



How to make coalitions work?

By Professor Robert Hazell
 Director of the Constitution Unit, Department of
 Political Science, University College London

For the first time in well over 60 years, the UK has a coalition government at the national level. Commentators have wondered aloud if Britain is capable of having stable, long-term coalition government. There is no reason why not. There are plenty of examples of successful coalitions in the devolved areas of the UK, the Commonwealth and Western Europe. In all of these places, proportional representation is the norm, making some form of multiparty government almost inevitable. So how have they made coalition government work? I leave it to others to focus on issues of substance; I focus here mostly on procedural matters.

Act in good faith and avoid surprises

At the heart of any effective coalition is strong personal relations and trust: trust, above all, between leaders of the parties, but also, where possible, at the ministerial and even the parliamentary party levels. Acting in good faith and avoiding surprises builds up trust. Acting in good faith expresses respect for the other coalition partner. Avoiding surprises is a good practice: warning a coalition partner in advance of anything they ought to know about or which might impact on the running of the coalition gives them time to prepare. This is something they will appreciate.

Consultation

Another key means of ensuring trust is to have in place comprehensive, regular, and if possible formalised procedures of consultation. Consultation may take place at various tiers, with varying levels of formality. This may involve ministerial discussions; talks between special advisors; even frontbenchers briefing backbenchers on a regular basis.

Regular consultation and the process of sharing information encourages a sense of ownership in the decisions being made, as well as trust. To do otherwise—to assert that a matter is on a ‘need to know basis’—is to implicitly suggest that one does not trust a coalition partner; and suggests a disregard for the fortunes of that partner.

Provide safety valves

Even for single party governments, maintaining party discipline and unity is difficult, because political parties are in themselves coalitions of competing factions. A coalition must assert its unity; but the parties composing the coalition must also assert their distinctiveness. These conflicting considerations of unity and distinctiveness may impact upon the coalition’s ability



The beginnings of the coalition government: Cameron and Clegg meet at Downing Street. Photo: Andrew Parsons/Conservative Party.

to govern effectively.

Collective cabinet responsibility—the requirement that all those in Cabinet must publicly support decisions made in Cabinet, even if they privately disagree—is an example of this requirement of unity. But it can be onerous, particularly for the smaller party. Thus, in many coalitions, as indeed in the current Con-Lib coalition, there is provision for a right to ‘agree to disagree’ on certain specified issues. This allows a party within the coalition to dissent, and preserve its distinctiveness on a small number of issues closely linked with its identity.

Address the resource imbalance

A common experience of coalitions within the UK and abroad is that the smaller party to the coalition has a harder time of it. Smaller parties may be seen as having too much influence—as the ‘tail wagging the dog’; or they may be identified with the policies of the larger party. Further, smaller parties to the coalition are often seen as a source of instability, which they are under pressure to disprove; at the same time, they are also under pressure to keep faith with their own supporters. Moreover, the loss of senior members to ministerial posts has a greater relative impact on the smaller party.

One way to remedy the balance is to give greater, even disproportionate resources to the smaller party, in the form of civil service support, or by the appointment of more special advisors. Another way is for the larger coalition partner to actively give credit to the smaller party where credit is due. Adjusting for the weakness of a part may strengthen the coalition as a whole.

Procedure is a difficult subject to get excited about, but for coalitions, it is vital. These suggestions seem commonsensical; but in practice they are not so easily implemented. They require attention and time, two matters all governments tend to be perilously short of. But this is how successful coalition governments work.