



PRESS NOTICE

12 May 2010: for immediate release

Constitutional Reforms high on Agenda of new Coalition

Constitutional reforms are high on the agenda of the new coalition. Nick Clegg is in charge of political reforms, and will chair the relevant Cabinet Committee. Ken Clarke as the new Justice Secretary will introduce early legislation on fixed term parliaments, and on the referendum on AV. Conservatives and Lib Dems are left free to campaign on opposite sides of the referendum.

Electoral reform and Lords reform

'I hope the new government will at last bring together thinking on the electoral system for the House of Commons and the Lords' said the Constitution Unit's director Prof Robert Hazell. 'Bicameralism works best when the two chambers are complementary to each other, with a different composition. The Lib Dems need not feel too disappointed that AV is not a proportional system: as Meg Russell has argued, a package of an AV elected Commons and PR elected Lords could be an attractive and sensible compromise'.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/may/10/electoral-reformers-lords>

As a consequence of the coalition the new government may have an effective majority in both Houses, because of the Lib Dems' pivotal votes in the second chamber. That could make it easier for this government to get its legislation through the Lords than the previous government, because the Lib Dem peers will be expected to support the government. Rebalancing of Conservative numbers will also help.

Fixed term parliaments and mid term dissolution

Fixed term parliaments will strengthen stability of the coalition, by creating an expectation that a parliament will run to full term. A five year term is long by comparison with other Westminster systems. The 55% threshold for dissolution is intended to strengthen the hand of the Lib Dems: Cameron could not call an early election without the consent of his coalition partners. On confidence motions tabled by the opposition parties, the normal 50% threshold should continue to apply.

Parliamentary reform

Both parties are committed to reducing the size of the House of Commons: the Conservatives to 585 MPs, the Lib Dems to 500. That will be considered alongside electoral reform, and be part of the referendum package. It will require a wholesale boundary review, and early legislation to streamline the boundary review process. The commitment to implement the rest of the Wright reforms in full is welcome, but needs to take the form the committee recommended, not the muddled wording in the statement.

Europe, and British bill of rights

The Conservative proposal for a Sovereignty Bill has been modified to examining the case for such a bill. But the commitment to legislate to require any future EU Treaty that transferred competences to be subject to a referendum still stands. Plans for a British bill of rights seem to have gone. If revived, and if the policy lead goes to Dominic Grieve as Attorney General, human rights groups can rest assured that it will be ECHR plus, not ECHR minus.

Notes for Editors

- Robert Hazell is available for interview and can be contacted on 0207 679 4971 (office). Meg Russell's number is 0207 679 4998. 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).