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WORKING TOGETHER

Lessons in how
to share power

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INTRODUCTION

By **Katie Ghose**, Chief Executive of the Electoral Reform Society

For many watchers of politics, the 2010 coalition seemed like a strange beast, unlikely to be repeated again in Westminster any time soon. After all, our archaic two-party voting system was meant to guard against such outcomes.

Some thought the UK so unused to power-sharing that they questioned whether the parties would be able to hold together for more than a few months.

But in reality, Britain has had plenty of experience of parties working together. Minority and coalition governments were common in the inter-war era. Wales and Scotland have repeatedly had power-sharing arrangements – from the Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition following the 1999 election in Scotland (and repeated in 2003), to the 2000-2003 Lab/Lib pact in Wales. Even today, Wales has a minority government, while Scotland only recently elected its first majority administration in 2011, after a post-2007 minority SNP government drew on the support of the Greens on a case-by-case basis. Meanwhile, Northern Ireland has been dealing with coalition government for decades, itself a result of the specific situation there.

Others thought the public's supposed distaste for coalition would ensure the 2010-2015 Parliament would be an experiment never to be repeated. After all, when put in black-and-white terms, the public generally say they prefer 'clear majority' government to hung parliaments or coalitions¹.

But if you dig deeper into public attitudes, you find **clear majorities who want to see parties working together**. In a poll² of voters in the 40 most marginal Conservative-Labour constituencies

¹ See www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/coalition-government/holm-media-impressions.pdf p15

² Fieldwork by ComRes, 15-24 November 2014. Sample: 1,002 GB adults

– in other words, where you would expect two-party competition to be fiercest – 78% thought “the Opposition should work with the government on issues they agree on”, while 54% believed “parliaments work best when no party is too dominant so that cross-party agreement is needed to pass laws” (against just 28% who thought the opposite). These are not the attitudes of an electorate demanding single-party government.

We have a voting system that does everything it can to cram the varied wishes of British voters into a two-party framework. Yet even under these circumstances, voters' desire to see more parties in Westminster is breaking through. The 2015 election will not only produce some spectacularly disproportionate, 'lottery'-style results³; it will also almost certainly fail to produce a single-party majority government. It is time to accept that power-sharing will be a feature of modern Westminster politics, and not a one-cycle phenomenon.

Learning from experience

And if we accept that, then we need to know more about how parties come to successful power-sharing agreements. This report is a series of reflections by leading politicians and academics with experience of coalition and minority government. It is designed as a guide for practitioners, and an important resource for understanding how best to share power between parties. Our contributors have generously committed their time and energy to this report and we thank them for their illuminating pieces.

From the UK, former Treasury special adviser **Julia Goldsworthy** speaks about the machinery of government and how you make coalition work in Whitehall, while former whip and junior minister **Jenny Willott** talks about some of the thinking parties have to do when contemplating a power-sharing agreement. **Cllr Andrew Burns**, the leader of Edinburgh City Council, writes about his experiences leading Scotland's only Labour/SNP coalition council, while **Rhodri Morgan**, former First Minister of Wales, shares his recollections of negotiating with Plaid Cymru and explains the vital role of special conferences. Former First Minister of Scotland **Lord Jack McConnell** also writes for us about his time in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, demonstrating that coalition can be long-lasting and achieve real policy change.

³ See *The Lottery Election* by Professor John Curtice, Electoral Reform Society, February 2015

From overseas we have former Irish minister **Ruairi Quinn** reflecting on the process of negotiating coalition government in his own country. **David McAllister**, former Prime Minister of Lower Saxony in Germany, shares advice from Germany's long experience of coalition. **Professor Dennis Pilon** from Canada shares his country's surprisingly common experience of minority government in the confines of a Westminster system. And ERS Deputy Chief Executive **Darren Hughes** shares some tips on how to make power-sharing work, based on his experience as a New Zealand MP.

Across all of these contributions, five key lessons emerge:

1. For coalition to work, there needs to be a **common sense of purpose** – clear aims and a united vision for what the parties want to achieve together.
2. It **takes time to negotiate**. Deciding how to govern a country is not something that should be rushed. And sometimes, the longer it takes, the better the outcomes.
3. **Parties need to sign off** on any power-sharing arrangement if it is going to achieve legitimacy. This can take the form of special conferences or other means of gaining party members' assent.
4. **Power-sharing comes in numerous forms**. Each nation can develop models of coalition or minority government which fit with their own political culture.
5. **Coalitions aren't easy**. They need constant dialogue, good personal relationships between protagonists and mechanisms for resolving disputes if they are going to work.

We hope this report can inform future thinking about coalition and power-sharing by political parties in the UK. Voters are setting parties a challenge, which is to find ways of working together. If parties are to meet that challenge, they could do worse than learning from those who have met it in the past.

1

TAKE YOUR TIME

Rt Hon Rhodri Morgan

Rhodri Morgan is the former Labour First Minister of Wales, serving from 2000-9. Rhodri led coalitions with both the Welsh Liberal Democrats (2000-3) and Plaid Cymru (2007-9) as well as a single-party administration (in both majority and minority) between 2003 and 2007. This piece is based on an interview with Rhodri.



First things first. You won't catch me saying 'I'm glad that we didn't always have a majority Labour government in Wales' because I think that having a majority government – even one where the majority is incredibly small – is easier than negotiating a coalition. But it's something you learn. Coalition is not abhorrent, and it doesn't make a country ungovernable. Nor does it render the smack of firm government impossible. You can make coalitions work, though they are harder than running majority governments.

The two key things to getting coalitions to work are: legitimacy and negotiation.

In 2007, one advantage we had in Wales was holding the caretaker government. We had gone down to 26 seats out of 60, but we were the largest party by 11 seats. This meant that we could 'play it long' in negotiating over a two-month period, and I developed a political principle that for every additional week spent on coalition negotiations, the coalition government would function much better. So we took two months to negotiate, from 7th May to 7th July (whereas in 2010 the Westminster coalition negotiations famously took just five days). This was despite the fact that an alternative

anti-Labour ‘rainbow coalition’ was being negotiated against us. We ordered the civil service to give them full support, but in the end it was internal Liberal Democrat splits that killed it. The key difference between us and the Westminster coalition was that we were the caretaker government for two months. Some vitriolic stuff was written about this long period, but we all felt that in order to compile the bible of what exactly you were going to do under the coalition and then get it approved by your respective parties, it’s better to negotiate while you remain a caretaker government for quite a long period.

Caretaker needed

However, in a sense, that idea was completely turned on its head in 2010 because you couldn’t have David Cameron coming in and running a caretaker government, and it was incredibly difficult for a Labour caretaker administration to just stagger on for a couple of months while both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats were negotiating a coalition¹. There are lots of pressures on a caretaker administration, and it’s very helpful if the party that was the government remains capable of running a caretaker government while the negotiations sort themselves out.

Yet the pressure on a caretaker administration to resign is huge, even if there isn’t an alternative administration to replace it. Therefore the fact that we were still negotiating in Wales was vitally important. Given this, if the party that was previously in majority government then tries to negotiate, as we did, with first the Lib Dems and then Plaid Cymru over a two-month period, it makes sense to play it long. But if you are coming in from a position of having not been in government, it makes sense to try and play it short, and to try and compile what you’re going to do and what you’re not going to do over quite a short period.

We did a huge amount of negotiating before we were able to put the agreement or ‘bible’ before the two respective parties at a special party conference – something that should always happen. The Liberal Democrats and Plaid have it in their constitution, while Labour and the Conservatives don’t. However, it couldn’t have been

¹ Editor’s Note: This illustrates the importance of having a proper caretaker convention in place, as Robert Hazell of the Constitution Unit has often argued. See for instance: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmjust/396/396we04.htm>.



the case that the coalition agreement was to be approved by a Plaid Cymru conference and not a Labour conference, so we had to put it to a Labour conference. Special conferences are important to approve what it is you're dropping from your party manifesto, and what it is that you're approving from another party's manifesto.

The special conference we had in 2007 was a very therapeutic exercise. Many people in the Labour Party profoundly distrusted Plaid Cymru, yet you have to ventilate the steam of that intense dislike. The key thing we were desperate to avoid was where – since we have an electoral college system in the Labour Party – one part of the party provides majority support to signing the coalition agreement and the other part doesn't. So the fear was that the delegates would split and that the trade union delegates would be very strongly in favour and the party members, represented by constituency delegates, would be against. The big risk therefore was not so much losing the vote, but not having a degree of unanimity between the three parts of the party. Fortunately, that didn't happen. We won a huge majority (95.8% in favour) amongst the trade union delegates and won comfortably (with 61% of the vote) amongst the party members.

“The special conference we had in 2007 was a very therapeutic exercise”

The chair of the special conference took the view that she must let basically everybody who put their hands up speak. It actually got a bit ridiculous, because we had seven speakers expressing vitriolic opposition to the proposed coalition deal all from one constituency, namely Islwyn. There were six ordinary delegates from Islwyn, and Neil Kinnock (formerly Islwyn), all spoke, but the chair rightly believed it was valid to let them all speak. This gave a slightly false impression, but she felt it was the right thing to do. She didn't want anyone complaining afterwards that they were stopped from speaking, and it was much better to ventilate the steam and then have the vote. I think she was right.

During the negotiating itself, it was also an important principle that the party leaders ourselves – Ieuan Wyn Jones, the leader of Plaid Cymru, and I – did not do any negotiating. In our case, the negotiation was led by Jane Hutt, because she was my Chief Whip,

and because having been the Assembly Business minister she had superior contacts with other parties. So anybody who has a good record negotiating things in a previous parliament is much better leading the team. On top of this there are special adviser equivalents to lead the negotiations when it comes to the gritty details.

Too little to do

You can see that in the tail-end of this present coalition government there's a lot of vetoing going on, and as a result Parliament has been left with far too little to do. That may be a problem of fixed-term Westminster parliaments which depend on there being usually around 25-30 Bills going through, and if the two sides can't agree on any Bills to go through then Parliament can become gridlocked. Normally there's a desperate battle to get your bills into the hopper, but now nobody wants to put any bills into the hopper because they might get vetoed by the other side.

“What if no party wins a majority? Does the Salisbury Convention apply, and in what way?”

There's also a problem with the Salisbury Convention. Usually, what the Salisbury Convention lays down in our peculiar British constitution of custom and practice is that any proposal that is in a party's manifesto which has won a majority will not be opposed by the Lords. Now what if no party wins a majority? Does the Salisbury convention apply, and if so, in what way?

The implication of the Salisbury Convention is that any Bill that the Lords has doubts about would have to be in both manifestos for the Convention to apply. In which case, what view does the Lords take of the Salisbury Convention if something is in a manifesto of a party that hasn't won a majority and was in the manifesto of a minor party that comes in to give them a Commons majority? Does the Salisbury Convention apply then, or can the House of Lords pick and choose the bits it does like and the bits it doesn't like from the government programme?

On points like these, holding special party conferences and getting the negotiations absolutely correct are vital, because of the additional legitimacy and the guarantee of effective government they give.

FIND COMMON GROUND

Rt Hon Lord McConnell of Glenscorrodale PC

Jack McConnell is the former Labour First Minister of Scotland. Lord McConnell led a coalition at Holyrood with the Scottish Liberal Democrats between 2001 and 2007.



Formal coalition government may be a new thing in London, but the devolved nations have all seen a variety of governments since 1999, and almost all have involved some kind of compromise. From power-sharing in Northern Ireland to the SNP/Tory informal agreement in Scotland between 2007 and 2011, all have had their ups and downs. But the longest and arguably most productive arrangement was the two formal coalitions between Scottish Labour and the Liberal Democrats in Scotland over the first eight years of the Scottish Parliament.

Getting used to coalition

I served in that coalition from the start, and led it between 2001 and 2007. Both agreements were challenging, but they were also right for their time. They respected the decisions of Scottish voters, and they delivered both good government and real change.

In 1999, the new proportional electoral system predictably resulted in no party having an overall majority on day one. As Scottish Labour and the Scottish Liberal Democrats, led by Donald Dewar and Jim Wallace, sat down to reach agreement on a Programme for Government, both sides were fresh to the challenge. Both were also under pressure from activists to look after party interests; from their UK leadership to ‘stay in line’; and from the Scottish public to

make devolution work and work quickly.

The result was what I have often described as the ‘add the Liberal Democrats on’ coalition agreement. The Programme for Government agreed that week was largely based on Labour’s existing plans for Scotland (where they had been running the Scottish Office of the UK government for two years) with a few key Lib Dem election pledges added in to secure agreement: reviews of tuition fees, proportional representation for local government, extensive Freedom of Information, and so on.

Many factors contributed to the ebb and flow of Scottish politics over the four years that followed: three Labour First Ministers, Donald Dewar’s Holyrood building project, the early stages of anti-politics, scandals in the Parliament, and of course adjusting to coalition politics.

Priorities in power

When I took over as First Minister in November 2001, devolution was in crisis. I was the third First Minister in two years, and public confidence in our new legislature and Scottish Government was low, with cynicism rapidly replacing the euphoria of the Parliament’s opening ceremony. But we recovered, and both parties entered the 2003 election with a record of achievement. And when I finally left office in May 2007, Scotland was a more confident, successful and healthy nation.

We led the way in the UK on immigration, through the Fresh Talent scheme, and in public health, through the smoking ban. Long-overdue reforms to our justice system were well under way and there had been more improvement, investment and consistency in Scottish education than for decades. Our economy, which had been flat-lining at the dawn of the new century, had caught up with the rest of the UK and our population was increasing.

Strengthening the economy was undoubtedly the biggest challenge for the coalition government I led. Scottish businesses and foreign companies considering investing in Scotland wanted reassurance that our government was building the right conditions for investment, and that policy would not chop and change. We were able to give them that and, by 2007, we had the highest employment rate in western Europe, we were winning awards for inward investment, and we were attracting people to come and live, reversing decades of population decline. The stable coalition was



the platform on which we built that government programme.

So, I would argue that coalition in the right conditions can produce strong, stable government and deliver transformative public policy – but the partners must follow some simple rules to have a chance of survival.

There are ultimately three key elements to a coalition that governs effectively, and holds together. It must have a **sense of purpose** – a central vision. There must be **trust between key people** at the top, between leaders and their parties, and **mechanisms to resolve differences** that arise in office must be in place.

When things go wrong

The first coalition from 1999 to 2003 had some of each, but not enough. Leaders trusted each other, but in each party the troops were restless. The sense of purpose to make devolution work well for Scotland was motivating but was not a strong enough baseline against which to measure our progress. And the mechanisms to resolve differences – leaders’ chats and Cabinet discussion – rarely engaged those who harboured the differences, and therefore created anger rather than diffusing it.

In 2003 however, the leaderships – collectively – knew each other better and in both parties the agreement of the wider party to the details of the settlement were mandates for action and endorsement of compromises made. After 2003, a joint committee of ministers and senior backbenchers was in place to discuss and agree handling of sensitive areas and disputes.

“We conducted ourselves in a more united fashion than most Westminster governments”

And in 2003, we had set the central purpose as economic growth. Scotland had suffered a huge shock with the movement of mass electronics manufacturing east, on top of our poor historic performance in new business growth. Combined with the impact of the 2001 New York bombings, and Foot and Mouth Disease on our tourism industry, we were sluggish. We needed to bring new life to enterprise and economic development. This provided focus for Budget debates, for priorities in transport and other infrastructure, and for our overseas promotion of Scotland as a destination.

As a result, with a combined majority of just five over all the other parties, we carried a full legislative programme every year between 2003 and 2007, including major reforms, and conducted ourselves in a more united and decisive fashion than most governments at Westminster.

In 2010, across the political spectrum from left to right, many predicted the new Conservative/Lib Dem coalition would not last for long. Every year since, there have been those who thought the end was near. But they have survived to the end of a long and difficult five years – and I for one have not been surprised.

With a strong central purpose on the deficit and the economy, enough trust (even if it has been tested from time to time), and mechanisms behind the scenes to resolve their differences, the coalition partners started on the right notes and rightly or wrongly stuck with it. However, they now face the challenge of fighting for votes and deciding what to do after another election that may yet produce a similar result.

Campaigning and coalition

Drawing up a strategy for the 2003 Scottish Parliament election was like no other experience I had encountered before. Each election campaign before had involved agreeing a manifesto that was based on what would be our plan for government if we won. The campaign was about highlighting the most popular parts of that plan and exposing the faults in our opponents.

But in 2003, we faced a very different situation. All parties were aware that a coalition might be likely again. Scottish Labour and the Liberal Democrats in particular had the complex challenge of defending a joint record, competing against each other for votes, and keeping one eye on the negotiations that would take place after Election Day.

Those negotiations had been better planned than before and soon after the results were in we set up our teams, our key links and channels, and our party machinery too. As in any successful relationship, compromise is necessary. For our second coalition in 2003, Labour wanted far-reaching legislation on crime and antisocial behaviour, and an agreement that economic growth was Scotland's top priority. The Liberal Democrats secured proportional representation for local government. Only with both could either have been agreed. And both were laid out in our respective

manifestos with the negotiations in mind.

So, for 2015, all three leaders have to think about three things: their main purpose and central vision; their policies on which they may yet compromise (and the red lines of others); and crucially their teams (including their back channels).

If votes, and maybe seats, split as widely as is currently predicted, then the leaders will have options. They will have to choose between stability and flexibility. My advice to all would be to keep options open. But also to be ready to listen. Whatever happens in this election there will be a signal of some kind from voters, and the leader who senses that most keenly will be in pole position after, as well as before, polling day.

GET THE MECHANICS RIGHT

Rt Hon Jenny Willott MP

Jenny Willott is the Liberal Democrat MP for Cardiff Central. She was initially appointed as a PPS to Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change Chris Huhne, before resigning her position over tuition fees in 2010. She later served as an Assistant Whip from 2012 to 2014 and as a Junior Minister in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Government Equalities Office from 2013 to 2014. This piece is based on an interview with Jenny.



From a Lib Dem perspective, being in coalition has been very important. One thing was clear in 2010 – we weren't going to be a majority government. Coalition therefore gave us the opportunity to be in government to prove that we can.

But it has also been important for the British public. For people outside of politics you now have a programme for government that is agreed, and that is drawn up for people at the beginning which you know the parties will stick to, or near enough. We don't normally have that in this country. We don't normally know what our government is trying to achieve and have it all laid out. A manifesto doesn't quite achieve that because a manifesto usually has things you're not going to deliver – things that are aspirational or longer-term.

But it also means the electorate is able to hold them to the promises that they have made as a government and that they have specifically said that they will do in that Parliament. It makes what the government is trying to achieve more transparent. Obviously

you don't have to have a coalition to do that, but single-party governments don't tend to do it, whereas it's something you do out of necessity when in coalition.

The past five years have debunked the myths about coalition. Before the last election there was a lot of scaremongering about how the government would be totally unstable if there was a coalition – that it would all fall apart and the UK would really struggle. Actually, it has been remarkably stable. It has shown we have no problems sticking together for a five-year term at all. There have been problems between the parties, but they have been resolved and the Government has held together to the very end.

In terms of the future direction of politics in the UK, I think it has changed it quite significantly. We've now experienced an example of how a coalition government can set a programme and then deliver that and how different political parties can work together.

Mechanics of government

In power, we've learnt a lot about the mechanics of government: how you resolve things within a government department, how you resolve issues where there are quite fundamental disagreements between two political parties in a coalition, and what processes you need to have in place. This stuff isn't glamorous, but for government to work you need the right processes. Having special advisers covering all the departments for both political parties is really important. A lot of things will need to be resolved at the centre, in No. 10, involving David Cameron, the Quad and so on.

We've also learned lessons about ministries. At the beginning we didn't have a minister in the Department for Energy, Farming and Rural Affairs (Defra), but we saw the forestry fiasco¹, which may have been more easily avoided if there had been a Lib Dem in the department because different parties have different approaches to an issue and so potential political problems can be more easily identified at an early point.

We've also had to learn a lot about how relationships work within departments so that in a future coalition we might need to have a rethink about what responsibilities different people have in departments. Sometimes it can seem like the Liberal Democrat

¹ In 2010-11, the Government planned to change the ownership of 258,000 hectares of state-owned woodland but abandoned these plans after widespread public pressure was exerted.



minister winds up with all the unpopular or boring areas of work in their portfolio, which is unhelpful.

There's also perhaps a need to think about having a senior minister of each party in each department, rather than having only one Lib Dem in a department if they are the Parliamentary Under-Secretary, with Ministers and a Secretary of State who are all Conservatives. In such a situation, that person is going to find it very difficult to work as an effective counterbalance. So there are lessons to learn about how you negotiate to ensure it goes both ways, so that when you have a Conservative Secretary of State you have a Lib Dem deputy and vice versa.

“Sometimes it can seem like the Liberal Democrat minister winds up with all the unpopular work”

It's also worth considering whether it's best to go for 'depth', where parties take entire ministries and work on issues just in those departments, or 'breadth' where you cover the whole government. Of course it depends how many MPs each party has whether breadth is possible or practical: it would be difficult for a party with just ten seats to cover every department, for instance.

It may be that a smaller party would choose depth – that it would be better to just have Energy and Climate Change or Defra, or whatever the priorities are for the party, so that you can really achieve a lot in those departments. But personally I've come to the view that if you are serious, the whole government has to be a coalition, not just bits of it. I think it would be much better to have a government that had Liberal Democrats throughout, and that means having Liberal Democrats in every department. Otherwise parts of government feel like they are one party and other parts feel Liberal Democrat. It doesn't feel cohesive as a whole. And that's not what people vote for – if you vote for a party that's likely to be a junior coalition partner, you're voting for that whole party, not just bits of it.

So having a government that is cohesive, and where you can see the Lib Dem influence throughout, is quite important. Otherwise there would be far more pressure on the Deputy Prime Minister's office, as they would end up as even more of a focal point and their work would significantly increase – when the amount that they

have to pick up is already phenomenal. The idea that the Deputy PM should have to spot all the political issues in every department where there aren't ministers to pick up on them would become almost unmanageable. You could end up having special advisers in those departments doing a job which is currently being done by a minister. That's an awful lot to ask from a special adviser, particularly if they don't have enough clout because they're clearly junior to ministers.

Getting through the tricky stuff

We also need to learn how coalitions can resolve some of the really tricky political issues. Tuition fees are the prime example. I was critical of the plan to support the government on tuition fees but I lost the argument. Part of the problem was that we were inexperienced – the tuition fees saga happened very early on, within the first six months, when people were still finding their feet in coalition and still trying to get used to how it worked. There was still a genuine fear that the Government might fall if the Lib Dems disagreed with the Tories too openly and too vocally. If it had happened a year later, perhaps it wouldn't have happened the way it did; I'm sure there would have been more visible disagreement between the parties up front, and more of a compromise. I think it was a massive problem for the Lib Dems that the first visible disagreement was on such a key issue for the party. The timing was poor. If the first disagreement had been on something that had been a fundamental principle to the Conservatives, it might have ended up completely differently, and by the time we got to tuition fees it would have been handled in a different way.

Party discipline is challenging in a coalition Government. It's difficult because some people feel that they're representing the views of the grassroots of the party by voting against things that the government's doing. But what it's also done is make it harder for the Lib Dems to claim credit for some things, because we look as if we are criticising ourselves. So there have been times where there have been compromise agreements reached and where we could go out and shout about what we've achieved, but if you then have people voting against it saying it's not going far enough, that's the narrative. The story becomes 'the Lib Dems have caved early, they haven't gone far enough, they haven't achieved all the concessions they could have and there's a backbench rebellion'. So a potentially

positive story becomes a negative one.

We need to think, as a party, about how we don't undo the good work of colleagues in negotiating behind the scenes, and that's difficult because I think some individual colleagues feel they're making sure they get re-elected by standing up against the government, and they often genuinely don't agree with what the government's doing. But there's a balance to be had between pushing as hard as you can to get the government to do exactly what you want, and accepting at some point that it's a coalition, we've got what we're going to get and you need to support it because otherwise the next time you're not going to get as much.

“It was a massive problem for the Lib Dems that the first disagreement was on such a key issue”

Finally, it's much easier to work with other parties than people would assume it is from the outside. A lot of things you work on in government aren't really party-political, and you just need to find a way of working with someone. What matters generally is whether you get on with colleagues of whatever party, rather than which party you are. The contrast between being in a department and being in the Whips Office is very stark, because in the Whips Office you're all trying to achieve exactly the same thing: delivery of what's been agreed. So you're pretty much always on the same side, whereas that is less true in a department.

But despite that, I think there are often disagreements within departments based more on turf war, rather than on political persuasion, though clearly in a coalition this is particularly challenging, since battles over portfolios also mean striving for party political control over a specific area. But having spoken to members of the previous government they found the same thing happened with a single-party government. Disputes seem to be a constant across government, whether they are coalitions or single-party ones!

ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL

Julia Goldsworthy

Julia Goldsworthy was the Liberal Democrat MP for Falmouth and Camborne between 2005 and 2010 and served as a special adviser to Chief Secretary to the Treasury Danny Alexander from 2010 to 2014, working at the heart of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition.



In the last days of the 2010 election campaign, a series of adverts were shown predicting a 'hung parliament' would produce chaos, indecision and economic collapse. The reality of the last five years could not be more different.

What lessons can we learn? Have the last five years established a positive precedent for coalition, and laid strong foundations for future governments? Has a template for 'good coalition' been created, or will the aftermath of the General Election in 2015 show every electoral outcome is unique and should be treated accordingly?

In 2010, it is certainly true that there were very strong forces pushing the two parties together. The economy was in crisis, the markets were demanding a speedy resolution and the electoral maths clearly pointed to one realistic configuration of viable government. These factors, combined with a shared desire from both the Liberal Democrat and Conservative leaderships to act in the national interest and find a workable solution, resulted in a coalition with a comfortable working majority (77), and an ambitious and wide-ranging policy agenda.

Far from creating chaos, there is good evidence to show that coalition has created better processes for decision-making in government. The 'Programme for Government' made explicit a

government's policy priorities at the start of its term for the first time. And processes for agreeing the big decisions were put in place very quickly. The 'Quad', comprising the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Chancellor and Chief Secretary to the Treasury, almost immediately became the supreme strategic and decision-making body in government, creating a strong centre where it had previously been bitterly divided under the last government. This, combined with the creation of the independent Office for Budget Responsibility, meant there was a clear timetable and process for making important decisions – particularly around fiscal events.

Adapting to coalition

I joined the Treasury three weeks before the emergency Budget – as these new processes were emerging, and as Whitehall was adapting to the new demands of governing in coalition. Under the previous government there was a lot of last-minute decision making, to the extent that Budget documents were printed with ink that only took six hours to dry so that decisions could be taken at the last second. It was a time when multiple versions of the 'scorecard' of Budget measures under consideration were created – deliberately to ensure that different factions in government were not fully aware of the full picture.

"In coalition, political differences are out in the open rather than concealed"

In coalition, political differences are out in the open rather than concealed; compromise is part and parcel of reaching agreement and delivering collective responsibility. It meant all measures under consideration had to be shared, and decisions had to be made in an orderly and timely way. The processes that resulted made for better government, and can and should be maintained, regardless of political hue or coalition.

The fact of coalition makes for more balanced advice from civil servants, too. Instead of a default approach that tries to pre-empt ministers' views, coalition makes it not just acceptable but desirable for different sides of the argument to be presented. Ministers get the opportunity to engage in discussions rather than being presented with recommendations biased towards what civil servants think



ministers' views will be. And there are rules of engagement to ensure advice is shared across the political spectrum in each department.

Of course, how effectively these terms of engagement were implemented in different departments varied enormously. The example set by lead ministers was important. The Treasury prided itself as the department where the coalition worked best – partly because of its broader mindset as the department that shows all the others how it's done, on any issue, but also partly because it had to. Both George Osborne and Danny Alexander knew that if the Treasury exposed a dysfunctional coalition, then the markets would punish accordingly. Hence it was made clear to all new ministers and special advisers that personally undermining anybody from a different party in the department would not be tolerated and would result in them being kicked out faster than their legs would carry them.

“There are risks around coalition being seen as ‘cosy’, but bad chemistry can be damaging too”

That kind of leadership from the top is very important – and wasn't always so clearly evident in other departments. Where professional working relationships broke down, the damage in policy and political terms for both parties was clear. There may be risks around a coalition being seen as too ‘cosy,’ but bad personal chemistry can be profoundly damaging too.

Looking ahead to 2015, we are now approaching an election where for the first time six parties will determine the result, and there's a high probability of a much more unstable outcome. Two or more parties may end up being required to work together to deliver a wafer-thin Commons majority. It's possible that both main parties may have the numbers, on paper at least, to form a government. A further five years of austerity of one kind or another is on the cards, and the better economic landscape will make this harder, not easier for the public to swallow. Compared to 2010, the circumstances are more challenging, not less.

The smaller parties appear belatedly to be realising they may have a critical role to play whether they go into formal coalition or not. The issues they are having to think about are broader than their present policy offer. They need to consider how the key policy issues will play out in potentially complex and lengthy negotiations.

What are the compromises they are prepared to make to secure their priorities? How will they manage this process internally?

They must consider the machinery of government, not just in terms of ministerial roles, but what support those ministers need. Coalitions need more political support, not less, to help Whitehall understand and manage the different political perspectives. The current government learned this lesson the hard way. It became obvious early on that the PM's policy support in No.10 was inadequate. Similarly, there were big challenges in setting up a Deputy Prime Minister's office that had simply not existed in that format before.

All parties should also be sure they fully understand the implications of the Fixed Term Parliaments Act. Too many backbenchers are still in denial. It's here to stay, and it has a profound impact on how any government operates. It doesn't just take the date of the General Election out of the Prime Minister's hands, it makes minority government almost completely unmanageable. It puts the opposition in a position to vote down a government agenda, pushing a minority government to the point of maximum weakness before they take the ultimate step of calling a vote of no confidence.

Significant concessions

The pull factors towards formal arrangements are strong. Significant concessions will probably be necessary – not just to smaller parties, but potentially even to individual backbenchers, who may need a liberal dose of pork-barrel applied to secure their support. The smaller parties know they can demand a high price for co-operation even if they only have a small number of MPs.

The coalition of 2010 has endured – not because it is a coalition, but because it has a comfortable majority. The slim or non-existent majority that 2015 looks set to deliver represents a new and significant challenge to the Whitehall machine. The consequences for government are huge. Battles in the Commons will need to be picked very carefully. The interests of small parties and individuals will become disproportionately important, and much of the Government agenda will need to be delivered outside of legislation.

Some of the discipline and processes established in Whitehall by the current government may help, but ultimately this election represents another unexplored frontier, where the uncertainty is heightened by our electoral system. The only thing we can be certain of is that more change and adaptation will be necessary.

5

CHANGE THE CULTURE

Cllr Andrew Burns

Andrew Burns is the Labour leader of Edinburgh City Council, Scotland's only Labour/SNP coalition council. Andrew is also a former Chair of the Electoral Reform Society.



I've been a long-standing supporter of the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system for local authority elections. But I have a confession to make – moving to STV will not, by itself, automatically change the culture of your council.

What it will do however is radically alter the political structure of your council, and therefore provide the potential platform for equally radical cultural change, in due course. But one need not automatically follow the other. I know this as I'm currently in the middle of my fourth term as a local councillor in Edinburgh, having been elected in 1999 and 2003 under First Past the Post (FPTP), and then in 2007 and 2012 under the STV system.

I was in a single-party administration for those first two terms, and from 2003 through to 2007 we had over 50% of the seats (thus an overall majority) on little more than 27% of the vote. We worked the system very well – but those statistics provide a strong argument against FPTP.

From 2007 through to 2012 (under Scotland's first STV local elections) I was in opposition, becoming opposition group leader in 2008. Those five years in opposition – culturally – were much the same as my first two terms as a councillor, except I was on the

other side of the administration/opposition divide.

There was no significant attempt by the then administration to use the platform of a radically altered political structure to change the organisation's culture. It was, I have to say, a massive missed opportunity; and one I was determined to rectify if I was in a position to do so after the subsequent elections.

And in May 2012 – thankfully, from my perspective – I was re-elected as part of the largest group, and became council leader, a post which I've now held for nearly three years.

It's been interesting. I'm a Labour politician, in a local coalition with the SNP. It's the only two-party Labour/SNP coalition in all of Scotland's 32 local authorities. Just think about what's happening in Scotland, politically, right now; and reflect on how interesting things have been running the capital city for the last few years!

Before May 2012, I'd never been involved in a formal coalition in my life. But I prepared for the post-election negotiations in a methodical fashion, and was lucky to have several senior colleagues around me who were supportive of our negotiating approach.

“Edinburgh is the only two-party Labour/SNP coalition in all of Scotland. It's been interesting.”

It would, of course, be entirely wrong of me to go into every detail of those negotiations, but suffice it to say, we had scenario-planned every single possible outcome and every single possible coalition arrangement. So: preparation, preparation, preparation – that's my main message!

Following the successful establishment of the local Labour/SNP coalition, I knew there was no time to waste in ensuring that we had a clear, unambiguous programme for governance, and thus the best chance of keeping our local arrangements fresh and lively for the whole of the forthcoming electoral term.

We agreed a clear set of 53 commitments in a new 'Contract with the Capital'. That emphasis on 'with' was crucial. The contract was openly published, and within weeks the 'monitoring against delivery' of our promises was live and visible via the front page of the main council website. It continues to be so, with six-monthly reports going to Full Council meetings.

What have we subsequently done to try and change the



organisational culture, using the (once again) refreshed political structures as a platform? I think you'd need to be inhabiting a wholly different world from the one I live in to not be aware that trust between the electorate and those of us elected or employed to serve that electorate has broken down badly in recent years. Of course, this malaise doesn't simply affect government or councils, but it has to be openly acknowledged before we can successfully re-invigorate our democracy. It was clear when we formed our local Labour/SNP coalition administration in Edinburgh that business as usual wasn't an option; we had to change the way we did things.

As already mentioned, Scottish local government had changed substantially back in 2007 with the introduction of a proportional voting system (STV) with multi-member wards. But the big change was in terms of political make-up (structural change). Deeper cultural change in the way politics was conducted was clearly going to take a little longer – and much more effort to instigate.

That's why we knew that we had to radically alter the way we worked with our local communities – and we had the perfect backdrop of multi-member wards to ensure that the widest possible involvement was forthcoming.

“Business as usual wasn't an option; we had to change the way we did things”

So, back in May 2012, we committed to becoming a 'Co-operative Capital', using our multi-member wards as the foundation for a new neighbourhood approach that would help put communities back in control. We wanted to encourage not just local communities, but our many partners and those using our services, to become more involved in how these are planned, managed and delivered.

The Co-operative Council philosophy underpins our approach to work on many levels. It means looking at new ways of delivering services but it also means co-operating with other agencies, other cities and, crucially, the people of Edinburgh: doing things with them instead of to them.

But those philosophical changes – and the related delivery of our 53 commitments – simply could not be a one-way street. There had to be an ongoing, two-way dialogue with residents about their role in exactly what their council does for the whole duration of its

political term. And, by way of example, that new approach to the way we worked, and the way we engaged with others, has included some definite actions in making the vision of a co-operative council a reality:

1. We have established the first Petitions Committee in Edinburgh. That Committee is chaired by a member of Edinburgh's opposition Green group. This has helped enable local residents to have an additional channel to raise issues of concern with their elected representatives, and directly with the council.
2. We have completely overhauled our scrutiny function, and established a new Governance, Risk and Best Value Committee, which is chaired by a member of Edinburgh's opposition Conservative group.
3. We have also completely revised our budgetary process, which has led to the publication of a draft Budget for the first time in decades. For this upcoming 2015/16 Budget we published our draft before the end of September, allowing a full three months of public consultation prior to the Christmas break and the eventual setting of the final budget in mid-February 2015.
4. We've also created a renewed focus on neighbourhoods and communities within our decision-making structures, and worked up proposals for the next stage in the development of our Neighbourhood Partnerships which will be put before the Full Council for debate and decision within the next few months.
5. We've also ensured direct parental representation within our education decision-making processes, by placing a Parental Representative on our main Education Committee, with the same voting rights as any other member on that committee.
6. And last – but by no means least – we're webcasting (both live and archived) all of our Full Council meetings, as well as an increasing number of our regular committee meetings.

The cumulative impact of all these considered changes has been fairly significant, and I would argue we have regained some degree of trust and a renewed sense of engagement with residents.

But in a time of significant economic challenge, Edinburgh's different sectors needed to make real co-operative efforts to ensure this city's high quality of life was maintained and, where possible, enhanced. There are good signs that this co-operative approach is

starting to take root. There is a new political narrative within the City Chambers here in Edinburgh; the political culture has most definitely changed. However, there is undoubtedly a long way to go, and continuing to deliver on both the co-operative content and on 'doing politics differently' are crucial not just for this year, but for every remaining year of this current council term. I know that keeping up this level of commitment will be challenging for both elected members and officers.

But we do need a new culture of 'letting go' and, wherever feasible, putting residents and service-users at the heart of service design and service delivery. And that's what we're working, slowly but steadily, towards. Now more than ever, I see genuine co-operation being at the forefront of innovative partnership working across sectors, tackling the serious challenges that lie ahead together, and rebuilding voters' trust in local democracy.

Electoral reform in 2007 provided the platform for that initial structural change. But since the second set of proportional elections in 2012, it's fast becoming a real catalyst for cultural change.

Ensuring a stable coalition – built on meticulous political preparation, and an openly agreed set of clear commitments – has been completely fundamental to the progress made to date. If a local Labour/SNP coalition running the capital city of Scotland can achieve this against the backdrop of current national politics here, then I certainly continue to believe – now based on some significant experience – that coalitions can change politics for the better.

6

MINORITY CAN WORK

Hon Darren Hughes

Darren Hughes is Deputy Chief Executive of the Electoral Reform Society. Elected to the New Zealand House of Representatives for Otaki in 2002, Darren was an MP until 2011. During this time he served in government as a Whip, Minister outside Cabinet and Deputy Leader of the House. In opposition he was Chief Whip, a frontbench spokesperson on transport and infrastructure and Shadow Leader of the House. He later moved to the education portfolio.



New Zealand has successfully transitioned to multi-party politics with the introduction of proportional representation in the mid-1990s. Since 1996 the country has been led by one coalition majority, three coalition minorities, and four minority governments. The lesson from the South Pacific nation is that power-sharing works – and can work very well indeed.

In a country with an unwritten constitution there are many more opportunities to put together a set of arrangements that can command a majority of support in the House of Commons. As the old order falls away before our very eyes, it's time to allow innovation and fresh thinking to take its course on how governments are constructed. There are no rules for this, it's just having the confidence to do what works.

The Helen Clark Labour-led government operated successfully – although without a majority on a single day – for three terms. It had relationships with a range of parties, selecting different types of arrangements depending on the party concerned. It had coalition partners, confidence and supply partners and parties that signed up

to a co-operation agreement with the government.

To demonstrate how this worked, the final term of the Clark government provides possibly the best example of how politics has had to develop in order to support minority government.

Lessons from New Zealand

After the 2005 general election, Labour once again formed a minority government with the Progressives. There was then a choice to be made about whether to work with four other parties, who broadly could be described at that time as falling into two categories: one to the left of Labour and the other in the centre, to Labour's right. It was from this point that some of the more innovative practices around New Zealand's unwritten constitution were developed.

Neither party in the centre (New Zealand First and United Future) wanted to formally join the government as coalition partners. However both parties were interested in supporting a minority government in exchange for policy concessions. These were duly negotiated and produced as publicly available written contracts.

“As the old order falls away before our very eyes, it's time to allow fresh thinking to take its course”

So far, so standard. The real innovation in this term of office (subsequently used for the three terms of the National-led government which followed) was the appointment of ministers from support parties who did not become members of the government but were bound by Cabinet collective responsibility for the portfolios they held. This effectively allowed for the leaders of the support parties to become ministers and oversee an aspect of government while at the same time leaving their party free to maintain their independent identity. Other than confidence and supply votes and the measures specified in their written contract with the government, the MPs in that party (including the leader serving as a minister) were free to criticise any aspect of government policy other than the portfolio/department that they had taken responsibility for. As Helen Clark observed: “This is an arrangement which might not work in theory, but certainly works in practice.”

The other two parties were then in discussions about what relationship would exist during the Parliament between them and



the government. In the end a formal relationship with the Maori Party was not developed, although they undertook to abstain on confidence and supply votes. The Greens also decided to pursue a relationship with the government that went beyond merely abstaining on key budget and confidence votes. The result of this was a Co-Operation Agreement which set out the areas they would support the government on. In exchange a degree of consultation on policy areas important to them was agreed, as was a decision that on two policy areas (energy efficiency and a ‘buy local products and services’ campaign) the Greens would provide an MP who would be the official spokesperson for the government on each area. Another innovation, and one that worked to build a strong presence for the government in Parliament.

Changing culture

Power-sharing really reflects voter reality rather than party fantasy. The challenge is to change political culture and learn to see it as an opportunity for a different style of government. Such change requires altering aspects of the machinery of government, but more importantly bringing about cultural change to make it work.

Some principles for this are: written contracts between parties that are well understood by both sides; good faith provisions and no surprise clauses to underpin the trust needed; co-operation and consultation mechanisms for working together; and ‘agree to disagree’ provisions for when issues can’t be resolved.

These principles have seen all minority governments (four National-led, three Labour-led) go the full distance.

“Having people with the right temperament in the right positions makes all the difference”

The presence of strong leadership is critical to the success of minority government. Voters, the media, and fellow politicians need to know that there is a purpose to the government, that it understands the direction it is heading in and that it is able to bring forward proposals which will stand scrutiny.

This requires leaders who can consult, listen, decide and then lead. And it requires a team around the leader in the larger party that instinctively understands that they cannot have all the say on

every topic. Also important are the House managers and whips, who are required to operationalise agreements. While it is not the end of the world to lose a vote on the floor of the House, it is often through good communication and trusting relationships that such events can be managed effectively.

In all of this, personalities are important. Having people with the right temperament in the right positions who understand the political reality in which they are operating makes all the difference.

The power of leadership

For those who may doubt whether leaders can be effective in a minority government setting, consider the case of Helen Clark and her successor as Prime Minister, John Key. If longevity and popularity are measures of success in retail politics, the pair’s consistently high approval ratings and status as longest PM of her party (Clark) and second longest of his (Key, by the end of this term) would suggest that minority government has produced the two most successful leaders of the last 40 years.

“The two main parties of New Zealand politics have been winners under minority government”

Consider the achievements of Labour-led governments between 1999 and 2008: lowest unemployment in the world and the re-introduction of apprenticeships; Working for Families tax credits; interest-free student loans; net public debt of zero for the first time in history; established a new local Supreme Court; introduced civil unions for same-sex couples; set up a retail bank and pensions savings scheme (Kiwibank and KiwiSaver); nationalised an airline carrier and the railways; legislated for smoke-free bars and restaurants; introduced measures and laws for climate change response; oversaw record rises to the minimum wage and reduced rents for social housing.

This is by no means an exhaustive list but regardless of political persuasion it is hard to argue that the above policy mix represents ‘nothing happening’. The minority government that replaced our one could supply a list of their own public policy achievements. Both sides of politics have been able to pursue a policy agenda every bit as credible as a single-party majority government.

Perhaps it may seem a surprise, but the two main parties of New Zealand politics have been winners under minority government. They have learnt to adapt very effectively to power-sharing and coalition-building. The last six governments (led three apiece by both sides of politics) have produced a more consultative and realistic approach to dealing with public policy challenges. While politics and disagreements naturally continue, governments can be confident of getting the majority of their agenda through but must show an ability to work with others.

The small party problem

For the smaller parties the picture is far less clear. To date we have not seen a ballot dividend for smaller parties who choose to participate in government. In fact in every example a minor party involved with government has received fewer votes at the subsequent election. While the minority government model undoubtedly maintains a smaller party's identity far more than a full coalition does, it seems to be that very little credit is given by voters to the contribution of the smaller party.

The biggest winners have been the voters. By adopting a voting system where every vote counts, New Zealanders no longer see governments elected on a minority of the vote (sometimes even coming second) rewarded with huge majorities and left powerless to challenge their decisions.

Good for politics

There are many ways to conduct the business of government. The New Zealand example shows how it is possible to build inclusive working arrangements with parties representing a broad coalition of voters to pursue a strong policy agenda, to manage the economy effectively and to maintain the country's positive international reputation. The political actors currently seeking to lead the UK could look to New Zealand's example as a sign that power-sharing can represent a position of strength rather than weakness.

7

GET USED TO IT

David McAllister MEP

David McAllister is MEP for Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union in Germany. David was Prime Minister of the Land of Lower Saxony between 2010 and 2013, governing in coalition with the liberal pro-business Free Democratic Party.



In the Federal Republic of Germany, elections to the Bundestag and most regional parliaments are based on personalised proportional representation. This electoral procedure introduces elements of majority-based election into a proportional representation system via an additional (first) vote for a constituency candidate. Crucially, however, the number of seats in the Bundestag is allocated to the parties throughout the country in line with their share of "second vote" (*Zweitstimme*). Thus, by contrast with the Anglo-Saxon majority election principle, absolute majorities rarely occur in the parliaments.

At federal level, only the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union has ever governed with an absolute majority, and then only once, from 1957 to 1961 under Chancellor Konrad Adenauer. At the last Bundestag elections in 2013, Chancellor Angela Merkel and her CDU/CSU only just missed obtaining an absolute majority, ultimately by a mere four votes. So, in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany since 1949 there have been coalition governments of CDU/CSU with SPD, CDU/CSU with Free Democratic Party, Social Democratic Party (SPD) with FDP, and SPD with Greens.

Germany is currently governed by a 'Grand Coalition', with the two major parties (CDU/CSU and SPD) in alliance. This coalition



was in power from 2005 to 2009 and has been again since 2013. Grand coalitions are often regarded as ‘temporary crisis alliances’. They also arise owing to changes in party systems or the influence of parties which are either unacceptable as coalition partners or do not wish to join a coalition.

Over nearly 65 years, coalition governments in the Federal Republic of Germany have proved relatively stable. This is helped by the institutional framework within which they operate. This framework includes the strong position of the Chancellor (enshrined in the Constitution), the need for a constructive vote of no confidence for his or her removal, and the electoral system described above, which expressly stipulates a 5% threshold in order to gain a seat, thus preventing the fragmentation of the parliament.

Creating stability

The framework within which the German party system works, its low level of fragmentation and polarisation, also have a positive effect on the stability of coalition governments. In addition, Germany has developed effective instruments for conflict resolution, solid coalition structures and consensus-oriented working methods for those involved. As well as this, the political system in Germany, with its bicameral structure (Bundestag and Bundesrat) is also dependent on cross-party co-operation on essential issues. So Germans are familiar with coalition governments. They value coalitions because they make a contribution to ‘checks and balances’.

In my Bundesland of Lower Saxony, too, absolute majorities have been a rarity. Only from 1978 to 1986 did the CDU govern with an absolute majority under Ministerpräsident Ernst Albrecht. Under Ministerpräsident Gerhard Schröder, who later became Chancellor, the SPD governed from 1994 to 1998 with its own majority. In nearly all German Länder, coalition governments are the norm. Some party strongholds are an exception to this rule, such as Bavaria, where the CDU’s sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), has governed mostly alone and with great success for several decades.

Experiencing coalition

From 2003 to 2013 I myself experienced at first hand a coalition between my party, the CDU, and the FDP in Lower Saxony. From 2003 to 2010 I was Leader of the CDU parliamentary majority in Lower Saxony, and from 2010 to 2013 Ministerpräsident. During this

ten-year period, Lower Saxony's CDU-FDP coalition was regarded as a model throughout Germany. Public disputes between the coalition parties rarely occurred. The coalition demonstrated a high degree of political agreement and good personal relations.

So what makes a successful coalition?

1. Coalitions are formed by parties. It is important that the parties concerned are **firmly determined to form a coalition** and that they stand four-square behind it. It is therefore important to explain the reasons for forming a coalition in detail to all levels of the party, down to the grassroots. A coalition agreement in Germany is confirmed by the party conference or a ballot of the party's members. This ensures legitimacy for the coalition within the party.
2. The basis of a coalition is the written coalition agreement. It is vital to spend **as much time and care on the negotiations as necessary**. A coalition agreement cannot provide detailed solutions to political problems for years ahead; that is impossible purely on practical grounds. However, the coalition agreement should clearly specify what the coalition partners want their substantive priorities to be and what individual legislative projects are to be addressed in the coming years. In my experience, matters that are determined in the coalition agreement get implemented. Things become difficult when items are deliberately left open, leaving room for interpretation. This often sows the seed of dissent between the parties. The very items on which the coalition partners' positions diverge most widely are those which should be formulated very precisely, to prevent later disputes about differing interpretations.
3. Coalitions are formed by parties, but they have to be put into practice, day by day, by individuals. This is why it is so important to have **personal trust and good human relations**. You can't impose trust: it has to grow. That is why the partners in a coalition have to work at it, week after week.
4. **Political decisions in a coalition need to be particularly carefully prepared**. In my time in Lower Saxony the coalition committee met once a week, which I found worked very well. This six-person committee met every Tuesday morning for an hour and a half before cabinet meetings. At these meetings we discussed all the political topics, and nothing we said there

in ten years ever reached the public domain. This generated a special sense of trust.

5. There should be a **good personal atmosphere not just at the top of the coalition but also among all its other operators**. This is why I felt it was important for the two parliamentary groups (CDU and FDP) to meet together and gain shared experiences as part of a team. Each coalition party also invited ministers and state secretaries from the other party to parliamentary group and working party meetings. CDU and FDP in Lower Saxony regarded themselves as a real team.
6. A coalition is often made up of a larger (senior) and a smaller (junior) partner. So of course the larger party has a greater numerical influence on the staffing of the Cabinet and is able to get more of its substantive legislation adopted. However, I took care in our coalition to ensure that both parties met as equals and could negotiate accordingly. I always took the FDP's concerns seriously. Thanks to personal friendships I knew exactly what topics were of particular importance to our coalition partners. **A successful coalition lives by give and take**, by insisting on some issues and giving support on others.
7. It is important for the coalition partners to **find a modus vivendi if they cannot reach agreement** on a specific topic. For us in Lower Saxony this was particularly important when voting had to take place in the Bundesrat (federal Upper House). Accordingly the CDU and FDP in Lower Saxony settled on this wording (now widely used) in the coalition agreement: 'The coalition partners agree, when determining how to vote in the Bundesrat, only to take decisions on which agreement has been reached. If no agreement is reached on which way to vote in the Bundesrat, the Land of Lower Saxony shall abstain from voting in the Bundesrat.'

To summarise: a coalition must be founded on a stable basis of substance on essential political matters. Political parties will never agree 100% on what matters are important. It would be very surprising if they did. However, a basis of substance which can stand the strain over the whole electoral term is necessary. All those involved should refrain from personal profiling and focus on co-operating as a group of colleagues. This is when the coalition will be most successful.

KNOW YOUR HISTORY

Professor Dennis Pilon

Dennis Pilon is Associate Professor at York University in Toronto, Canada. Dennis is an expert on Canadian political history, especially regarding the history of electoral reform in Canada.



There is little agreement about minority government in Canada. One side views it favourably, arguing that periods of minority government have been some of the most creative and dynamic the country has ever seen. Another sees minority government as weak and unstable, contributing to reckless decision-making and/or short-lived administrations. Both judgments say less about minority government *per se* than the policies associated with them.

An element of the country's centre-left has tended to associate minority government with policy collaboration across parties and the achievement of progressive ends like national healthcare and state funding for political parties. But much more of the political class – from across the political spectrum – see minority government as an inconvenience, something to be tolerated only until another election can bring a single party back to majority government. Both views read from particular circumstances of minority government a general rule that suits their politics. A more thorough reading of the cases presents a much less uniform picture of the experience of minority government in Canada.

Considering Canada has used the majority government-inducing single member plurality voting system for nearly all elections at the federal level since 1867, it has had a surprising number of minority

governments. For instance, Canadian elections have produced many more minority governments than the UK, Australia, or New Zealand. Exactly how many is a matter of dispute, but if we define a minority government as one where the executive continues to govern despite lacking a stable voting majority in the House of Commons, then the number can be settled at 12¹.

Debate over minority government in Canada has largely focused on questions of stability and good government. For critics, minority governments are unstable and short-lived, as they are prevented from introducing their policies by an opposition that need not take responsibility for governing, or forced to make policy concessions that they might not make otherwise. The facts present a more nuanced picture. Of the 12 minority governments, five lasted roughly two and a half years or more, two lasted a year and a half, and five lasted six months or less. But length of tenure doesn't tell the whole story of the stability of minority governments, because in half of the cases the government resigned or engineered their own defeat in parliament (the first 1925 government, and 1957, 1963, 1968, 1972, 2006). In only five cases were minority governments defeated in a vote of confidence that they clearly did not want to lose (the second 1925 government, and 1962, 1979, 2004, 2011). Stability takes on a partisan hue when we apply party labels to the minority governments.

“More important than the left/right dimension has been the overall economic policy paradigm”

Until recently, the most short-lived minority governments were all Conservative, ranging from roughly six months in three cases to just three days in another. Conservatives were either in a hurry to get to another election (1957) or, frankly, proven to be incompetent in managing a minority parliament (1925, 1962, 1979). This only

¹ There have been 41 federal elections in Canada since 1867 to 2011 producing 41 parliaments. One parliament hosted two different minority governments. Doing the maths, minority governments account for 27% of the parliaments. However, all 12 occur from 1921 on, a date that also marks the transition from a two-party to multi-party system. If we restrict our focus to this more competitive period from 1921 to the present, then minority governments account for 39% of the total.



changed in 2004 and 2006 when Stephen Harper's Conservatives set new records for the longevity of a parliament where the government was always in a minority.

Regardless of partisan interest, few would argue that short-lived governments and frequent elections are a good thing. So, leaving aside the five most brief minority governments (i.e. ones that lasted six and half months or less), how good were the minority governments that lasted longer? The problem here is that judging the 'goodness' of any approach to government is fundamentally a partisan question.

Minority biased?

Fans of minority government tend to cite the 1921, 1963, 1965 and 1972 examples to advance their case that minority governments can effectively govern². Coincidentally, all examples are Liberal administrations supported by parties to their left, who then together are seen to have been responsible for introducing progressive legislation that the Liberals seemed reticent to introduce when governing without support from other parties. One can't help but wonder if these supporters judge minority government in terms of the policies they think it will produce, rather than any generic values of stability and goodness in government. Certainly, some Conservative commentators have argued that minority government in Canada is biased towards the centre-left because the right has no one to coalesce with. But, again, both analyses are too selective in examining the cases, as well as too optimistic/pessimistic in their predictions about what may come to pass with either a centrist or right-wing minority government.

For instance, it is hard to argue that the Conservatives lacked possible allies to govern with when they were in minority in 1926, 1957, 1963 and 1979. In each case, there were regional political parties that could have supported them, if they had courted them effectively. Here the federal Conservative party simply appeared to lack the tact, experience, and talent to pull it off, which was surprising given that provincial Conservatives in Ontario, Manitoba and British Columbia did manage to participate effectively in minority and/or coalition governments. Nor should Canada's Liberal party be understood as uniformly leaning towards the left.

² See Russell, Peter H. 2008. *Two Cheers for Minority Government*. Toronto: Emond Montgomery

The federal Liberals have always had strong links to the country's business community and Canada's very modest welfare state is a testament to their ongoing influence in the party. At the provincial level, Liberals have more often found themselves working with the political right than the political left.

More important than the left/right dimension or coalition opportunities of parties in the Canadian experience of minority government has been the over-arching economic policy paradigm that has been in place at any given time³. Although the economic policy paradigm is itself a product of political competition between the political right, centre and left, it tends to become more entrenched and thus less affected by this or that election outcome. For instance, some argue that John Diefenbaker's brief minority government in 1957 was both publicly popular and not really in danger of parliamentary defeat precisely because he advanced the welfare state policy paradigm that the Liberals had introduced. Canada has had basically three broad-ranging economic policy paradigms over its history: the investment state from the late 19th to mid-20th century, an expanding welfare state from the 1950s to 1980s, and the neoliberal state from then to the present. Each has presented the various political forces with different opportunities to work together – or not, as the case may be.

“Canadians rarely give a majority of their votes to one party – PR would simply reflect that”

In the investment state period, both Liberals and Conservatives were keen to use the state to support business investment but disagreed about just how to do it. Both used extensive government patronage to gain support and liberally underwrote the building of canals and railways to build up the nation, but disagreed on economic regulation issues like protection versus free trade. But the trade-offs required to make the investment state work eventually destroyed the two-party system, leading to the emergence of new parties voicing regional and social appeals from the 1921 federal election on.

It would take a worldwide depression and catastrophic world

3 See Hall, Peter A. 1993. “Policy Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State.” *Comparative Politics*. 25:3 (April), 275-96.

war to shift into a new welfare state policy paradigm some 30 years later. Once in place though, it remained dominant through to the 1980s. The welfare state policy paradigm helps explain why Liberal governments could work more easily with the NDP than Conservative minorities could with their potential right-wing regional party allies, as the NDP supported it but the conservative regional parties did not.

Fast forward to the present. The welfare state policy paradigm has given way to a neoliberal one. Both federal Conservative and Liberal parties are committed to smaller government, lower taxes and reduced social benefits, while the NDP, Greens and the Bloc Quebecois harken back to the old paradigm. Examining our most recent cases of minority government we can see how the pressure of this latest economic policy paradigm has changed the relationship amongst parties. While Paul Martin's Liberal minority government from 2004 to 2006 appeared to follow old patterns, supported by the NDP and occasionally the Bloc, the arrangement was unstable and hardly progressive in terms of policy. Basically, the Liberals did not want to return to the old welfare state policy paradigm. Still, the main supporter of the Liberal minority government in terms of votes in the House of Commons was the NDP⁴. Stephen Harper's Conservative minority government from 2006 to 2011 produced surprising results – the main supporter of the government was the Liberals. Some argue this was because the Liberals were unwilling to risk an election due to debts and internal disarray, and there is something to such claims, but the policy consensus between the modern Conservative and Liberal parties around taxes and spending cannot be ignored. This may have contributed to the Liberals' loss of Official Opposition status – they did not oppose enough.

Predicting 2015

The probable results of the upcoming 2015 election in Canada are hard to predict. Polls suggest that the Justin Trudeau Liberals may eclipse the New Democrats while Conservative numbers suggest another minority government or even a loss for Harper. In the event of a minority government, it is hard to say who will seek support from whom.

4 See Godbout, Jean-François, and Bjørn Høyland. 2011. “Coalition voting and minority governments in Canada.” *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*. 49:4 (November), 457-485.

A rejuvenated Liberal party will not want to be seen to be supporting the Conservatives. Nor would the Conservatives support the Liberals, despite their broad areas of policy agreement on economic issues. As both parties want to portray themselves as potential majority governments, they can't be seen to support each other. But a minority Liberal government wouldn't necessarily want to pay the price that NDP support would require. A revived Bloc Quebecois would only further complicate things. A minority NDP government would face similar challenges winning votes in Parliament.

One thing is certain, if minority government is here to stay in Canada then the recent NDP proposal to introduce a form of proportional representation (PR) would certainly make it more functional. Canadians seldom give a majority of their votes to one party – PR would simply reflect that.

But more importantly, it would change some of the key incentives fuelling the political behaviour of party leaders and MPs. The 2004, 2006 and 2008 minority governments did not perform well by most accounts, shifting from crisis to threats of toppling the government to various cloak and dagger shenanigans around some of the more arcane parliamentary rules. It appeared that the parties could not agree on policy nor could they stop calculating when the fall of the government would benefit them most electorally. A shift to PR would change that. If no party could count on turning 39% of the popular vote into 54% of the seats (as Harper did in 2011), then the incentives to make political deals would change dramatically. Then if the most logical deal under the current policy paradigm really is one involving the Conservatives and Liberals, they would be more free to make one. Then perhaps opinions about minority government in Canada would focus on how they work rather than what they do.

9

IT ISN'T EASY

Ruairi Quinn TD

Ruairi Quinn has served as leader of the Irish Labour Party (1997-2002), as Minister for Enterprise and Employment (1993-4), Minister for Finance (1994-7) and as Minister for Education and Skills (2011-4) as well as a series of junior ministerial positions in the 1980s in both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael-led governments.



For the first time in living memory, British voters are facing the near certainty of a coalition government after the general election on 7th May. The polls, so far, question the likelihood of a single-party majority government. This used to be described as a 'hung parliament'. That description belongs to another age.

I do not intend to predict what the outcome of the election will be or indeed the relative strength of the parties. Rather, let me survey the political landscape after all the results are in and the voters have spoken.

Assuming the outgoing government is defeated, whatever that means, there is the possibility that the Queen may ask Mr Cameron, having tendered his resignation, to continue in office as a caretaker Prime Minister. What happens next? In my own experience, the political leaders in the main parties would already have contingency plans in place, weeks in advance of the polling day results. Let us assume that both the Conservatives and Labour will be the lead parties for either a centre-right alliance or a centre-left alliance.

Taking Labour as our example, preparations would already be made before the election, as part of a responsible contingency plan to have a team of negotiators ready to go into action immediately

if it was clear that there was no clear political winner after polling day. This is of course highly sensitive, but it would need to be done. Preparation of the draft Programme for Government is essential.

The role of the negotiators would be to assemble a political programme that could appeal to a broad centre-left alliance. This would be done, well in advance, by a careful comparative analysis of the party-political manifestos of the centre-left parties. If the numbers stack up to provide an overall working majority and the draft Programme for Government is acceptable in principle to both sides, the leaders and their teams can move on to the next stage, which is the composition of the government.

Trading ministries

The size of the Cabinet is already known, or at least agreed in advance. The numerical size of each political party expressed in the number of seats within the alliance is combined to give a weighted share of seats by number in the Cabinet. How the leaders allocate the ministries is one task to be decided. The leaders will no doubt bargain and negotiate which party will get different ministries, but that is as far as it can go at inter-party level. Who gets what job can only be decided by the leader of each party after the allocation of Cabinet portfolios has been made to each party. There can be no vetoes on personalities in other parties being appointed to a Cabinet position. The approach to the formation of the Cabinet would inform the filling of other ministerial positions. All the other political posts would be based on an agreed pro rata share by the two parties involved.

“Party leaders are essential to launch the process, but are then kept in reserve”

This is simple to describe but extremely complex to deliver. It requires skilled political negotiation teams who are appointed by the party leaders to the job. In my experience of negotiating three programmes for government, the teams combined senior parliamentarians and party officials, working very closely together.

The party leaders were essential to launch the process of coalition government formation. But having done so, they were kept in reserve, away from the detailed negotiations. In the end, they were

used to resolve conflicts around the Programme for Government, and, to a lesser extent, around the allocation of ministerial portfolios. However, the appointment to ministerial office remained the exclusive prerogative of the party leader in the different parties.

The final stage was the process of formal agreement of the Programme for Government by the constituent parties to the agreement. In our case, after bitter experience of the past, we used the mechanism of a special delegate conference of the party to ratify the Programme for Government, and, on that basis, to give a mandate to the party leader to proceed to enter into government with the other centre-left partner parties.

Each party has their own way of decision-making. In one case, it was a decision of the parliamentary party. In another case it was a combined decision of the National Council and the parliamentary party. Mutual respect for the internal decision-making processes of each party is an absolute prerequisite for sustaining the cohesion of the new coalition government.

“None of this is easy, even for countries and cultures used to coalition governments”

None of this is easy, even for countries and political cultures that are used to coalition governments. It takes time and is not always successful. It can even be rejected within the party when it comes to the final vote of acceptance.

During the course of the negotiation of our Programme for Government in 1992, where I was the leader of our delegation, Dick Spring, then leader of the Labour Party, asked me how we were getting on. I told him that we were making really good progress but that I still had a problem. When he enquired as to what it was, I told him that while we could negotiate about what we knew and what was on the table for the Programme for Government, we could not negotiate on how we might handle a problem that had not yet arisen. He nodded in agreement, as I said that, in the end, it depended on how well the two party leaders understood and trusted each other. That was true then and remains so to this very day.

Brave new world

The British electorate and the British political establishment on all



sides are very well used to the traditional system, in what is one of the oldest democracies in the world. One change has already happened with fixed-term parliaments and its consequential long general election campaign.

They now need to prepare for another big cultural change of which they are unaware. There will be no certainty about any new government or its composition after all the Westminster seats have been filled. It could be days – and indeed probably weeks – before a new government is in place and ready to begin to implement an agreed programme of change.

“It has taken Ireland’s electorate and political systems at least two decades to adjust”

Ireland’s political path after both independence and a civil war followed closely the Westminster model of government and opposition right up to the 1970s, with three short-lived coalitions before single-party government was returned. But since the 1980s we have had no overall majority government and most new administrations have been based upon formal coalition governments negotiated after the results of the general elections were finalised. It has taken our electorate and our political systems at least two decades to adjust. Our political landscape shows no sign of reverting to a two-and-a-half party system.

There are more than six political parties/groupings within our current parliament. Other European countries traditionally having a small number of parties, such as Spain, Greece, Denmark and Sweden, now have a more diverse party-political landscape. Whatever the outcome on 7th May, the historical trend for a small number of big political parties, even in Britain, is moving towards more parties and less continued support from specific social groups, as has been the case in the past.

In the future, therefore, success will rest not just with those parties which win a lot of votes, but with those which can also build post-election partnerships with other parties to provide stable and predictable government.

EDITOR'S CONCLUSION

Disraeli famously said: "England does not love coalitions". Of course, it can be asked whether 'England' – or that is to say, British voters – 'love' any form of government.

In reality it would be truer to say that coalition government was, back then, unnecessary most of the time. Britain's electoral system – and party system – rendered coalitions unnecessary. The two-party system, based on stark social divisions, must once have seemed unbreakable. At the 1955 general election, 97% of votes were for one of the major two parties. All but nine of the UK's MPs were Labour or Conservative.

Gradual fragmentation

The unwinding of two-party dominance has been slow, but has followed vast social changes. Affluence and education caused a changing middle class to embrace new political issues, while the working class began to fragment socially and politically. Society became less deferential, and the rise of identity politics introduced new and often previously ignored dimensions to political debate.

Moreover, as social class has become much more complex and fragmented, these changes have challenged the basic logic of the two-party system. A class-based two-party system no longer works in the diverse social terrain of modern Britain.

The tragic outbreak of The Troubles in Northern Ireland also resulted in further fragmentation as the Ulster Unionists began to distance themselves from the Conservatives, eventually becoming officially separate in 1985. Today, all of Northern Ireland's MPs are members of Northern Irish only parties.

Slowly, throughout the '50s and '60s, the system began to crumble away. The Liberals rebounded. From less than 3% of the vote in 1951 they reached 11% in 1964. The evolving party system made itself heard with a bang in February 1974. Not only did the

Liberals reach 19% of the vote and win 14 seats – into double digits for the first time in decades – but the SNP won seven seats, having only won its first seat in the prior 1970 contest, while Plaid Cymru secured two, having not won any in 1970. Meanwhile, divisions in Northern Ireland saw the then Protestant Unionist Party's Ian Paisley elected.

The result was a hung parliament. While no government was forthcoming and a (very thin) majority did appear in the October election six months later, the basic changes were here to stay. The Liberals – and later the Liberal Democrats – maintained a popular vote in the high teens and low 20s. While the party would remain under-represented by Britain's First Past the Post electoral system, they became increasingly good at targeting their vote in winnable constituencies, peaking at 62 seats in 2005.

2010 and beyond

Change has continued apace. In 1992 6% of us voted for a party other than the main three parties, the highest since October 1974 when 7% voted for an 'other' party. 1997 saw that barrier broken with over 9% voting for an 'other' party, and since then it has crept upwards still with every election, with the record broken in 2001, 2005 and then, again, in 2010 with 11% of the vote cast for parties outside the traditional three major parties. This is unprecedented. But it is a trend that is likely to continue. Two months out from the 2015 election, polling averages¹ show 27% of voters supporting a party outside the traditional main three parties.

Britain's first hung parliament since February 1974 has not seen, as some might have expected, a return to two-party politics as people react against coalition government. In fact the opposite is true: rather than polarisation, we have radical fragmentation with the rise of UKIP, the SNP and the Greens. Rather than a return to business as usual, the 2015 election looks set to herald another hung parliament, with polls and election forecasts regularly projecting such a result.

Working together

But, as this report has shown, Britain has more experience of coalition and joint working than might be imagined. The Welsh Assembly, elected by a proportional system, has come to see

¹ See <http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/uk-polling-report-average-2>

coalition and minority government as the norm, while since 2007 Scottish local government has also been proportionally elected, resulting in the same phenomenon there.

Given the increasing likelihood of hung parliaments in Britain, the parties will almost certainly have to learn to adapt to the pressures of multi-party democracy and coalition formation. And rightfully so. We should welcome such a development. But our First Past the Post voting system appears no longer capable of producing one-party governments. It's clearly **time to change to a proportional voting system**, which generates power-sharing administrations and parliaments more transparently, in a way that corresponds more accurately to voters' choices and fairly translates their votes into parliamentary seats.

Finally, it is important to draw available lessons from the examples of successful coalitions and minority governments in the UK and elsewhere. How can a coalition best maintain transparency and legitimise itself in the eyes of the public? How can two parties best maintain a working relationship through four or five years of government? What are the best strategies in negotiations?

This report is an attempt to get to the bottom of some of these questions, providing insights that should be useful for years to come. Parties should embrace the challenges of power-sharing. The public are tired of 'yah boo' politics and want something different – something more co-operative. Coalitions and power-sharing can help to restore faith in politics if they are done well. Working together, while tricky to get right, isn't so scary after all.

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