

## A NEW POLITICS?

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### A One-Off – or the Shape of Things to Come?

So, is that it then? Is the postwar “dual hegemony” of the Labour and Conservative parties dead and buried? Are we always to have coalition governments, broadly centrist, always with the Lib Dems in government, just as, for many years in postwar West Germany, the liberal Free Democrats remained permanently in office, now with the Christian Democrats, now with the Social Democrats?

Or will the coalition collapse within two years and then we will be back to “normal politics”, or the “old politics”, depending on your point of view?

One thing is for certain: even if the next government after this one reverts to single-party type, politics in the UK will never be quite the same again.

This paper looks at some of the implications of recent developments.

### Building a Coalition

The process of putting together a programme for government, and then a government itself, was much less fraught than many had believed it would be – and, ironically, than the apocalyptic warnings of the Tories before the votes had been counted. Sir Gus O’Donnell and the ranks of the senior civil service deserve tremendous praise for the way in which they handled an outcome which only really became probable during the election campaign.

But it is easy to see how messy and even more protracted the process of forming a government could have been: if David Cameron had not made the running with his speech on Friday 7 May including his “big offer” to the Lib Dems; if the secret Lab – Lib Dem talks had surfaced earlier; if Gordon Brown had announced he would resign as Labour leader immediately; if the markets had not been distracted by the sight of Athens burning; if the Lib Dem MPs or Federal Executive had been more seriously split, what might have happened?

In truth, there were only two decisions to be made: did the Tories prefer to go it alone or go into a coalition (Cameron’s speech answered that); and could the Lib Dem leadership deliver party support for a coalition with the Tories? As the rather forlorn “negotiations” of Monday – Tuesday 10-11 May showed, a Lib / Lab pact was never a realistic runner. John Reid (“mutually assured destruction”) and David Blunkett read the last rites over that idea.

But before everyone is carried away with the belief that politics will always be like this, it is important to remember that it could have been very different – and we might still be waiting for a government to be formed. In other European countries this is commonplace; but would the British people have wanted Gordon Brown still in Downing St weeks after the election – or, as would have been the case if the Lib / Lab talks had prospered, months later?

## Why Didn't the Tories Secure a Majority?

There is a great deal of soul-searching on this question in the Conservative Party and some sections of the Conservative-supporting press. Following a good first week of the campaign, it looked as if the Tory lead over Labour, at around 8-10 points, might just deliver a small working majority. But then the first debate took place. The polls then appeared to suggest that the Lib Dems were on level terms with the Conservatives and ahead of Labour. From that point on a hung parliament looked likely – though, as it turned out, for the wrong reasons. In fact, the apparent Lib Dem surge concealed the fact that many of those impressed with Nick Clegg did not in the end vote Lib Dem (or, perhaps, at all), and that in the meantime the Labour vote was performing better than the polls suggested. Poor though the Labour result was (29% of the vote), it was better than some of the dire predictions.

In the end, therefore, a Tory lead over Labour of 7 points, more than double Labour's lead over the Conservatives in 2005, failed to deliver an outright win. So, the Tories failed to win an outright majority because:

*They couldn't get more than 36% of the popular vote*

*They failed miserably in Scotland*

*They couldn't win enough target seats from the Lib Dems*

*The electoral system worked against them – as it was always going to.*

## The State of the Parties

The two-party system may be looking weak, but the three-party system is alive and well. None of the minor parties did particularly well, with the exception of the Greens winning their first MP. Nevertheless, all three of the main parties face significant challenges ahead.

The Conservatives faced an unpopular government and couldn't deliver an outright win. They must hope that David Cameron performs well as Prime Minister, they deliver some at least of their manifesto, successfully tackle the deficit and will then have the advantage of incumbency at the next election. On the plus side, they will have reformed the electoral system to even up seat sizes, thereby eliminating much of the advantage Labour enjoys from the skewed electoral maths. On the debit side, they may have to fight the next election on the Alternative Vote, making it harder to win a majority; they will have presided over the most savage public spending cuts for a generation; and their natural supporters may be disappointed with the watered down Tory policies in the coalition agreement. And the Tory Right is seething with discontent (see below).

Labour, despite being effectively leaderless and soundly beaten, especially in England, look in surprisingly good shape. They must hope that their leadership election, with six declared candidates (not all of whom will secure the required number of nominations to proceed), will revitalise the party. They may also benefit from disillusioned Lib Dems joining their ranks, especially as the coalition takes unpopular decisions. On the other hand, the party has no money and its relationship with business looks broken for some time to come. It will need to find a way of being an effective opposition without being shrill, which, if the "new politics" takes hold, might look rather dated. A Miliband or Burnham could be very effective in the new politics: it is difficult to see Ed Balls, however, "love-bombing" the Lib Dems, or anybody else.

The Lib Dems have gained most from the election – despite losing ground – but are in the most precarious

position. On the upside, if they can persuade the country to vote Yes in a referendum to AV, they will be in a very much stronger position; they should also have a proportional system for the Lords, guaranteeing them a strong presence at Westminster in some shape or form. They are receiving publicity and attention to a degree unthinkable even a couple of months ago; and they are able, finally, to put some of their policies into effect. But they may find their activists increasingly restive as the government makes unpopular decisions, and there are several potential flashpoints: a repeal of the ban on hunting, the go-ahead for nuclear power stations, an as yet unforeseen row with Europe, the failure of the AV referendum – any could drive Lib Dem activists and even representatives into the arms of a neo-Blairite Labour Party. Certainly Labour under any of its likely new leaders would try to reach out to the Lib Dems with a view to possible alliance after (or possibly even before? – see below) the next election.

## 7 May 2015: Pencil or Ink it in the Diary?

Much has been made of the coalition's desire to stay in office for a full five years, and even more of their attempt to block a collapse of the coalition triggering an early election (through the controversial 55% rule). It is not surprising that they should aim for a five-year term: the coalition is going to introduce legislation for fixed 5-year parliaments anyway; and the country arguably really does need a stable long-term government to tackle its problems. The process of reducing the deficit is going to create considerable political unpopularity; the longer the government can wait before going to the polls, the better.

Some on the Tory Right, deeply suspicious of the coalition anyway, have argued that the 55% rule gives the Lib Dems power without responsibility; if they decided to switch sides (however improbable this might seem) and join the Labour Party in a new coalition, they could do so without having to fear an election, because the Conservatives can block an election (having more than 45% of the seats) but cannot trigger one on their own. On the other hand, if the coalition was defeated in a confidence motion the Conservatives could then form a minority government without having to face an election.

On balance, if the 55% rule goes through it seems unlikely that there will be an election before May 2015, unless both parties of the coalition agree that their relationship has irretrievably broken down and the best way to resolve the tensions is a new election.

## Icebergs Ahead

Irrespective of the parliamentary arithmetic, the new government could face a difficult few years. What will the electoral consequences of the coalition be, for example in local government? A Labour revival there seems certain. In May 2011 there will be elections to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. In Scotland in particular the coalition parties might do very badly, though of course so might the Nationalists if Labour enjoys a revival. But what if the very English-looking government at Westminster feeds Nationalist sentiment north of the border? If the SNP made gains at the Scottish Parliamentary elections, they might be a step closer to an independence referendum (though it is almost impossible for the SNP to win an outright majority in the Scottish Parliament). Then in 2012 Boris Johnson will face re-election (if he stands again) as Mayor of London. If Labour were to win the mayoralty back – they will have a candidate in place by September – that would be a big political blow to David Cameron.

So both the coalition partners will have one eye on their own political fortunes: Nick Clegg worrying that his activists might desert in droves, David Cameron alert to the rumblings from the Tory Right. At the moment Nick Clegg might feel more worried, but there is no doubt that the relationship between the Prime Minister and parts of the Conservative backbenches is in something of a mess.

The Right of the Conservative Party was always nervous about the direction in which David Cameron was leading the party; the (to their eyes) alacrity with which he ditched some of the Conservative manifesto and leapt into bed with the Liberal Democrats confirmed their fears that he wanted to rule as a Blair-like figure above narrow party concerns; the plans to adopt Lib Dem proposals on Capital Gains Tax and to stick with the Human Rights Act are anathema; the apparent slighting of some right-wing shadow ministers who have lost out in the formation of the new government; continuing bitterness about how the leadership handled the expenses saga in the last Parliament and the rather heavy-handed attempts to silence internal opposition (redefining the backbench 1922 Committee as a grouping representing the whole party ie including the frontbench, partly with a view presumably to trying to block the election of Graham Brady as Chairman of the 1922, though in the end the leadership pulled back and allowed Brady to win the Chair) - all have poured oil on the flames. The degree of alienation from the party leadership felt by some on the Right would be hard to exaggerate, and may yet prove a source of real trouble to the Prime Minister.

The election of a full slate of officers of the 1922 Committee broadly from the Right of the party emphasises the distance between the leadership and a sizeable element of the Parliamentary party. Many of the Conservative new intake are also quite right-wing, in a modern sense of being socially fairly liberal but "dry as dust" on economic issues. They will want to see the great majority of deficit reduction falling on spending cuts, not tax rises. David Laws, the Lib Dem chief secretary, seems to be of a like mind, and made a good start with his £6.2bn package on 24 May; but will Vince Cable or Simon Hughes be happy with modest tax increases and correspondingly deep spending cuts from now on?

On the other hand, both parties have plenty to be pleased with in the first Queen's Speech. The overall theme of "freedom, fairness and responsibility" can offend no-one and covers both parties' general sense of direction pretty well. Tories can look forward to root-and-branch welfare reform and a "referendum lock" on further European integration; Liberal Democrats have the opportunity of constitutional and political reform; both parties can enjoy unpicking what they regard as some of Labour's big mistakes – such as ID cards. The second programme, for the period from autumn 2011, may be more difficult to put together.

## Conclusions

David Cameron and Nick Clegg have tried to buy themselves time. They may need every minute of those five years before they are ready to face the electorate again. Labour, presumably under one of the Milibands, may feel they have escaped lightly. However, their increasing reliance on union funding and the fact that business is now focused again on making sure the Conservative Party delivers on the economy will not make life easy for their new leader.

But all in all, Labour may feel that they have been lucky. Spared the need to make savage cuts in public expenditure and/or swingeing increases in taxes, they face a coalition government which has shown great courage and determination in its formation, but has yet to get down to the strains of governing. And they have five full years in which to pull themselves round. Like 1992, this may have been a good election to lose.