Coalition government: doomed to fail?

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UCL lunchtime lecture
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Structure of today’s talk

- Are hung parliaments here to stay?
- Stability of coalition government
- Fixed term Parliaments
- Referendum on electoral reform
- Reducing the size of the House of Commons
- Failure of political reforms threatens the coalition
Decline of the two party system since 1950s
Decline of the two party system

- Conservative + Labour polled 95% in 1950s, 75% in 1974, 65% in 2010
- Lib Dems polled 24%, second best performance ever
- Minor parties polled 10%: UKIP, BNP, SNP, Greens, Sinn Fein, DUP, Plaid Cymru
- In last four elections at least 75 MPs neither Labour nor Conservative
- Hung Parliaments are more likely in future
Coalition governments in Europe
Are coalitions inherently less stable?

Average duration of types of government

- Single Party Majority
- Minimal Winning Coalition
- Single Party Minority
- Surplus Coalition
- Minority Coalition
- Caretaker

Coalitions of the type now established in the UK last on average seven months less than single party majority governments. But they last longer than minority governments.

NB. According to standard methodology, a government is counted as terminating at the time of an election even if the incumbent party or parties win the election and return to power. So UK governments have a maximum duration of 1827 days (5 years). A change of PM also counts as a government change.

But the UK coalition deal was struck quickly

The UK coalition government was formed in five days, with a full coalition agreement published 13 days after the election.

The UK programme for government is of medium length in international terms.

Very short coalition agreements mainly or entirely covering the rules and principles of coalition government rather than the government’s policy programme.

* Proposed Liberal-NDP coalition – ultimately was not formed
Coalition Agreement for Stability and Reform

- Issued by Cabinet Office 21 May
- 5 year agreement to May 2015
- Based on goodwill, mutual trust, agreed procedures. ‘Good faith and no surprises’
- Close consultation between PM and DPM
Government and Cabinet Committees

• Coalition Committee, co-chaired by PM and DPM
• Unresolved issues can be referred to CC by chair or deputy chair of any Cabinet Committee
• Each committee has chair from one party, deputy chair from other
• Coalition Operation and Strategic Planning Group: Danny Alexander, Oliver Letwin, Francis Maude and Jim Wallace
Support for the Government in Parliament

- Government policy and legislation to be supported by both parties in Parliament
- Same whip applies to both parties
- Conservative chief whip, Lib Dem deputy
- Parallel arrangements in Lords, where new government has effective majority thanks to LDs
Fixed Term Parliaments

• Deny government the right to set the election date to suit its own electoral advantage
• Greater stability and predictability, allowing better planning and long term decision making

Two main issues
• Length of fixed term
• Provide safety valve to allow early dissolution
Length of Fixed Term in other Parliaments

• Australia and New Zealand have 3 years max
• Canada and provinces have 4 year fixed terms; and Australian states
• Scotland, Wales, N Ireland 4 year fixed terms
• Most European countries have 4 year fixed terms
• So 5 year fixed term is relatively long
Safety valve for mid term Dissolution

- Two main routes to early dissolution in FxtPs Bill
- 67% vote by HC, requiring cross party support
- No confidence motion (50%) threshold, with no alternative government formed in 14 days
- Do we need dual threshold?
- Prerogative power of dissolution is abolished
Referendum on Electoral Reform

- Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill
- Cons supported FPTP, LDs STV, Labour AV
- Cons and LDs whipped to support the bill, but free to campaign on opposite sides in referendum
- LDs want early referendum, and Cons want early start to reducing size of House of Commons
Will AV referendum be won?

- Voters know nothing about electoral systems
- Difficult to explain difference between FPTP and AV
- AV is preferential voting system, not proportional
- Estimated AV results in 2010: Con 280, Lab 260, LD 80
  (Actual results: Con 307, Lab 258, LD 57)
- Political parties and electoral reformers divided
- Very little time for public education from Feb to April 2011
- Confused public may vote for status quo: Canada
Reducing size of House of Commons

- HC to be reduced from 650 MPs to 600
- Requires wholesale boundary review
- Last boundary review ran from 2000 to 2008
- Need to streamline process, abolish local inquiries
- Conservatives want equal sized constituencies, plus or minus 5%, to reduce bias against them
- Accusations of gerrymandering
- Difficult passage for legislation in Commons and Lords
Possible failure of political reforms threatens future of the coalition

- Lib Dems support coalition to deliver political and constitutional reform
- Mad rush to legislation, no consultation
- Unnecessary fight over 5 year fixed terms
- Referendum on AV is likely to be lost
- Accusations of gerrymandering parliamentary boundaries
- Lords reform remains genuinely difficult
So what might happen next?

- The Lib Dems might split, as in previous coalitions
- They might leave the government but support it on supply and confidence, allowing them to develop greater distinctiveness
- Future hung parliaments might see minority governments, not necessarily coalitions
- What will develop as the UK tradition?
The Conservative-LibDem government is the first coalition government at Westminster since 1945.

The pattern of coalition and minority govt in C20

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Source: Akash Paun and Robert Hazell (eds.) (2009), Making Minority Government Work, p. 18