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The 2010 British General Election: The beginning of the end of single-party majority government ?

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Abstract

The British General Election on 6 May 2010 will be one of those that receives more than its share of attention in future history books – for the economic and political background against which it took place, for aspects of the campaign, for its result and outcome, and possibly for the systemic transformation of British politics and government to which it led. This paper touches on all these topics, but it focuses primarily on the statistical results of the election and the immediate outcome: the formation by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties of the UK's first peacetime coalition government for more than 70 years and the first formed afresh after a general election since the mid-19th Century. The final section of the paper gives some details of the Coalition Agreement and assesses the Coalition's immediate and longer term future.

The rarity in recent years of coalitions and minority government generally at the national level of British politics owes much to a single-member plurality electoral system that has tended to produce single-party parliamentary majorities from minority votes. That it failed to do so in 2010 was because this tendency, powerful though it still is, was outweighed by another of the historic features of this election: the confirmation of the long-term decline in support for the country's two largest parties, Labour and the Conservatives, and the increasing

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importance of minor parties. The nearly 35% of UK voters who voted for candidates *not* representing one of these two main parties was the highest proportion since 1922. If this trend continues, and particularly if it is accompanied by the change to an Alternative Vote electoral system that the Liberal Democrats are seeking to introduce, it could represent the beginning of the end of single-party majority government in Britain and the gradual normalization of coalitions. The paper suggests that there are certain resemblances between these recent events in British politics and developments over the past two decades in Japan.

The 2010 British General Election: The beginning of the end of single-party majority government?

Britain turning Japanese? Part 1

In early 1994, two UK political science colleagues published a book that, for a volume aimed primarily at an academic readership, had an unusually eye-catching cover. It comprised a picture of London's Big Ben clock and bell tower – the unmistakable symbol of the Palace of Westminster and the British Houses of Parliament – except that the tower was capped not by its own framed spire, but by the top two storeys and decorated finial of a pagoda. The title of the book was: *Turning Japanese? Britain with a Permanent Party of Government.*

The book's thesis was that, with the Conservative Party having won its fourth consecutive General Election victory in 1992 – after deposing the electorally unpopular Margaret Thatcher and replacing her with the less abrasive John Major – Britain appeared to be turning into a polity dominated by a single party. Most European countries are governed by coalitions or minority administrations, so the suggestion was that students and practitioners of politics might learn more from looking further afield at countries with actual experience of one-party dominance. As it happened, Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) had temporarily lost power in 1993 for the first time in 38 years; even so, the 'Japanese model' seemed one that the British might fruitfully examine.

The concern was entirely serious. The electoral evidence, as shown in Table 1, seemed persuasive. Since 1945, Britain had become, at parliamentary level, a largely two-party system. But, despite the tendency of the single-member plurality or 'First Past the Post' (FPTP) electoral system, as in Japan, to boost the parliamentary advantage of the leading party with a 'winner's bonus', the Conservatives and Labour had alternated in government with reasonable regularity. Until 1979, 17 years of Labour governments had been matched by 17 years of Conservative governments. It is true that the Conservatives had won three parliamentary majorities in succession in the 1950s, but Labour's vote during this period did

not crumble calamitously, and the Conservative leads in the popular vote were modest.

Table 1 Results of UK's 18 General Elections, 1945-2010

	Percentage vote				Number of MPs					
	Cons	Lab	L/LD	Other	Cons	Lab	L/LD	Other	TOTAL	Result - majority
1945	39.6	48.0	9.0	3.4	210	393	12	25	640	Labour 147
1950	43.4	46.1	9.1	1.4	298	315	9	3	625	Labour 6
1951	48.0	48.8	2.6	0.6	321	295	6	3	625	Conservative 16
1955	49.7	46.4	2.7	1.2	345	277	6	2	630	Conservative 59
1959	49.4	43.8	5.9	0.9	365	258	6	1	630	Conservative 99
1964	43.4	44.1	11.2	1.3	304	317	9	-	630	Labour 5
1966	41.9	48/0	8.5	1.5	253	364	12	1	630	Labour 97
1970	46.4	43.1	7.5	3.0	330	288	6	6	630	Conservative 31
1974 (F)	37.9	37.2	19.3	5.6	297	301	14	23	635	Labour minority
1974 (O)	35.8	39.3	18.3	6.7	277	319	13	26	635	Labour 4
1979	43.9	36.9	13.8	5.4	339	269	11	16	635	Conservative 44
1983	42.4	27.6	25.4	4.6	397	209	23	21	650	Conservative 144
1987	42.3	30.8	22.6	4.4	376	229	22	23	650	Conservative 101
1992	41.9	34.4	17.8	5.8	336	271	20	24	651	Conservative 21
1997	30.7	43.2	16.8	9.3	165	419	46	29	659	Labour 179
2001	31.7	40.7	18.3	9.4	166	412	52	29	659	Labour 166
2005	32.4	35.2	22.0	10.4	198	355	62	31	646	Labour 65
2010	36.1	29.0	23.0	11.9	306	258	57	29	650	Con/LD Coalition

Notes: Cons = Conservative; Lab = Labour; Lib/LD = Liberal (pre-1988)/Liberal Democrat (1988-);
F = February; O = October

Since the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979, something different seemed to be happening. The Conservatives' margins of victory over Labour now averaged over 10 per cent, and, even more importantly, in 1992 they had formed a fourth consecutive single-party majority government. This was unprecedented in the modern political era, and, moreover, was achieved following a period of deep economic recession. With the Government having a guaranteed majority of supporters in the House of Commons, and the Prime Minister able personally to select the most politically advantageous date for the next General Election – constrained only by the statutory five-year limit on the lifetime of a Parliament – it seemed entirely possible that the Conservatives might "emulate the pre-eminence of the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan" (O'Leary, 1994, p.4).

If so, there could be important implications for both the conduct of politics and the conduct of government. Political debate, as in Japan, might come to centre as much on factions within the ruling party as on differences across the parties – and might as a consequence come to be more about rival approaches to government management than about competing ideologies. The traditional and valued neutrality of the British civil service could be threatened, if even senior civil servants had personal experience of only one party in government. People might start looking not to Parliament, but to the media, for the main voice of opposition to the Government. The call for electoral reform might increase, but the prospects of Parliament

approving it would be negligible.

It is arguable that some of these developments have come about anyway – most notably the point about much contemporary inter-party debate being more about management than ideology. But the 1994 book's main proposition looks today both outdated and perverse. Not only has British politics not turned Japanese; even Japanese politics is less Japanese. Very shortly after the publication of *Turning Japanese*?, Tony Blair became leader of the Labour Party, following the sudden death of the former leader, John Smith, and the political fortunes of the party started to rise, while support for John Major's Conservative government was plummeting. Long before the 1997 General Election, a Labour victory, for so long unlikely, had come to be seen as a certainty – and so it proved. The Conservatives, in what was their worst result since modern party politics began in 1832, lost a quarter of their 1992 votes, a third of their Cabinet ministers, and over half their Members of Parliament (MPs). Tony Blair's New Labour Party won the largest majority for any administration since the National Coalition government of 1935. The statistical details may have differed slightly from those following the 2009 Japanese General Election, but the headlines were strikingly similar.

Britain turning Japanese? Part 2

So could it be that Japan politically is following Britain, rather than the reverse? On the basis of one election result, historic as it was, it is obviously far too early to say. There are, however, signs once again that Britain could be turning Japanese, but in a very different manner from that which seemed possible in the early 1990s. We have seen how British politics changed dramatically, but so too did politics in Japan. First there was the reform of the electoral system, then the establishment and normalisation of coalition government. Previously, on those occasions in the 1970s and early 1980s when the LDP lost its overall majority in the House of Representatives, it continued to govern as a single-party minority administration. Both major parties in Britain did exactly the same, following an inconclusive election result (Labour in February 1974) or the evaporation of a narrow majority during the course of a Parliament (Labour in 1976 and the Conservatives in 1997) (see Table 2).

Since 1993, however, Japanese lower house elections producing overall majorities for single parties have become the exception, and, starting with Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa's 8-party alliance, Japan has become accustomed to government by various permutations of coalition – a phenomenon unfamiliar in both countries for most of the post-war period. Now, as shown in the bottom line of Table 1, Britain too has produced a coalition government – the first in peacetime since that formed in 1931, and the first formed by two parties afresh following a general election since 1852.

Table 2 Composition of UK Governments, 1906-2010

	Composition of Government CAPITALS = Single-party majority
1906 - 1910	LIBERAL
1910 - 1915	Minority – Liberal
1915 - 1918	Wartime Coalition – All-party
1918 - 1922	Post-war Coalition – Liberal/Conservative
1922 - 1923	CONSERVATIVE
1924	Minority – Labour
1924 - 1929	CONSERVATIVE
1929 - 1931	Minority – Labour
1931 - 1940	National Coalition – Conservatives dominant
1940 - 1945	Wartime Coalition – All-party
1945 - 1951	LABOUR
1951 - 1964	CONSERVATIVE
1964 - 1970	LABOUR
1970 - 1974	CONSERVATIVE
1974	Minority – Labour
1974 - 1976	LABOUR
1976 - 1979	Minority – Labour
1979 - 1997	CONSERVATIVE
1997	Minority – Conservative
1997 - 2010	LABOUR
2010 -	Coalition – Conservative/Liberal Democrat

That 1852 election was triggered by the parliamentary defeat of the Conservative Party, prompting Benjamin Disraeli, one of the most famous 19th Century Conservatives and later Prime Minister, to deliver his still much-quoted view that 'England does not love coalitions'. The 1852 coalition took Britain into the inglorious Crimean War against Russia, so in the 19th Century Disraeli's remark may indeed have reflected public sentiment. But Table 2 suggests that it was surely much less true in the 20th Century, when coalitions became the almost expected response to either wartime or peacetime national crisis. For about a third of that century Britain was governed by either coalition or minority administrations (21 and 13 years respectively). However, Table 2 also shows clearly the 1945 dividing line, confirming that, until 2010, no sitting MP had even an adult memory of a parliamentary coalition, much less any personal experience. Unfamiliarity, however, did not stop most of these MPs, particularly those from the two major parties, being instinctively suspicious of coalitions. They were inclined to dismiss them as 'not British' and then produce Disraeli's 150-year old quotation.

Parliament is not, of course, the only political arena, and outside the Palace of Westminster – in the devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and across the country's local authorities – both coalition and minority government have become commonplace in recent years. When the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly

for Wales were created in 1998, the Labour Government decided that, to avoid their single chambers becoming one-party dominated, both should be elected by a Mixed Member system of Proportional Representation (MMP) – similar but not identical to Japan's semi-proportional Parallel system. The electoral engineering worked, and both Scotland and Wales have been governed by a mix of coalition and single-party minority administrations. The Northern Ireland Assembly, also established in 1998, is elected by the same Single Transferable Vote (STV) system of proportional representation that is used in almost all Northern Ireland elections – precisely to ensure a balanced representation of both the unionist and nationalist communities and to guarantee a power-sharing administration. In local government, over a quarter (28 per cent) of the 408 principal local authorities in Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales) were in 2010 under what is termed 'No Overall Control', meaning that no single party had a majority of the council seats. These authorities divided fairly equally into those run by single-party minority administrations and those governed by coalitions of usually two but sometimes three or four parties (Wilson and Game, 2011, ch.17).

The growing expectation of a hung or balanced Parliament

The negotiation and operation of coalition government, therefore, were not novel experiences for British politicians – except for those in Parliament; which brings us to the term 'hung parliament'. The British use the term slightly differently from the Japanese, who tend to reserve it for when the Government has no majority in the upper house, as happened following the 2010 House of Councillors election. Britain's upper house, the House of Lords, is non-elected and, with at least 150 of its approximately 750 members sitting as 'crossbenchers' with no party affiliation, no one party is ever in an overall majority. So the British 'hung parliament' usually refers to no single party having a majority in the House of Commons – and the adjective is generally seen as a negative description, connoting deadlock, inaction and uncertainty. The Liberal Democrats, on the other hand, whose third party standing puts them most frequently in the position of being able to exploit such a situation, see the inconclusive arithmetic as a potentially positive opportunity for cross-party co-operation and constructive compromise, and they prefer the term 'balanced parliament'.

As the 2010 General Election approached, the prospects and implications of a hung or balanced parliament moved to the very centre of political debate. The regularly published opinion polls had been showing the Conservatives comfortably in the lead over Labour for almost the whole time since Gordon Brown had succeeded Tony Blair – without, importantly, even an internal party election – as Prime Minister in June 2007. Brown experienced what the media like to call a brief 'honeymoon period' over that summer and indicated in October 2007 that he was about to call an immediate General Election, in the hope that voters would confirm and renew his prime ministerial mandate for a further five years. The opinion

polls suggested that, with assistance from the electoral system, Labour would probably have gained a further comfortable parliamentary majority, but in the end Brown lacked the political courage actually to call an election, and his non-decision meant that the Parliament would run its full five years until 2010. The 'election that never was' incurred a cost of £1.2 million (JPY 150 million) for the Labour Party (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010, p.11) – to cover the advance publicity, campaigning and private polling expenses – but it cost Gordon Brown and his reputation far more, and for the next two years he and the Labour Party trailed badly in the opinion polls, mostly between 10 and 20 percentage points behind David Cameron and the Conservatives.

Early in 2010, however, the gap between the two major parties began to narrow down to under 10 per cent. Brown and his ministers were gaining some credit for their handling of the global recession and the banking crisis, and voters did not see the Conservatives being as 'ready to form the next Government' as they had felt Blair and New Labour had been in 1997. The likelihood of a hung parliament seemed to be increasing, added to which there was the uncertainty created by what became known simply as the 'expenses scandal', the electoral impact of which seemed certain to be significant, but in a way that was impossible to predict. Throughout the second half of 2009, large numbers of MPs and the whole institution of Parliament had been embarrassed by the a national newspaper's publication of full details of all MPs' expenses claims – including many items obviously not essential for the performance of their parliamentary duties, and of which their constituents would have been most unlikely to approve, if they had known about them. The revelations attracted international media attention, brought the whole parliamentary system into unprecedented disrepute, prompted the resignation of the Speaker of the House of Commons, and led many MPs of all parties to stand down, rather than risk testing their popularity at the forthcoming election. The big uncertainty was whether voters would turn out in large numbers to vote against those MPs they regarded as most guilty of abusing the expenses system, or express their disgust by not voting at all.

Table 3 Range of results that could have produced a hung parliament in 2010

SCENARIO	Votes (%)		Number of MPs			Largest party: overall majority
	Cons.	Lab.	Cons.	Lab.	Other	
Both parties win equal votes Bias/advantage to Labour = 90 seats	35	35	240	330	80	LABOUR +10
Conservatives 2% vote lead Labour lose overall majority	36	34	253	315	82	Labour - 11
Conservatives 4% vote lead Labour still the largest party	37	33	276	292	82	Labour - 34
Conservatives 5% vote lead Conservatives become largest party	37	32	287	279	84	Cons. - 39
Conservatives 6% vote lead Cons still no overall majority	38	32	296	270	84	Cons. - 30
Conservatives 8% vote lead Cons still no overall majority	38	30	317	251	82	Cons. - 9
Conservatives 9% vote lead CONS WIN OVERALL MAJORITY	39	30	335	234	81	CONS. +20

Source: Electoral Calculus - http://www.electoralcalculus.co.uk/homepage.html.

Both politicians and the public were also coming to understand better the odd and apparently biased way in which the FPTP electoral system works in contemporary Britain, and to realize that the two major parties did not have to win roughly equal numbers of votes for there to be a hung parliament. On the contrary, as can be seen in Table 3, a very wide range of possible results would bring the outcome of no single party having an overall House of Commons majority: in fact, almost any result in which the Conservatives had a lead in votes of between 2% and 8% over Labour. Moreover, as can be seen in the top line of the table, equal votes for the two big parties would be one result that probably would *not* produce a hung parliament.

The UK's electoral system is essentially the same as that used in Japan for the election of constituency members to the House of Representatives, and both systems regularly produce highly non-proportional results. But the causes and effects of the non-proportionality in the two systems are different. There are less extreme variations in the size of constituency electorates in the UK than in Japan. But the relatively smaller electorates in inner-city, Labour-held seats and the considerably greater readiness of Conservative supporters, even in unwinnable seats, to turn out and vote, means that there is a strong systemic bias not just towards the big parties, but specifically towards Labour, as seen in Table 3. In 2010, therefore, the Conservatives faced a massive task in trying to overturn Labour's majority and achieve an overall majority of their own in a single election, which explains why David Cameron and his party became concerned when the substantial lead they had held over Labour for so long started to melt away. They knew that, unless they had a lead of nearly 10 per cent in the opinion polls and in the popular vote on Thursday 6 May, a hung parliament

was the likeliest outcome.

The election result and its consequences

Counting the votes in a UK General Election starts in most constituencies as soon as possible after the polling stations close at 10.00 pm and the ballot boxes have been transported to a central counting location. Most results are announced overnight, and it was clear early on Friday morning that the Conservatives would be the largest party in the House of Commons, but that they would be some way short of having an overall majority of seats. The headlines, the electoral records that were broken and set, and the parties' final seat totals, summarized in Table 4, were known by late on the Friday.

The result was closely in line with most of the final opinion polls and with pre-election projections. The Conservatives won nearly 2 million more votes than in 2005 and increased their share of the vote to 36.9 per cent. Labour's vote fell by almost a million to 29.7 per cent, and the Liberal Democrats suffered from the disproportionality of the electoral system even more than usual, as they increased their vote from 2005 but finished with five fewer MPs. Of the final polls from the nine national polling companies, eight reported a Conservative lead within 2 per cent of the actual 7.2 per cent (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010, p. 252). The pollsters themselves would concede, however, that they were lucky. Part of their accuracy in reporting the Conservatives' lead is attributable to the fact that they all under-stated the actual votes of both main parties, and particular Labour, but compensated by over-estimating the performance of the Liberal Democrats, whose popularity surge during the campaign, following the impact of Nick Clegg in the first of the party leaders' televised debates, failed to translate into the expected surge in votes.

The really difficult part of predicting the results and outcomes of UK elections is translating projected vote percentages into numbers of parliamentary seats, but the Conservatives' 7.2 per cent vote lead leaving them 20 seats short of an overall majority is almost exactly what Table 3 would have forecast. In this particular election, the precise numbers of seats gained by each party were even more important than usual, and, though the arithmetic was delicately balanced, it did point unmistakably in one direction. At least 326 seats were needed for a majority in the House of Commons, and only one feasible combination of parties – the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats – could comfortably exceed that figure. In principle, there was the possibility of all the non-Conservative parties forming what might have labelled itself a 'progressive rainbow alliance', embracing Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish and Welsh nationalists, the country's first Green MP, and perhaps the Northern Ireland Social Democratic and Labour Party. But, even if it had been possible to bring these disparate groups together, their combined Commons vote would still have totalled only 328 seats – in the circumstances, the most fragile and probably unsustainable of majorities.

Table 4 Votes and seats won by the major parties, Great Britain only, 2010

Party	Votes			No. of candidates	Seats		
	'000	% share	+/- from 2005		No.	+/- from 2005	Under perfect PR
Conservative	10,704	36.9	+ 3.7	631	306	+ 96	233 (-73)
Labour	8,607	29.7	- 6.5	631	258	- 90	187 (-71)
Liberal Democrat	6,836	23.6	+ 0.9	631	57	- 5	149 (+92)
UK Independence Party	920	3.1	+ 0.9	558	-	-	20 (+20)
British National Party	564	1.9	+ 1.2	339	-	-	12 (+12)
Green Party	285	1.0	=	335	1	+ 1	6 (+5)
Scottish National Party (Sc.)	491	19.9	+ 2.3	59	6	=	12 (+6)
Plaid Cymru (Wales)	165	11.3	- 1.3	40	3	+ 1	5 (+2)

Notes: PR = Proportional representation: the proportion of seats a party wins is the same as its proportion of votes, so the Conservatives would have won 36.9% of 631 GB seats = 233. The 632nd GB seat is that of the Speaker of the House of Commons. His chief role is impartially to chair debates in the House, and, by convention, his seat is not contested by the major parties.

The election headlines

- No single party won an overall majority, for the first time in a UK General Election since February 1974. The Conservatives increased their share of the vote by 3.7% since 2005. Taking account of constituency boundary changes since 2005, the Conservatives won approximately 96 more seats, Labour lost 90, and the Liberal Democrats lost 5.
- The nearly 35% of UK voters who voted for candidates **not** representing one of the **two** main parties was the highest proportion since 1922. The nearly 12% who voted for candidates **not** representing one of the **three** main parties was the highest proportion ever.
- The 87 MPs (including 18 from Northern Ireland) elected to represent the Liberal Democrats and minor parties were not a record number, but they did help to ensure that, for only the second time since 1945, no single party secured an overall parliamentary majority.
- The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition that resulted from the election can claim to represent 59.1% of the UK popular vote, a higher share than for any government since 1945.
- Labour's 29.7 % share of the vote was, except for 1983, the party's lowest since 1918. It represents a 14.6% fall in its support, or a loss of nearly 5 million votes, since winning the 1997 election.
- Even the Conservatives' achievement was only modest. The party's 36.9% share of the vote was lower than that in 1945, when it suffered one of its heaviest ever defeats (see Table 1).
- However, the Conservatives' 7.1% lead over Labour in the UK vote was higher than Margaret Thatcher's 7.0% lead when she first won power in 1979, and higher than Harold Macmillan's 5.6% in 1959, when the Conservatives won an overall majority of nearly 100.
- To the general relief of all politicians, who had feared that a disenchanted electorate might abstain in record numbers, the 65% turnout was higher than the 59% in 2001 and 61% in 2005, but still the third lowest figure since 1922, and lower too than Japan's 69% in 2009.

The message conveyed by the arithmetic was forceful, but it also had its problems. The first was recent history. The Liberal Democrats had officially abandoned during the 1990s their policy of positioning themselves equidistant between the Conservative and Labour Parties, but they still liked to encourage the idea that they represented an acceptable choice for disaffected voters from either party. In reality, though, their policies, their election manifestos, and, at least until Nick Clegg was elected in 2007, their recent leaders had been very much closer to Labour than to the Conservatives. Indeed, if Labour had not won the 1997 election by such an overwhelming majority, there could well have been some kind of deal between the two parties, as part of the Blairite project to create a permanent centre-left majority in British politics.

Confirmation that this relative positioning had not fundamentally changed is found in a comparison of the three main parties' 2010 election manifestos. Party manifestos are still novel features in Japanese elections, having been used first only in 2003. In British elections they date back to the 19th Century, and have an indispensable role in the democratic process. They are distillations of many months of wide-ranging discussion and research within the political parties. Most of their individual policies are fiercely debated, and they are documents on which the parties expect voters and their political opponents to assess them during the election and to hold them to account afterwards.

The three main parties' 2010 manifestos, each around a hundred pages long and containing well over a hundred specific promises and pledges, were subjected to content analysis, using a well established manifesto coding scheme. The Conservative manifesto was found to be a little more 'right-wing' than its 2005 predecessor, while the Liberal Democrats' document was slightly more 'left-wing' than both its own 2005 manifesto and Labour's for 2010 (Bara, 2010, p.24). A similar spread of views could be seen in relation to the issue that dominated the whole election: how soon and how fast to reduce the country's estimated structural deficit of over £100 billion (JPY 13,000 billion) or over 7% of GDP. The Conservatives' policy was to start soon and finish early, eliminating the bulk of the deficit within a single parliamentary term by a 3:1 ratio of public spending cuts and tax rises. The Labour and the Liberal Democrat approaches were not identical, but they were similar. They argued that such a policy would be unnecessarily economically and socially damaging and risked creating a further ('double dip') recession. They would delay any cuts until 2011 (Liberal Democrats) or 2012 (Labour), would take two parliamentary terms to eliminate the deficit, and would do so through a more equal balance between spending cuts and tax increases.

There were several political reasons, therefore, why an arrangement between Labour and the Liberal Democrats seemed the more likely development – except that once more Gordon Brown seemed incapable of coming to a decision either about his own immediate future

as Prime Minister and party leader or about the party's future with or without the Liberal Democrats. His view appeared to be that it should be obvious to the Liberal Democrats that a 'progressive alliance' with Labour was a more natural and attractive proposition than working with the Conservatives. It should not be his job, as Prime Minister – which he still was – to work at trying to persuade them, or to agree to stand down as party leader and remove himself from any negotiations.

The second problem was that, even if, on numerical grounds, some arrangement between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats made sense, it could take a variety of entirely different forms. The major decision – which initially had to be David Cameron's, as leader of by far the larger of the two potential partners – was whether to seek a formal executive coalition or to attempt to govern as a single-party minority administration, underpinned by some kind of legislative understanding – perhaps a 'confidence and supply' agreement, in which the Liberal Democrats would enable the Government to pass its budget and support it in any motions of no confidence, but would judge other policies on their individual merits.

This decision, however, which seemed problematic to most political observers, proved almost entirely unproblematic for the man who actually had to make it. During the first weekend after the election, most commentators – including the first-named author of this paper – and most politicians who were not themselves involved in the negotiations, explained to their various audiences exactly how difficult it would be to negotiate a formal coalition, and why a minority Conservative administration would be the likeliest outcome, followed probably by a second General Election in less than a year's time. We were completely wrong. David Cameron, it appeared, dismissed the idea of minority government almost immediately. His reasoning, reinforced by the early advice he received from civil servants about the vulnerable state of the national finances, was that the country's economic problems were so serious that they required a stronger, longer-term, and more inspiring government than a minority administration could provide.

A minority administration, he reasoned, would almost certainly mean an early second General Election, which the public would not want and which might well produce another hung parliament. A formal coalition with the Liberal Democrats, by contrast, would be backed by 59% of the electorate – although none of them, of course, had actually voted for it – and could hope to provide strong, stable government for a period of years, rather than months. An alliance with the Liberal Democrats would also make it easier for Cameron to control the more neo-liberal, Thatcherite wing of his party, who resented his campaign to regain the centre ground of British politics with a softer, greener, more modern brand of Conservatism: one that emphasised the importance of the environment and placed economic stability and the protection of core public services ahead of tax cuts.

Negotiation of the coalition

Nick Clegg announced on the morning after the election that the Liberal Democrats would talk first with the Conservatives, who, having won the most votes and seats, had a mandate to form a government. But at the time of his announcement he had little idea what Cameron was thinking – or what the Labour leadership might be planning, for many of his MPs and probably most party members would still have preferred, if the arithmetic were manageable, a deal with Labour to one with the Conservatives. Like Cameron, though, the Liberal Democrats' leadership group took the view that minority government was not an attractive proposition for them either. In the event of a second General Election, even if they had not been responsible for actually bringing down the government, they would share the blame, and, in an election that they could afford financially even less than the two bigger parties, they could well lose further seats. Nor would a premature election be easy to explain to the electorate, if their party, whose support for a proportional electoral system necessarily implied a belief in the merits of coalition bargaining, had rejected the only coalition deal it had ever been offered, particularly at a time when the country faced such great economic uncertainty.

So, though they did not yet know each other's thinking, both relevant parties were in principle attracted to a coalition. But the ideological and policy distance between them remained, and few observers rated very high the chances of a full coalition being the outcome of the forthcoming inter-party negotiations. The vital, and remarkable, opening bid came from Cameron, who, on the Friday afternoon, made what he called a "big, open and comprehensive offer" to the Liberal Democrats. The 'coalition' word was not mentioned, but it was generally assumed, certainly by the Liberal Democrats, that coalition was what was implied. Cameron also spelt out, though, some of the key principles and negotiating hurdles. As the dominant party, the Conservatives would "expect that the bulk of the policies in our manifesto should be implemented". In particular, there could be no basic change to the party's prioritization of the importance of cutting the national debt, no weakening of its tough immigration or nuclear-based defence policies, and no ceding of any additional powers to the European Union. On the other hand, there was potentially common ground between the parties on the need for education reform, new measures to establish a low-carbon economy, urgent reform of the political system, reform of the tax system, and the protection of civil liberties that had been eroded under the Labour Government.

Direct talks between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats began on the Friday evening. Both parties had four-member negotiating teams in addition to the party leaders, and the meetings were conducted, importantly, without civil servant note-takers, who might have been required under the Freedom of Information Act to reveal what those notes contained (Kavanagh and Cowley, pp. 208-09). If David Cameron's "big, open and comprehensive

offer" had pleasantly surprised the Liberal Democrats, the key details tabled by the Conservatives astounded them: 20 ministerial posts, of which five would be in the Cabinet (Fox, 2010, p.613). It was almost certainly a more generous deal than they themselves would have proposed, but this was not going to be the most difficult part of any agreement to sell to party members. Those who saw any kind of deal with the Conservatives as a betrayal of their party's history and principles would be more concerned about policy agreements and concessions than with how many ministerial posts the MPs had been able to secure for themselves. The only possible justification that they might accept would be a seriously enhanced prospect of electoral reform. For the Liberal Democrats – for reasons that can be understood from swiftest of glances at Tables 1 and 4 – electoral reform, and preferably the introduction of a genuinely proportional system, is a cause vital to their party's very existence. For Conservatives it is an unwanted, potentially damaging constitutional change that would probably prevent there ever again being a majority Conservative government. It was the single issue most likely to prevent an agreement between the parties.

The Conservative team's offer – of an all-party committee of inquiry on political and electoral reform – was completely unacceptable to the Liberal Democrats, and the potential deadlock should have represented Labour's best chance of negotiating a deal, possibly even a minority coalition. With the deliberate aim of attracting former Liberal Democrat votes, Labour had pledged in its manifesto to hold national referendums on the introduction of an Alternative Vote (AV) electoral system for the House of Commons and on the creation of a directly elected House of Lords. AV is not a proportional electoral system, but a majoritarian one, which would retain the UK's single-member constituencies, but enable voters to rank candidates in order of preference, rather than vote X for one candidate only. If, after the first count, no candidate has a majority of votes (50% + 1), the candidate with the smallest vote is eliminated and the second preference votes they received are distributed among the remaining candidates, with the process continuing until one candidate does have a majority. AV's chief appeal is that it offers voters more opportunity to express their preferences, and enables all successful candidates to claim that they have the support of a majority of their electorate. It is not the proportional system that Liberal Democrats, and Liberals before them, have campaigned for over decades, but in recent UK elections it would have given the party a greater number of seats than it actually received – perhaps around 89 in 2010, instead of 57 (Sanders *et al.*, 2010, Table 11) – so it could be seen as better than nothing.

Labour's negotiations with the Liberal Democrats, however, were still hampered by uncertainty over the future of the deeply unpopular Gordon Brown. As Prime Minister, he was unacceptable to the Liberal Democrats, but, even when he did finally agree that he would stand down as party leader at Labour's annual conference in September, the identity of his successor would not be known until after an internal party election, and so there was simply a

different kind of uncertainty. The Conservatives, however, did not know this. All these crucial negotiations were bilateral meetings, and therefore only the Liberal Democrats had anything like the full picture. So, while the other two parties were still meeting, the Conservatives assumed that their talks must be progressing much more constructively than was actually the case. Certainly David Cameron came to believe that, if they did not match Labour's manifesto offer of a referendum on AV, the other two parties would come to some kind of agreement, and the Conservatives would be left in opposition for a further parliamentary term. The referendum offer was therefore made on the Monday evening. It did not in itself 'seal the deal', but it was a massive boost, even though there were vocal minorities in both parties who disapproved of the policy concessions and compromises that were being agreed.

With all prospect of forming a government based on a Labour-Liberal Democrat deal having disappeared, Gordon Brown followed constitutional convention and resigned as Prime Minister on the Tuesday evening – before, although he did not know it, the final terms of the coalition agreement had been settled. Events now moved extremely quickly, which is how the British like to handle their regime changes. Gordon Brown visited Buckingham Palace and informed the Queen of his resignation. David Cameron followed him, and accepted the Queen's invitation to form a Government. Then, standing outside 10 Downing Street – the Prime Minister's official residence – the new PM gave a short speech saying he wanted to form 'a proper and full coalition' with the Liberal Democrats in order to ensure strong and stable government. By international standards, the length of time taken to bring into existence this new, almost experimental, form of peacetime government had been remarkably short: under five days between the counting of the first vote and David Cameron entering Downing Street. Elsewhere in Europe, government formation takes an average of nearer five weeks (Paun, 2010, p.24), while both the Dutch (1977) and Belgians (2007) have required around 200 days.

The following day David Cameron and Nick Clegg held a joint press conference in the garden of 10 Downing Street, and presented their coalition negotiation agreement, setting out agreements in principle on major policies, headed by deficit reduction and the Comprehensive Spending Review, due in October. Clegg was appointed Deputy Prime Minister, with special responsibility for political and constitutional reform, and he was joined by four other Liberal Democrat MPs in the 23-member Cabinet. Over the following few days, 16 other Liberal Democrats – 13 MPs plus 3 members of the House of Lords – joined the Government, ensuring that the party has a voice in almost all the major departments. With a 22% representation in the Cabinet and 19% of the 111 paid members of the Government, the Liberal Democrats also have more than their 16% share of the Coalition parties' 364 MPs – though far less than their 39% share of the two parties' votes.

How long will the Coalition last?

The most urgent questions throughout the early months of the Coalition centred on its plans to reduce the structural deficit, and on the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR). The CSR is always a major event in the UK's economic life, as it involves the Treasury setting expenditure limits for all government departments for the next three or four years, thereby determining the whole volume and shape of national public spending. In 2010, with a new government in office and unprecedentedly severe cuts deemed necessary to deal with the deficit, it was an even bigger event than usual. It was important to government departments, whose spending will have to be cut on average by 19% over the next four years, and by even more in the case of 'unprotected' areas of spending – like local government, which will lose around 28% of its grant funding by 2014-15. But its political importance too was enormous, for the CSR's reception and impact will shape much of the answer to what has become the most fascinating question in contemporary UK political debate: how long can, or will, the Coalition last?

As has already been emphasised, while coalitions may be a novelty in UK parliamentary politics, and were until recently in Japan, elsewhere they are the norm and single-party governments are the aberration. During the second half of the 20th Century, more than half of all governments in the democratic world were coalitions of one form or another, while barely a quarter were single-party majority governments (Woldendorp *et al.*, 2000, p.86; Paun, 2010, p.14). Today, of the 27 European Union countries, only two – Greece and Malta – have single-party majority governments, and, perhaps even more remarkably, following Australia's elections in August 2010, every major 'Westminster model' country now has either a coalition (UK, India, New Zealand) or minority government (Australia, Canada).

Just as there are many more coalition governments than people in Britain generally realise, it is also the case that at least some forms of coalition are much more durable than is commonly imagined. There are three main categories of coalition: minority, minimal winning, and surplus. A minority coalition, of the kind Labour and the Liberal Democrats might conceivably have formed, is self-explanatory, and, equally obviously, inherently unstable. A minimal winning coalition is one where the withdrawal of any of the coalition partners would lead to a loss of the government's majority – as in the case of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. A surplus coalition is one comprising more parties than are arithmetically necessary to form a majority – as in some of Japan's recent coalitions. At least one party can withdraw without the government losing its majority, which can be a strength, but also be a source of instability. As would be hypothesised, single-party majority governments have the longest average lifespan, but two-party minimal winning coalitions follow not very far behind (Woldendorp *et al.*, 2000, p.86; Paun, 2010, p.16). Structurally, therefore, the UK Coalition, especially with its 77-seat House of Commons majority and also a majority in the House of

Lords, looks built to last.

In fact, defeat by the opposition in Parliament is not a very common cause of coalition governments coming to an end. Nor is a breakdown in interpersonal relations between a coalition's leading members. It is easy to think of cases in which this could happen, but even their critics admit that the personal relations both between Cameron and Clegg and generally across their respective ministerial teams seem exceptionally cordial, and indeed were a key positive factor throughout the negotiation of the coalition. Easily the commonest cause of early coalition breakdown, at least in Western Europe, is policy disagreement, particularly over financial, economic and tax issues (Müller and Strøm, 2000; Paun, 2010, pp.18-19). For a government that inherited a country on the brink of bankruptcy, with an unsustainable budget deficit, and a growing public sector debt mountain, there would obviously be no shortage of such issues over which to disagree. The very scale and urgency of these issues, however, meant that there had to be basic agreement on the Government's approach before other areas of policy were seriously addressed – and there was. It had been there throughout the coalition negotiations, and was given its own separate page in the Coalition's policy document:

> 'The deficit reduction programme takes precedence over any of the other measures in this agreement, and the speed of implementation of any measures that have a cost to the public finances will depend on decisions to be made in the Comprehensive Spending Review.'

The Coalition's official policy document – *The Coalition: Our Programme for Government* (HM Government, 2010) – was formally launched by David Cameron and Nick Clegg a week after the formation of the coalition itself. In about 30 pages it put forward more than 400 individual commitments across 31 separate policy areas, listed in alphabetical order from Banking to Universities – or, as some have observed, from those chiefly responsible for the national deficit to those who will be among its principal victims. In a joint foreword to what is a genuinely historical document, the two party leaders emphasise that the Coalition agreement goes much further than simply adopting those policies on which their parties' thinking already overlapped. Rather, it seeks to combine the two parties' best ideas and to produce an 'era-changing, convention-challenging' programme that is more radical and comprehensive than their individual manifestos.

The instinctive reaction of some of the more sceptical media commentators was to ignore this radical and constructive spirit of the agreement that the leaders had sought to communicate and attempt to construct a balance sheet of each party's policy gains and losses. It proved a difficult and largely ineffectual exercise – partly because of the sheer number of policy commitments with their inevitably varying degrees of importance, and partly because,

as David Cameron emphasised at the very outset of the negotiations, the Conservatives were the heavyweight partner in this coalition and naturally they would expect any joint policy document to reflect this position. *The Programme for Government* does, therefore, resemble the Conservative manifesto more closely than it does the Liberal Democrat manifesto. But it is unmistakeably different from the programme for government that a majority Conservative Government would have produced, and there are many easily identifiable commitments whose detailed wording is clearly the product of Liberal Democrat input.

The speed with which the *Programme* was put together inevitably meant that a number of complex or politically sensitive issues were not argued through, but instead were set aside for later and more detailed consideration by reviews and commissions of various sorts: banking reform, long-term care, retirement age, local government finance. Some of the most contentious topics, however, were addressed and different formulae agreed to accommodate continued Liberal Democrat dissent:

- **Renewal of Britain's Trident submarine-based nuclear deterrent** – 'We will maintain Britain's nuclear deterrent, and have agreed that the renewal of Trident should be scrutinised to ensure value for money. *Liberal Democrats will continue to make the case for alternatives.*'
- **New nuclear power stations** – 'Liberal Democrats have long opposed any new nuclear construction. Conservatives, by contrast, are committed to allowing the replacement of existing nuclear power stations … We will implement a process *allowing the Liberal Democrats to maintain their opposition* to nuclear power, while permitting the Government to bring forward the National Planning Statement for ratification by Parliament so that new nuclear construction becomes possible.'
- **University tuition fees** – 'We will await Lord Browne's final report into higher education funding, and will judge its proposals against the need to increase social mobility, take into account the impact of student debt, and ensure a properly funded university sector … If the response of the Government to Lord Browne's report is one that Liberal Democrats cannot accept, then *arrangements will be made to enable Liberal Democrat MPs to abstain in any vote.*'

The most difficult issue of all, which many think may lead to the breakdown of the Coalition, is the Alternative Vote referendum. The Government will bring forward a Referendum Bill which includes provision for the introduction of AV in the event of a 'Yes' majority in the referendum. The party 'whips' of both coalition parties will organise their MPs to vote in favour of the referendum being held, but Conservative MPs, including members of the Government, will then be allowed to campaign *against* AV in the referendum

itself. This means that there will be a referendum – on 5 May 2011, the same day as local elections in England and elections to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly – but one that the electoral reformers will find it very hard to win. As noted above, if AV were introduced, the likeliest effect would be that the Liberal Democrats gained some seats from both Labour and the Conservatives, so both these parties have an incentive to campaign for a 'No' vote.

Even if the referendum vote were to go against the Liberal Democrats, though, that is no reason in itself for them to withdraw from the Coalition. They are part of a peacetime government for the first time since the 1930s. They have the chance to implement significant parts of their manifesto, and to shape other areas of policy at an exceptionally vital time in the country's history. Electoral reform would certainly have improved their prospects at the next General Election, but the existing electoral system produced a hung parliament in 2010 and could easily do so next time – especially if the long-term decline in support for the two main parties continues. If so, if Britain is about to enter an era of three-party parliamentary politics, the Liberal Democrats, after decades of marginalisation, could become a permanently pivotal centrist party. No longer a left-of-centre rival to Labour, it could be an economically liberal, socially liberal party with its own identity, able to work with either the Conservatives or Labour, but always itself in government – just like the Japanese Liberal Democrats used to be.

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