



PRESS NOTICE

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The Constitution Unit compares the Labour and Conservatives positions on electoral reform and their appeal to the Liberal Democrats

Labour/Lib Dem negotiations: What may happen next

The Prime Minister has offered Nick Clegg immediate legislation and an early referendum on electoral reform if the Lib Dem leader's negotiations with David Cameron do not succeed.

'Labour and Liberal Democrats are very close on their ideas for political reform' said the Unit's director Prof Robert Hazell.

Electoral reform

- The Lib Dems want STV, and to reduce the House of Commons to 500 MPs. Labour have pledged a referendum on AV, but want to keep the House of Commons at 650 MPs.
- Both parties wish to change the voting system. Labour's proposed system of AV is no more proportional than FPTP, but would not require any boundary changes. The obvious compromise is the 1998 Jenkins Commission proposal of AV-Plus. This would require a wholesale boundary review; but if the parties could reach quick agreement on AV-Plus, endorsed in a referendum within the first 12 months, they could just implement the change in time for an election in 2014 or 2015.

Lords reform

- Both parties want a fully elected second chamber, but Labour want a referendum first. Other issues to be resolved are the size of the new House; electoral system; timing of elections; staggered elections; length of term; renewable or not.
- Negotiations can focus mainly on timing, and Labour's proposal for a simultaneous referendum on electoral reform for the Commons and the Lords. The referendum might need to be held earlier than Labour's target date of autumn 2011; but there needs to be sufficient time for public education and information on such a big issue.

Fixed term Parliaments

- Both parties support fixed term parliaments. The main issues are the length of the term (four years?), timing relative to devolved and European elections, and devising a safety valve for mid term dissolution which is not liable to abuse. Legislation could be introduced in the first or second session, and would set the date of the next general election, and elections after that.

Party funding

- Both Labour and Lib Dems have a strong interest in increasing state funding. Labour's finances are desperate, and the Lib Dem surge may not last. They will want to revive Hayden Phillips' 2007 review, which produced a draft agreement. There may need to be some accommodation of Labour's wish not to include trade union donations within the proposed £50k cap.

Votes at 16

- Labour and the Lib Dems both support votes at 16, in Labour's case on a free vote in Parliament, with improved citizenship education. The Lib Dems can probably agree to this modulation of their policy.

Right of recall

- Both parties are agreed on a power to recall MPs found guilty of serious wrongdoing. The main issue is the threshold: what counts as 'serious wrongdoing', and what proportion of constituents need to sign a petition to trigger a recall ballot.

Conservative/Lib Dem negotiations on political reform. Mission impossible?

The Liberal Democrats have invited the Conservatives as the party with most seats and most votes to approach them before Labour. David Cameron is claiming the right to be Prime Minister regardless but is still likely to explore the terms of possible co-operation with the Lib Dems.

'The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats may seem far apart on their ideas for political reform, but they are not impossibly so' said the Unit's director Prof Robert Hazell. 'The hardest issue is electoral reform. If the Conservatives can move some way on that, they can readily agree the rest'.

Electoral reform

- The Lib Dems want STV, and to reduce the House of Commons to 500 MPs. The Conservatives also want to reduce the size of the Commons, to 585, but to retain First past the Post. To reduce the size of the House of Commons requires a wholesale boundary review of all constituency boundaries. That is difficult to achieve in one Parliament; but not impossible, if the boundary review process is drastically streamlined. The difficulty of adding electoral reform is the risk of delaying the whole process beyond this Parliament. To persuade the Tories the Lib Dems might propose:
 - A quick (6 month) commission to investigate why First past the post operates so unfairly
 - A referendum in which Lib Dems and the Tories are free to campaign on opposite sides
 - Hardball negotiation: no electoral reform, no deal.

Lords reform

- The Lib Dems want a fully elected second chamber, while the Conservatives want to 'build a consensus' for a mainly elected second chamber. The Lib Dems will want a clear timetable, with a plan for legislation in this Parliament leading to the first elections in 2014 or 2015. The Tories may offer Lords reform in place of electoral reform for the Commons. There is some logic in that: the electoral system for one House needs to be resolved before deciding on the other.

Fixed term Parliaments

- The Lib Dems support fixed term parliaments. Cameron has mentioned the possibility in the past, and might be persuaded. Legislation could be introduced in the first or second session, and would set the date of the next general election, and elections after that.

EU (Referendums) and Sovereignty Bill

- The Conservatives are committed to legislate to require compulsory referendums on future EU Treaties, and to restate the sovereignty of the Westminster Parliament. Both bills are problematic, in terms of their legal effect, and signals they would send to Europe. The Conservative leadership might be relieved if the Lib Dems insisted they were dropped; their backbenchers will not.

Party funding

- The Lib Dems will want to revive Hayden Phillips' 2007 review into party funding, which came close to reaching agreement. Both parties could agree a cap of £50k on donations, which would also apply to trade union contributions. The Conservatives will not be happy with any increase in state funding.

Right of recall

- Both parties are agreed on a power to recall MPs found guilty of serious wrongdoing.

Notes for Editors

- Robert Hazell is available for interview and can be contacted on 0207 679 4971 (office). Vicki Spence is the Unit's Administrator and Prof Hazell's PA (v.spence@ucl.ac.uk, 0207 679 4977) and Brian Walker is the Unit's Press Officer (wiliambrianwalker@gmail.com, 07802 176347).
- The Constitution Unit is an independent and non-partisan research centre based at University College London (www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit).