflatable rubber tunnel, the downdraft from the police helicopters cleared the yellow mist of smoke bombs from the pitch and the noise induced a kind of delirium.

The match itself combined delicacy, feints and poise with a series of blood-curdling tackles that bordered on physical assault. There were five goals, a penalty miss, a dog on the pitch and a straight red card for a Boca player who hurled his shirt at the Independiente fans. The only way to get him off the pitch alive was to reinflate the tunnel. He finally had to struggle down it holding the thing above his head, flanked by eight girls in red bikinis promoting a local yoghurt drink. It's a sight I won't forget for a long time – the beautiful game, indeed.

Comment on Tom Horan's view at [telegraph.co.uk/personalview](http://telegraph.co.uk/personalview)



# In office, but no longer in power, Brown gives Labour a last chance

Imagine the agony of Gordon Brown. For much of his embattled career, he has seemed the Sisyphus of politics, compelled to roll a boulder up a hill, only to watch it hurtle down again. This task, the worst punishment that Greek mythology could devise, suddenly got worse. Somebody stole Gordon's rock.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister was relegated to being a watcher, in office but not in power, as the Tories and Lib Dems tried and failed to forge a governing alliance. As aides claimed that Mr Brown was dealing with business as usual – Sarkozy of France on one line, Zapatero of Spain on the other – the PM's inner circle was discussing the terms of his departure.

The exit of Gordon Brown, who wants a successor in place by the party conference in September, was both predictable and unthinkable. Through hardship and humiliation, coup and mutiny, Mr Brown had clung to No 10 like a barnacle to the mothership.

He has relinquished his grip partly through necessity. Had he not announced his departure now, Lord Mandelson would have issued a one-way ticket. But Mr Brown has also fulfilled the promise made before he took office. He would leave, he said, when he could give nothing else to the country. By yesterday, there was nothing else to offer but his best.

It was the bitterest of gifts. To hand his scalp to Nick Clegg, a disliked rival he dismissed as a "television show host", was anathema to Mr Brown. But however uncertain his temper and unspinnable his demeanour, he was prepared to stand by his word and put his party and his country first.

By yesterday morning, it seemed clear that change was in

the wind. On a day that politics stood still, the Westminster chatter was delivered in enigma code. If there was a narrative, no one could read it. The clamour from the City for a fast fix to stop economic meltdown had been ignored, and rightly so. Britain may have been vague about its preference for an administration, but it hadn't chosen to be governed by Ernst & Young.

The public story was that Mr Clegg's alliance deal with the Tories was nearing fruition. Behind the scenes, it was clear that all was not well. A senior Lib Dem told me that the grassroots were "appalled" at the thought of a Con-Lib Dem pact that fell short of electoral reform, and that Lib Dem peers would be "astounded" if Mr Clegg could sell any such offer to his party.

Meanwhile, Mr Brown, who had phoned Nick Clegg to propose their meeting on Sunday night, waited to be summoned again by the kingmaker. An aide declared the PM "still keen to get a deal if that's possible". Behind the scenes, Lords Mandelson and Adonis, with Eds Miliband and Balls, secretly met Mr Clegg's strategists.

Some deal with the Tories had looked likely ever since Mr Clegg's pre-election error of deriding first-past-the-post as "broken" and discredited, while simultaneously appearing to promise to abide slavishly by the perverse result our voting system ordained. In playing up the "moral mandate" of the Tories to try and govern, Mr Clegg seemed to have ignored the democratic right of the 6.7 million voters – almost a quarter of the electorate – who cast their ballot for him.

In the event, both Mr Clegg and the grandees advising him have accepted that virtue is rarely the accelerant of change. As a No 10 source wondered, can Mr Clegg endorse a Tory monetarist Budget,



*The PM has at last given up his grip on No 10 – rather than be pushed out, says Mary Riddell*

cuts in frontline services, rubbing shoulders with Europe's "nutters" and abandoning electoral reform?

It seems he is struggling. Faced with a choice between the Tories who, as one leading Lib Dem puts it, "could dump us and go for a short-term election" and the uncertainty of a rainbow alliance, Mr Clegg has opened up to the latter.

The question remains as to who will be the senior partner if Britain is to get an umbrella government of disparate elements. One high-placed ally of Alistair Darling contacted me yesterday suggesting that the Chancellor, liked by Liberals and the markets, would be the "obvious candidate to lead a fixed-term coalition".

Now that a permanent post is on offer, David Miliband, the current favourite, will surely stand, as will Ed Balls, whose backing from Unite and other unions makes supporters and foes alike think he could win. Mr Balls, whose view of PR was once similar to the Pope's take on polygamy, has softened considerably, becoming a prime mover in advancing the Lib-Lab negotiations.

Other possible runners are Ed Miliband, Andy Burnham and Yvette Cooper. Jon Cruddas, one of the party's most innovative thinkers, has remained in informal touch with the older Miliband. Although Mr Cruddas has kept his counsel, he should not be discounted as a potential candidate or running mate.

In an extraordinary twist, Labour may not now, as some senior figures had counselled, retreat to the wilderness of Opposition. This is not the moment for any party to accord itself the political equivalent of a fortnight at Champs-Élysées. Maybe Labour would emerge, buffed and polished, to crush a floundering Opposition. Or maybe Mr

Cameron would entrench himself for years to come.

Today, all bets are off. Labour's fightback may have looked doomed, but sometimes the desperate stands proxy for the good. A centre-Left coalition, whatever hurdles it faces, would be better for democracy and for the young, the old, the poor, the ambitious and all who lack the iron cocoon of privilege and wealth.

Mr Brown, whose hairshirt tenacity may be missed more than many allow, should be applauded for offering that chance. Yes, he lost the election, but when I spoke to him last week, it was clear that he would do anything to save his party from meltdown.

Thanks partly to his implacability, the Tories didn't win it, either. Although money, media and the forces of God and Mammon called it for Mr Cameron, the public denied him a mandate. Thus, Labour and the Lib Dems retained the right to try to govern, if a deal could be struck. Yesterday, that prospect came to life.

It was easy to think that Mr Clegg, high on hope or hemlock, would press on with the Tories. To his great credit, he did not. Today, the door lies ajar, if not yet open, to a fairer future offering ordinary citizens security, prosperity and a government whose objectives mesh with theirs.

If this deal succeeds, Gordon Brown, a colossal figure on the political stage, will have assured his place in history. He may also have called time on Sisyphus syndrome. In future, those pledged to social, global and electoral justice may not be cursed to push the rock of change uphill, only to watch it crash to earth again.

Comment on Mary Riddell's view at [telegraph.co.uk/personalview](http://telegraph.co.uk/personalview)

# Sunday voting would solve this shambles

We all remember the first time we voted. Invariably, the venue was a draughty church hall or an unprepossessing municipal building with peeling paint and creaking floorboards. Sitting behind a large trestle table were a couple of volunteers of a certain age, armed with a ruler to cross out your name on the register, whereupon you would go into a booth and, with a stubby pencil, put a cross next to your favoured candidate. It was ever thus, and last Thursday it was, reassuringly, just the same.

Except that for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people it wasn't, because they were locked out of the polling booths. For those among them who were first-time voters, this must have been an especially miserable experience. After all, the prospect of taking part in the election of a government or even a local council is a tangible sign that you have grown up. Nothing – not being old enough to drive, or buy a beer in a pub – compares

with the sense of maturity and responsibility associated with finally being allowed to place an X on a ballot paper. It is a rite of passage and to be denied a part in it is unconscionable.

How, then, did a system that used to work well become so shambolic? According to Jenny Watson, this is because the system is "a legacy of the Victorian era". You, like me, had probably never heard of Jenny Watson until she popped up on our television screens to explain what had gone wrong; and now we discover she is paid £100,000 a year for a three-day week to chair the Electoral Commission, yet another of New Labour's incompetent, vastly expensive and ultimately pointless quangos that act as a job-creation exercise for members of the so-called "progressive" Left.

Watson might like to consider that the Victorians were actually very good at getting things done, and that this country has managed to conduct elections perfectly adequately since the franchise was extended to all adults in 1928. Also,



*The disaster at many polling stations is the real electoral procedure in need of reform, says Philip Johnston*

the numbers voting cannot be used as an excuse for the debacle last Thursday. Although turnout was up on the previous two general elections, the 29 million who voted were fewer in number than in the seven elections between February 1974 and 1997. In 1992, 33 million people voted, without any of the problems we saw last week.

Miss Watson was quick to blame returning officers for the mess – and, given that they run the counts in their own local government areas, they must of course shoulder some of the responsibility. But the fact remains that, since the Electoral Commission was established 10 years ago, what was a fairly straightforward activity has been dogged by controversy and even corruption.

This is largely the Government's fault for relentlessly pushing the concept of postal voting, an innovation carried out in the name of modernisation that has caused many of the problems we are now seeing. Until 10 years ago, it was necessary to state a reason for

applying for a postal vote, such as absence from the country on polling day, or illness, and to have this independently attested. Now, one can be obtained on demand.

An assumption that a big rise in postal voting would mean fewer people turning up in person may well have been behind last Thursday's debacle. The irony is that people working abroad, such as soldiers, complained that the postal or proxy vote system didn't work properly, either. It would have been preferable to have concentrated on improving participation at the polling station.

The simplest way of achieving this is to move election day from Thursday, which is a convention that has only existed since the Second World War. In the past, Sunday was ruled out as a day of rest; but since everything else is now allowed on the Sabbath, including gambling, why not voting?

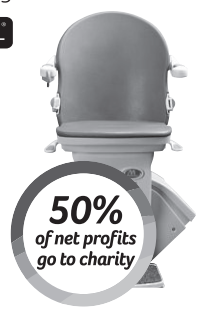
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