



PRESS NOTICE

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

Now that the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives are negotiating the Constitution Unit has issued this guide to the political reforms they will be discussing, and where they may end up.

'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.

British bill of rights

- Up until the election the Lib Dems supported a British bill of rights, as part of a written constitution. Faced by the Conservative threat to repeal the Human Rights Act, they have now pledged to protect it. They might be willing to discuss what a British bill of rights would add to the HRA, on the clear understanding that it would have to be ECHR plus.

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 (williambrianwalker@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).