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AND THE WINNER IS ...



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And the Winner Is ...

by Richard Burgess, 10 May 2010

So it's all over! After one of the most exciting election run-ups in post-war British history, nearly 30 million Britons – that's about 65% of those eligible to vote - have been to the polls and put their ballot paper in the box. And the winner is ...

Well, who is the winner? And, indeed, is it over? At first glance it seems that the election result has provided us with three losers. Labour certainly can't be counted a winner, having lost 91 seats in parliament and over 6% of the vote. For the Liberal Democrats, whose leader Nick Clegg made such an impression in the TV debates and who afterwards seemed to be riding on a surge of optimism, election night was a big disappointment. Whatever people might have said in opinion polls, it seems that many of the "don't knows", once in the privacy of polling booth, chose to vote as they usually do – for one of the two major parties. (Poor Liberal Democrats – it is not the first time this has happened in a British election!) The Conservatives, lead by David Cameron, emerge as the largest party with 306 seats (and 36%) of the votes. But neither can they be called outright winners, having fallen short of the 326 seats needed to have a majority in the House of Commons.



Party leaders Gordon Brown (Labour, left), David Cameron (Cons.) and Nick Clegg (LibDem, right)

What we are left with is what was forecast by many observers beforehand and warned against by both Labour and Conservative politicians – a hung parliament.

What this means in practice is that no single party has a majority in the House of Commons. This is a fairly rare occurrence in British politics. The last time was in 1974.

One of the features of the British



election system is that relatively small swings in electoral support between the two major parties are often translated into much larger swings in terms of seats. This has the advantage of providing stable, majority governments that can get their policies through parliament without having to haggle with the opposition. This is what the British are used to – governments that are allowed to sit out their allotted five-year terms, that make decisions and put them into practice, while oppositions are allowed to voice their disapproval, but seldom have an opportunity to do much more than that. The alternative strikes many Britons as a recipe for chaos.

But it is worth remembering that what is a hung parliament for Britain is a perfectly normal state of affairs in other countries. In Norway, for example, we have to go back to 1957 to find an election in which one party secured more than 50% of the seats in the Storting. The “problem” of the hung parliament is solved either by the forming of coalitions between parties or by the largest party forming a minority government and seeking for support from other parties from issue to issue. It is these choices that face the party leaders in Britain now. We can list four alternatives:

1. The Conservatives can form a minority government and seek support from issue to issue with other parties. In practice this will usually mean the Liberal Democrats. Of the other smaller parties only Northern Ireland’s eight Democratic Unionist Party MPs are likely to be very supportive. Minority governments tend to be fairly short-lived.

2. The Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats can form a coalition, i.e. form a government in which both parties have ministers. This has the advantage that it would give an absolute majority in parliament. So they would be able to sit for a full period, provided they are able to keep the coalition together. The difficulty is, of course, that there are real differences of policies between the two parties and that compromises will have to be made. And, as SV in Norway can confirm, it is the smaller party in a coalition that has to make most. One vital issue that separates the two parties is electoral reform. Changing the voting system from the present “first-past-the-post” system to a form of proportional representation similar to the one we have in Norway has been the key issues for Liberals for decades. Their chief opponent has been the Conservative Party. Could Clegg compromise on this issue and still look his voters in the eye?
3. The third alternative is that Labour and the Liberal Democrats could form a coalition. On some issues these two parties actually have more in common than the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats: they are generally favourable to Europe and, importantly, they can agree on the need for electoral reform. The trouble is that, even together, they can’t make a majority government. A coalition government without a full majority would be weak, and be dependent on the small parties (for example, the nationalist parties) to get their policies through parliament. Would this give these parties too much power over government policy?
4. A fourth alternative is one that has been suggested by Alex Salmond of the Scottish National party. It involves forming what they have called “a rainbow coalition” of Labour, Liberal Democrats and the nationalists in a formal coalition. The same drawback applies: it would give the nationalists considerable influence.

The Conservatives claim that the last two options ignore the will of the people. The British electorate, they argue, has voted for change and Gordon Brown has lost his mandate to govern. As the largest party, the Conservatives should be ones to form a government, either alone or in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Even some leading Labour politicians have voiced this view. Indeed, some Labour politicians are saying privately that the next few years are going to be so tough for however gets into power that Labour is best served by standing down and letting the Conservatives take the unpopular decisions.

At the time of writing this (Sunday 9 May), it is option nr. 2 that seems the most likely scenario. Talks are taking place between negotiators from the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats with a view to forming a coalition government. Gordon Brown has informed Nick Clegg that if these talks fail, he is willing to negotiate the possibility of option 3 or 4. In the mean time he is still Prime Minister and continues to run the country, sending his Chancellor (Finance Minister) to Brussels to attend an important EU meeting on the current financial crisis in Europe.

One thing everyone is agreed on is that decisions must be made swiftly. This election has taken place at a difficult time in Europe, as fears grow that Greece's economic problems will spread and cause a new recession. Continuing uncertainty about the future of the British government could have serious economic consequences, both in Britain and in the EU, and this requires that leaders of all parties put the national interest above party politics. So far the three main leaders appear to have responded to the seriousness of the situation. The confrontational language of the election campaign itself has been considerably toned down while negotiations are going on.

Whatever the outcome over the next few days, the political geography of Britain has shifted. Thirteen years of Labour domination has come to an end. The smaller parties, particularly the Liberal Democrats, find themselves in a bargaining position that they have not had before. In the days and weeks ahead compromises between political adversaries will have to be made, camels will have to be swallowed and new alliances forged. This is a new experience for Britain's politicians, and if they are not able to rise to the occasion, the country may well be in for a period of great instability, with a strong likelihood of a new election before very long. But there is another possibility too: that the need to find common solutions and work together may change the confrontational style that is so typical of political life in Britain. Perhaps this in the long run might be an advantage for British democracy.

The results show some of the anomalies of the British electoral system. As you may know Britain has a so-called first-past-the-post system in which each constituency returns only one representative – the one with the most votes. Votes cast for the losing candidates are not actually translated into representation. They are essentially wasted, and, statistically, most votes in a British election *are* wasted. This has particularly serious consequences for parties whose support

may be strong nationally but who often end up as number 2 or 3 in each constituency. The Liberal Democrats, for example, polled 23% of the vote nationwide. This translates into 57 seats – less than 9% of the seats in the House of Commons. Ironically, although their support rose by 1% compared to at the last election, they lost 5 seats. (A double irony is that, in spite of this, they are in a more powerful position than for many decades!)

If we are going to announce a clear election winner, maybe we should choose Caroline Lucas, the MP for Brighton Pavilion, who became the first member of the Green Party to gain a seat in parliament. One seat out of 650 may not sound much, but given the voting system it is an enormous achievement to finish ahead of all three major parties in a constituency.

