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You can read this issue of Populus Perspective online at www.populus.co.uk.

A year is a long time in politics, isn't it?

A year ago, as Parliament rose for the summer, the average of published polls put the Conservatives on 42%, Labour on 26% and the Lib Dems on 19%.

As MPs departed wearily for their summer break this year, the average of published polls for the month of July 2009 showed the Conservatives on 40%, Labour on 26% and the Lib Dems on 19%. The net effect of twelve months of frenetic political activity, argument, drama and farce is a 2% shift from the Conservatives to 'Others' (principally UKIP).

Very flat, Norfolk

A turbulent political session ended with a decisive Conservative victory in the Norwich North by-election. Boundary changes taking effect at the general election will make it a harder seat for the Conservatives to hold than it was to win. As currently constituted Norwich North has been a bellwether since 1983, not only voting the same way as the country as a whole but giving the Conservatives about the same vote share at the last six general elections as they have got nationally. Consistent with this pattern, the winning Conservative vote in the by-election, 39.6%, was exactly the party's average support in national opinion polls over the last month.

Labour's defeat was worse than it may have looked. The swing away from Labour was smaller than in last year's Crewe & Nantwich by-election – and the party emphasised, in mitigation of the Norwich result, the unique circumstances in which

the by-election took place. But the drop in Labour's share of the vote was vastly greater than in any other by-election the party has defended since 1997. Labour's 18.2% vote share, the lowest in a by-election for any incumbent party for at least 40 years, was barely two fifths of what it had received at the 2005 general election; the next worst drop in support was 14 months ago in Crewe, where Labour got more than three fifths of its general election vote share.

Right to die?

Three quarters of British voters favour the legalisation of doctor-assisted suicide, along the lines of Switzerland's Dignitas clinic, according to the latest Populus poll for The Times. Three fifths (60%) think the law should also be changed to allow close friends or family members to assist someone in committing suicide without the risk of prosecution.

The vast majority (85%) of those supporting these changes believe that assisted suicide should be legal only in certain specific circumstances: almost all (95%) think that it should be legal for those suffering a terminal illness, but this falls to 56% in cases where someone is experiencing great pain, but is not terminally ill, 48% for people with severe physical disabilities. A majority – even of those who support the legalisation of assisted suicide in principal – oppose it (63%) in cases where someone wishes to die at the same time as a terminally ill long-term spouse or partner.

Links – <http://www.populus.co.uk/the-times-the-times-poll-19th-july-2009-190709.html>

Who'd be a Member of Parliament?

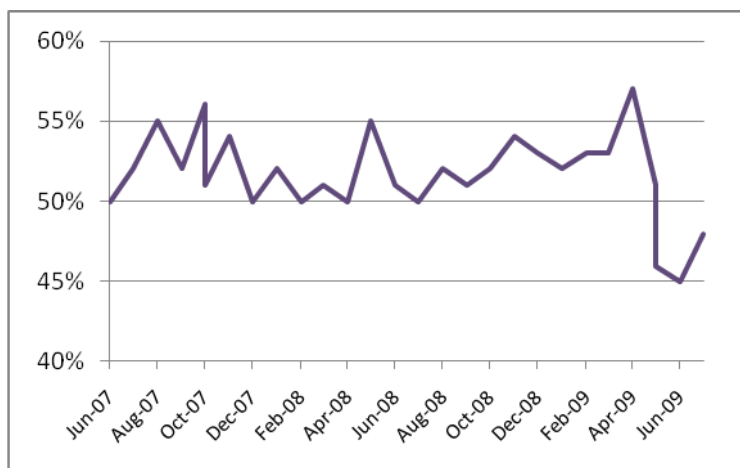
As MPs prepared to leave Westminster for what the tabloids call their “82 day summer holiday”, the latest Populus Parliament Panel survey of MPs of all parties revealed the toll that revelations over expenses has taken on their morale. Over one third (34%) of MPs, and nearly half of Conservatives (48%), would not choose to be an MP if they were starting out on their careers today. Nearly 40% (39%), and half of Tory MPs, would discourage someone considering a career in politics from becoming a Member of Parliament.

'Others' – and turnout – revert

The wave of cynicism about mainstream politics that followed the MP expenses saga led not only to a well documented surge in support for various fringe parties, but also to a steep drop in likelihood to vote at all.

The graph below tracks the proportion of respondents in monthly nationally representative Populus poll samples saying they would be 'certain to vote' if there

was a general election tomorrow. Since Gordon Brown became Prime Minister more than two years ago, this has fluctuated within a narrow range between 50% and 55%. As the graph clearly shows, the number of people saying they were certain to vote went into an almost vertical decline at the beginning of May, when publication of details of MPs' allowance claims were first published.



Links - <http://www.populus.co.uk/the-times-the-times-poll-19th-july-2009-190709.html>

Whose spending cuts?

More than eight in ten voters (81%) now believe that significant cuts in public expenditure are "inevitable" regardless of which party forms a government after the next election, according to the latest Populus poll for The Times.

The shape and scope of these spending cuts – and the critical question of which party is trusted more to preside over them – has dominated Westminster debate in recent weeks and looks set to be one of the central arguments between now and the next general election, now at most barely nine months away.

The new Populus poll finds for the first time that the Conservative Party has established a clear lead over Labour on this key battleground issue. The poll asked which party could be trusted most to cut spending in ways that don't harm important public services and have a negative effect on ordinary people. Despite Labour's best efforts to drive home warnings about "Tory cuts", 38% of voters most trust David Cameron's party to do this, compared with only 28% who trust Labour most. Nearly a quarter of all voters (24%) say they don't trust either party to cut public spending without hitting people and harming services.

Links - <http://www.populus.co.uk/the-times-the-times-poll-19th-july-2009-190709.html>

UK outliers on climate change

The UK is much less concerned about climate change than most other EU countries, according to a new study by the European Commission. Across the EU as a whole two thirds (67%) view climate change as a 'very serious problem'. Concern is greatest in Greece (94%) and lower than the UK (51%) only in Estonia (49%). This is despite the fact that UK voters (73%) are much more likely than those of most other EU countries (56% on average) to regard themselves as 'well informed about the different causes of climate change' – and that they are also more likely (77%) than any other member state apart from Sweden (82%) to say "I personally have taken actions aimed at helping to fight climate change".

Links – http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_313_en.pdf

Something for the Weekend

Whenever the General Election does come – and, according to the latest Populus Parliament Panel survey most MPs expect that won't be until the summer of 2009 – turnout will again be a crucial factor. So our latest poll of MPs put a number of options to them for increasing voter participation.

The most popular choice was to move voting from Thursday to the weekend – three quarters of MPs backed this suggestion with nearly 91% of Labour MPs in favour. Conservatives are more evenly split – 54% support the move, while 46% are opposed.

61% of Labour MPs would make it compulsory to vote but 97% of Tories and 77% of Liberal Democrats are opposed. There's also a significant party divide over the suggestion of increasing the variety of places where polling stations are located, including having them in supermarkets. 84% of Labour MPs support this, while 56% of Conservatives are opposed.

There seems to be little support for electoral reform among MPs – 21% of the Labour MPs surveyed and only 3% of Conservatives supported a more proportional system.

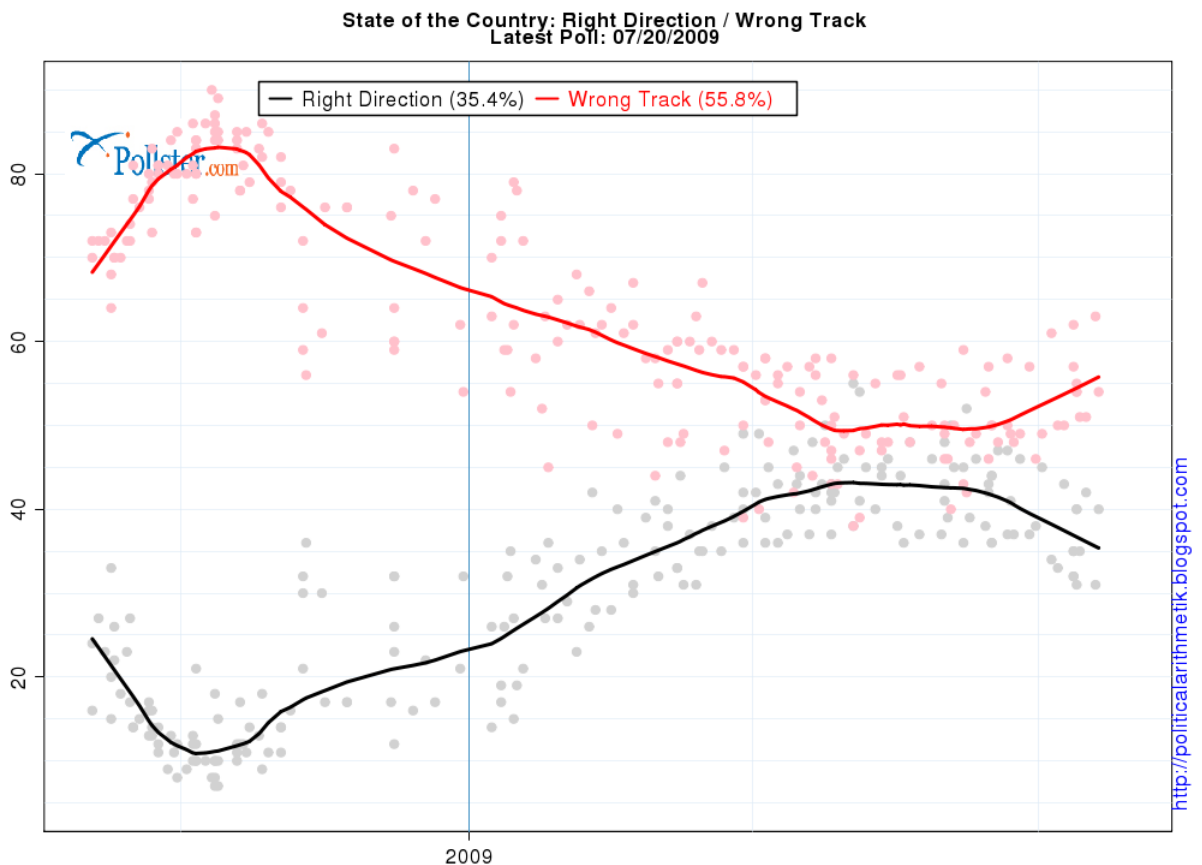
The Populus panel covers nearly a third of all MPs and includes a representative spread from all parties in the House of Commons and a good regional mix. Respondents include front-benchers from each party as well as senior backbenchers, rising stars and influential members of key Parliamentary Committees.

Honeymoon over?

Six months into his Presidency Barack Obama is finally starting to look politically mortal. Struggling to win public and Congressional support for his health reform

plans and facing criticism over the effectiveness of his response to the recession, as the US unemployment rate touches 10%, the President's poll ratings have started to dip. Though he remains personally popular, Obama's approval rating as President is down to about the same level as the two Presidents Bush, at the same point in their tenure.

One of the key tracking questions of America's mood provides further evidence that confidence in President Obama's leadership is waning. On the eve of his election fewer than 20% of US voters thought their country was 'going in the right direction', with more than 80% feeling it was 'off on the wrong track'. Barack Obama's victory prompted a wave of optimism about America's future, and by Easter nearly half of all voters thought that the country was now going in the right direction. As the graph below shows (taken from the treasure trove of US polling data www.polling.com), this trend has reversed in the last few weeks. On average Americans now think by a 56/35 margin that they are going in the wrong direction.



Links – <http://polling.com>

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