The Forum

The British General Election of 2010

Graham K. Wilson, *Boston University Brussels*

The British General Election of 2010

Graham K. Wilson

Abstract

In a sense, all the parties lost the British General Election of 2010. However, a number of factors including the skilled leadership of David Cameron resulted in the creation of a governing coalition composed of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats that would have seemed highly implausible before and during the election campaign. The coalition, the first to be formed outside a national emergency since Britain became a democracy raises interesting questions about how its "Westminster Model" system will adapt.

The Improbability of the Result

If an experienced commentator on British politics, asked to predict the outcome of the British General Election of 2010 at the start of that year, had said that it would result in a coalition between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, he or she would have suffered a severe loss of professional reputation. Numerous reasons would have been given why such an outcome could not happen. Whatever its many failings, people would have said, the British electoral system usually delivers a clear result. Even in the rare instances since the Second World War in which a clear majority did not emerge for a single party, the two elections of 1974, the result was not a coalition but *understandings* between the largest party in the Commons and smaller parties such as the Welsh Nationalists, the Scottish Nationalists, and the Liberals. Some might even suggest that coalitions are contrary to the spirit of the Westminster system. British politics was about clear accountability not the ambiguities of coalition politics. The British are accustomed to bargaining *within* political parties (for example, between "wets" and "drys" in the Thatcher government or between Euroskeptics and pragmatics in the Major government) rather than bargaining *between* parties, which savored of how Continentals behave in smoke filled rooms. On the other hand, as in the United States, there is always popular support in the UK for the idea that politicians "should try to get along with each other" and reduce the partisan adversarialism so evident in British politics (King 2007).

In the unlikely event of the election producing an inconclusive result, the informed observer would have noted, an alliance between the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives was unlikely because they disagreed on fundamental issues such as taxation, immigration, and nuclear weapons, while in important parts of the country, notably the South West, the Liberal Democrats were the Conservatives' main opponent. *Any* coalition was unlikely and one between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats particularly implausible. Liberal Democrats seemed more likely to work well with Labour and some foundations for cooperation seemed to have been laid prior to the election. The Labour Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, used to seek regularly and frequently the confidential advice of the Liberal Democrat's spokesman on the economy, Vince Cable. The meetings allegedly provided Brown with "therapy" as well as economic advice and Brown would tell Cable "how unfair everything was." ("Against the Wall" *Sunday Times* 20 May 2010.) If there had to be a coalition, one between Labour and the Liberal Democrats seemed more likely than one between Liberal Democrats and Conservatives.

As we all know, the highly improbable happened nonetheless. Britain acquired its first formal coalition government since the nineteenth century to be created outside a national emergency such as war or the Great Depression which

was of an order of magnitude several times recent difficulties. How did this outcome materialize and what are its implications for the British political system? The explanation of this strange outcome has to include both the outcome of the election itself and of the bargaining that followed.

The Election Everyone Lost

The most obvious and literal loser of the election was the Labour Party. The party received one of its lowest shares of the popular vote, only narrowly exceeding its low point under the leadership of Michael Foot in 1983. In terms of the popular vote, therefore, the result represented the loss of all the gains of the Blair era and, it might be added, a similar setback geographically. The truly surprising gains achieved under Blair in the London commuter belt, for example, have been erased. Labour has been pushed back into the fortresses in the Northeast, East, and Scotland, the fortresses that ensured its survival in the 1980s and that allow it to receive a higher proportion of seats in the House of Commons than its share of the popular vote would suggest.

The Labour Party's loss, to use a term from Marxist scholarship, was over-determined. Numerous factors would almost in themselves have been an adequate explanation for their loss. The worst economic crisis since the 1930s happened under a government that had loudly proclaimed its economic successes, including growth and an end to the "stop-go" of the British economy in the past. To the degree that British elections are now about achieving results and delivering successful management (Clarke, Sanders et al. 2009), the Labour Party could have been expected to lose badly.

The Labour Party had also somehow, perhaps because it was the majority in the House of Commons, taken the brunt of the public's ire over the abuses by numerous M.P.s of the expenses system. Beyond that, its leader, Gordon Brown, seemed to many to be a grumpy and irascible man, incapable of communicating with the public and unreliable in his relationships with colleagues. Brown obligingly lived up to stereotype in the campaign's most celebrated moment, "Duffygate." As millions around the world saw, when it was inadvertently broadcast because Brown failed to take off a microphone, he slandered in the safety of his prime ministerial car a woman – a lifetime Labour supporter – from whom he had parted affectionately seconds before. For good measure, the government remained committed to an unpopular war in Afghanistan after awkwardly extricating itself from another in Iraq. Finally, although Brown had been the co-architect with Blair of "New Labour," he had so lost association with the New Labour brand that the London correspondent for *The New York Times*, John Burns, could bizarrely describe Brown as an old-style class warrior (*The New York Times* 16 May 2010). While Brown can hardly be blamed for the

inadequacies of the American press, it is telling that such a description of him could appear in a major newspaper.

The Conservatives were frequently reminded by their leader, David Cameron, in the days immediately after the election, that they had not won it. For all the reasons advanced to explain Labour's defeat, this was also a striking failure by the Conservatives. An opposition party could scarcely wish for more propitious circumstances than those of Britain 2010. The economic crisis, the weariness of a government that had been in power for thirteen years, Brown's personal limitations, et cetera, could reasonably have been expected to produce a clear Conservative majority. At the start of the year, both YouGov and ICM polls suggested that just such an outcome was about to occur, with the Conservatives enjoying a double-digit lead over Labour (see Table 1.) Although the Conservatives did ultimately emphasize the large gains they had made in terms of seats in the House of Commons, their vote share was clearly below the share they had won when led by Margaret Thatcher in 1979, 1983 and 1987. By the standards of any modern period except the last thirteen years, this was a dreadful result.

Table 1. Opinion Polls at the Start of the Year.

Poll	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Conservative Lead
YouGov 2010/01/07	42	30	16	12
ICM 2010/01/07	40	30	18	10
Comres 2010/01/14	42	29	19	13

Excuses can be offered. The electoral system has been biased against the Conservatives, as we shall discuss further below. National swings did not necessarily translate uniformly into local results. Journalists were impressed by how frequently candidates for Parliament were questioned on local issues ("The Western Front" *The Economist* April 22, 2010). While not exaggerating its importance, the belief by some M.P.s, such as Vince Coakley (Gedling) that they enjoyed a personal vote seemed to be justified, in that the swing away from Labour in his constituency was less than the national average – or in some neighboring seats. However, the failure of the Conservatives to turn highly propitious circumstances into a majority in the House of Commons constituted a notable failure.

The third losers in the election were the Liberal Democrats. The dynamics of the campaign had been transformed by what was commonly agreed to be the victory of their leader, Nick Clegg, in the first of the debates that had transformed the campaign. Displacing more established aspects of British campaigns, including interviews by television journalists far more aggressive and demanding than American TV interviews, the debates, as one activist said, sucked the oxygen out of everything else. The Liberal Democrats were the clear beneficiaries, partly from being treated as the equal of the large parties and partly because of the adroit performance in them of their leader.

For a time, opinion polls had the Liberal Democrats leading not only Labour but briefly everyone else. Yet at the end of the day, the Liberal Democrats increased their vote by only one percent over the 2005 result, and their representation in the Commons actually declined slightly. Again, numerous explanations of the outcome are plausible. Clegg did not dominate the third debate as he had the first, the argument that a vote for the Liberal Democrats rather than Labour might keep Gordon Brown as prime minister, and the unpopularity of possibly sensible policies such as a onetime amnesty for illegal immigrants might all explain why the final result was so unconvincing for the Liberal Democrats.

We might finally extend the claim that everyone lost by noting that all the prominence and advantages of controlling the Scottish Executive resulted in no significant gain in votes and none at all in seats for the Scottish Nationalist Party. Meanwhile, the Welsh Nationalists saw their share of votes actually decline, while gaining one seat.

Why Did Everyone Lose?

The simplest explanation for the fact that every party lost is that in a three-party system, winning outright is difficult. And yet in a three-party system in 2005, Labour had secured a comfortable majority in the House of Commons. While analyses of individual-level data may produce different answers, three factors were probably important. First, the mysterious workings of the non-partisan Electoral Commission have produced a system biased in favor of the Labour Party and against the Conservatives. Unlike the Royal Family, the workings of the Electoral Commission retain a degree of mystery that would have commanded Bagehot's attention and admiration.

Americans know that redistricting is inherently political in a partisan sense. Any way of re-drawing the boundaries favors one party and disadvantages another. The British continue to behave as though this were not the case. For example, the Conservatives acquiesced in boundary change, such as moving thousands of Conservative voters out of the marginal constituency of Warwick

and Leamington and into a neighboring constituency that already had an impregnable Conservative majority, thus diminishing their chances of winning the seat. (In the event, a quality Conservative candidate did capture the seat by achieving a swing to the Conservatives significantly higher than the national average.) Either of the major US parties would have protested loudly.

More importantly, the Conservatives have accepted *practices* by the Commission that are predictably to their disadvantage. The most obvious example is the Commission's refusal to make decisions on the basis of projections of very clear population trends, such as declining populations in central cities, and instead to use mechanically data that they know to be outdated by the time they use it. This has produced a significant advantage for the Labour Party which these declining areas support.

The second factor is the popular history of Thatcherism. The popular history of Thatcherism may differ from its reality. It can reasonably be concluded that the policies of the Thatcher and Major governments resulted in huge gains for the United Kingdom. The UK went from being the "sick man" of Europe in 1979, lagging behind not only France and Germany but also Italy in per capita income, to being better off than any large continental European country in 2007, with higher GDP per capita and lower unemployment. Surely Thatcherite policies such as the Big Bang reforms of the City, which made it globally competitive, and the reining in of mindless union militancy (except among British Airways cabin crew), were at least partly responsible for these gains. Tony Blair clearly thought so.

However, Thatcherism in popular history is often remembered as a set of policies that involved mean treatment of the poor and needless confrontation. Popular history is written and disseminated by people – academics, journalists – who in Britain overwhelmingly are anti-Thatcherite in their views and arguably in their self-interest. David Cameron tried hard to disassociate the Conservatives from this legacy of Thatcherism in popular history during the campaign. However, the public sensed ambivalence in his party about the Thatcherism that was indeed surely there, with some at least thinking it was a defensible record, while others sought to distance themselves from it.

Thus everyone in Britain knew that expenditure cuts were inevitable. The awkward question for the Conservatives was whether the public would support a party with a reputation for *savoring* expenditure cuts irrespective of whether economic conditions required them. The rapid growth of public spending under the Labour governments of this century had produced noticeable improvements in public services, such as the National Health Service. Many voters feared the reversal of these improvements under a Conservative government and a reversion to "Thatcherism." Even once in office, the Liberal Democratic Leader and Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, felt the need to argue that the expenditure cuts the

coalition government would make were not going to be a reversion to "the 1980s." Whether or not Thatcherism explains the economic success of the UK in recent decades, it was, then, an important liability for the Conservatives in the popular mind.

Finally, while the aggregate economic statistics were bad, they were not dreadful, and in any case most voters do not live life at the aggregate level. British unemployment remained significantly lower than American. House prices increased by ten per cent in the year leading up to the election. Discretionary spending continued. Millions of Britons continued to take vacations in the USA or Spain. By the time the election occurred, it seemed that the dreadful possibilities of a crash leading into a depression had been averted. Life for most voters, in short, was not nearly that bad. Labour's poor result would have been even worse if Recession had indeed turned into Depression.

Winning the Post Election

As Americans know, Al Gore defeated George W. Bush by half a million votes in 2000 and failed to become president. Part of the explanation is that Bush's team managed the post-election period better. Similarly, while Cameron has been criticized for a lackluster campaign, his performance in the post campaign was impressive. The results had produced a close balance between what might have been regarded as the parties of the left and the parties of the right. A summary might have looked as follows:

- The Right = 307 Con (including the delayed result in Thirsk & Malton) + 8 Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) = 315.

- The Left = 258 Labour + 57 Lib Dem + 3 Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), plus (taking Labour whip) 1 NI Alliance = 319.

- The 3 Plaid Cymru PC + 6 SNP + 1 Green would usually have voted with Labour = 329, or occasionally abstained. The 5 Sinn Fein do not take their seats. The NI Independent's vote is unpredictable.

We can suggest several reasons why this apparent marginal victory for the left did not result in a left-leaning coalition. The first is that although the results can be seen as confirming the existence of a three-party system, the *moral logic* of a two-party system remained in place. The fact that the Conservatives were the largest single party was seen as conferring on them the moral right to have first chance at forming the government. Clegg had promised no less in the campaign, a promise that also had the advantage of sparing Clegg the difficulty of specifying

which party he would choose to support first in its attempt to form a government. It is probably fair to say that this expectation was widely shared, even though constitutional doctrine would have supported an attempt by the Labour government to remain in power until defeated on a confidence vote in the House of Commons. Labour was perceived as defeated and rejected. A coalition that kept it in power would have been perceived to be a coalition of the losers.

The second reason the Conservatives won is the simplicity of the arithmetic of a Liberal Democratic/Conservative coalition. The two parties together enjoy a clear majority. As we saw above, a "progressive coalition" would have required not only those two parties but a veritable ragbag of minor parties in order to achieve a majority. Such a diverse coalition would have been unstable at a time when major decisions on public expenditure were needed and, as in Israeli politics, the coalition would have been easily held hostage by demands for special favors or policies from the small parties on whose support it depended. In other words, the Liberal Democrats would have paid a heavy price with the public for creating not only a "coalition of the losers" but for relying on an agreement with the SNP and Plaid Cymru. In Canada, a putative coalition of Liberals and the Partie Quebecois had been successfully attacked by the Conservatives for "giving the keys to Canada to its enemies."

The third reason the Conservatives won was that their bargaining with the Liberal Democrats was more than adroit than Labour's. The Conservatives drew the Liberal Democrats in with unexpected promises such a referendum on changing the voting system, numerous seats in the Cabinet (5) and government more generally (20, about one third of the Parliamentary Liberal Democratic Party), and concessions on tax policy. In contrast, negotiations with Labour seem to have gone surprisingly difficultly. The reasons why Liberal Democratic/Labour bargaining faltered are difficult to specify.

One question is whether the Liberal Democrats and Labour were in fact as natural allies as has been suggested so far. Certainly there were very clear differences between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives on nuclear weapons, immigration policy, and taxation. Yet there were areas of agreement, on scrapping identity cards and facing up to the need for public expenditure cuts (though, the Liberal Democrats argued during the campaign, only once the economy was growing again.) Moreover, the profound authoritarianism of the Labour government allowed the Conservatives to suggest that they were closer to the traditional emphasis of the Liberal Democrats on protecting civil liberties.

Yet a fair reading of the Liberal Democratic manifesto would surely lead to the conclusion that they were a party of the left. The repeated emphasis was on creating a more equal, fairer Britain with more spending on education, ending income tax on low paid workers, and, for good measure, committing to policies such as breaking up the banks. Although Clegg suggested that their commitment

was not to replace the Trident nuclear submarines on a like-for-like basis but was simply a search for efficiency, the context in the manifesto makes clear that this was a unilateralist gesture intended to prompt other countries into also renouncing nuclear weapons. It was this policy that provoked one of Brown's best moments in the debates when he told Clegg to "get real" on nuclear weapons. Someone given the Liberal Democratic manifesto to read, with the name of the party and its commitments to electoral reform edited out, would not have been surprised if told it was the Labour Party manifesto.

We are therefore still left with the difficulty of explaining the creation of a Liberal Democratic/Conservative coalition. It is perhaps relevant that several of the Labour negotiators were soon to be involved in the leadership contest. The decision on what to agree to, or not, in the negotiations probably seemed to those involved to be a decision not only about the immediate future but about the future direction of the Labour Party. An alliance with the Liberal Democrats, an idea with which Tony Blair had toyed in the late 1990s, was an appealing prospect to those who believed that under Blair the party had moved too far to the right. Tellingly, *The Guardian*, the serious newspaper with the closest links to Labour, associated opposition to a deal with "M.P.s from northern heartlands and Scotland." (Patrick Wintour "Hopes of a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition foundering…." *The Guardian* 11/5/2010.)

Liberal Democrat negotiators were struck by how less positive the demeanor of the Labour team was than that of the Conservatives. Labour negotiators in turn suggested that the Liberal Democrats, gripped by a lust for power, were already set on a coalition with the Conservatives. As the parties sought to use questions of who had said what to whom in the negotiations as a weapon in the opening rounds of the *next* election (supposedly, under the Coalition agreement between the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives, to be held in May of 2015), the prospects for coming to a definitive impartial account of the negotiations are slim.

The Coalition and the Future of British Politics

There are two scenarios that are entirely plausible electorally. The first starts by noting that the Liberal Democrats have generally sustained a significant level of support since 1974, their worst result being 14% in that year. In the last two elections, they have received over twenty per cent of the vote. The Free Democrats in Germany would be thrilled with such a performance. In this 'rosy scenario' for the Liberal Democrats, the British public, delighted by the new style of government associated with the coalition, endorses the Alternative Vote, a system which, while not perfectly proportional, would have trebled the number of Liberal Democratic M.P.s if used in the 2010 Election. After a period holding

major positions in government, Liberal Democratic leaders could no longer be derided as inexperienced and untested. Coalitions became the norm in British politics.

The second, and for the Liberal Democrats more pessimistic, scenario suggests that the unpopularity of the government's expenditure cuts help to ensure the defeat of the Alternative Vote in a referendum. In this scenario, Liberal Democratic activists were steadily disillusioned by the compromises required with the Conservatives and the choices needed to govern in a time of fiscal austerity. As in the aftermath of the coalition during the First World War, Liberal Democrats lose their identity and English politics reverts to its "normal" two-party contest between Labour and the Conservatives. The Labour Party, even though its strongholds are in declining cities and unions, is able to regroup and avoid the extremism that began its period in opposition after the 1979 Election.

No doubt events will prove to be unpredictable and neither scenario will be fully accurate. On balance, the second seems the more likely. Politics is about more than elections, however. So what are implications of this coalition for governing? Many have noted that David Cameron is the youngest British Prime Minister since Lord Liverpool. It is to Lord Liverpool that the famed remark on Cabinet government is attributed: "Gentlemen, it doesn't matter what we say as long as we all say the same." Saying the same will be harder to achieve in a coalition, and there are in fact already agreements to differ in place.

At the very least, coalition government will complicate prime ministerial government. As King notes, at the start of Blair's prime ministership, the phrase "Tony Wants" was seen as a command (King 2007). The movie *In the Loop* provides an arresting portrayal of the days when an enforcer from the prime minister would descend on a minister who had seemed to go "wobbly" on a key policy, as with, in that portrayal, war in Iraq. Given the inevitable differences of opinion in a coalition, *In the Loop* may come to seem as dated a portrayal of British government as *Yes, Prime Minister* seemed in the Blair years.

It might be said that Britain has experienced "coalitions" in the past but that they have been called things like "the Callaghan government" or even, especially in her early years, "the Thatcher government." Divisions between socialist hardliners such as Benn and, for example, Shirley Williams, were probably greater than the divisions between Clegg and Cameron. The struggles between "the wets" and "the dries" in the Thatcher years had hardly faded before the more obscure struggles between the Prime Minister and her Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson, erupted. In such situations, several issues arise.

First, the civil service struggles to define where its loyalties lie. Officials are unsure whether it is to government as a whole, and therefore try to keep their minister in line, or to the individual minister, even if she or he is clearly departing

from government policy. This was known in Whitehall at the time as "the Benn problem" (Campbell and Wilson 1995: Barker and Wilson 1997).

Second, prime ministers can still get their way, but as King described in his masterful analysis of Thatcher as prime minister (King 1987), they need to use a variety of resources, strategies and skills in order to do so. Thatcher used her powers of appointment to place ideologically sympathetic people in key positions and carefully varied the strength of her attempts to control according to the extent of her political power. For example, the hapless Francis Pym, a leading "wet", was brought into the government at Thatcher's most vulnerable moment, following the Argentine invasion of the Falklands, and was quickly dispatched once the 1983 election was won. Neustadt argued four decades ago that in a political system characterized by a sharing of powers, successful Presidents must use their powers "to persuade" adroitly in order to succeed. He may well have underestimated the powers to command inherent in the office, and successful presidential leadership probably requires both command and persuasion. Similarly, a prime minister leading a divided government must mix maneuvering, command, and persuasion.

Third, a prime minister leading an ideologically divided government must have particularly effective staffing support, whether from within Number Ten or the Cabinet Office. It is vital for a prime minister in a divided government to know of plans conflicting with his or her priorities, plans that are being developed deep in Departments long before they reach a Cabinet Committee, let alone Cabinet. The twin dangers of losing on a policy question and having highly visible splits in the government make it really desirable to monitor policy proposals in their early stages. As staffing resources for British prime ministers remain small by international standards (unless the Cabinet Office is included), this is a real challenge.

A final challenge will be in dealing with the other governments that rule the United Kingdom. The Scottish and Welsh Executives and the European Union all enjoy significant authority over a number of policies. The presence of the Liberal Democrats in the government gives it slightly greater legitimacy north of the border, where the Liberal Democrats won eleven seats compared with the Conservatives one – almost double the number won by the Scottish Nationalist Party. The presence of Nick Clegg in the government, erstwhile Eurocrat, multi-linguist, and married to a Spaniard, might give some temporary reassurance to the EU.

The British Election and Political Science

The outcome of the British election – and the current state of British politics more generally – raises several questions for political science. The first is how we came

to end up in this state of affairs. In particular, how did the two-party system evolve into a system that contained three major and many minor parties? One of the few things we thought we knew for sure in political science was Duverger's Law – the relationship between the electoral system and the number of political parties (Duverger 1963). The misleadingly named "first past the post" system was supposed to guarantee a two-party system. Perhaps there would be awkward moments of transition as a new party (Labour) displaced an established party (the Liberals), but inexorably the electoral system would restore and maintain a two party political order.

This is clearly not how things turned out. As noted earlier, the Liberals/ Liberal Democrats have maintained themselves as a major electoral force for several decades. The ragbag of minor parties, such as the UKIP, the BNP, et cetera, collectively attract significant if limited support. How can this be? One hypothesis would be that different party systems exist in different regions and that Duverger survives. The SNP and Labour fight it out in Scotland, the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives in the West Country, and Labour and the Conservatives elsewhere. Riker long ago suggested a revision of Duverger that would allow for the continued success of their parties if they were the second party locally (Riker 1982). Yet the facts do not fit this explanation. There are too many constituencies in which all three major parties attract significant support.

Another hypothesis might be termed the "market failure" argument. Because of their internal power structures, the two major parties were incapable of acting as the vote-maximizing organizations that the Duverger model assumed. Unions and left-wing activists prevented Labour moving sufficiently to the right; while increasingly (sociologically) unrepresentative activists in the Conservative party prevented it moving sufficiently to the left. The major parties left a hole in the middle that a third party could occupy successfully. This explanation does indeed seem to fit British politics in the 1970s and 1980s. It does not fit the 1990s or the twenty-first century. Blair led Labour back to the center, perhaps even to the right of center on some issues. The Liberal Democrats moved left looking for disaffected former supporters of the Labour Party. How far they succeeded is a matter of debate, but it is clear that the "hole in the middle" does not work for the last twenty years.

The simplest explanation would be that the significant minority of voters who backed the Liberal Democrats did so because they did not like the two major-party offerings. Even this explanation raises problems, however. British politics is supposed to have been through a period from the 1970s to the 1990s in which differences between the parties were acute. This might have been expected to induce habits of mind in voters in which keeping Labour out – or the Conservatives out – was of vital importance and could be expected to overwhelm a preference for the third party. While the Blair/Brown New Labour "project"

reduced polarization, the lasting memory of Thatcherism should surely have maintained the viability of the argument that keeping out the less-liked major party was of crucial importance.

It would seem that we are left with two possibilities. The first is that there is some means of reconciling developments in British politics with Duverger that escapes this author. The second is that the Duverger law has to be consigned to that social science category of truths that depending on circumstances either apply or do not apply. Perhaps supporting this disciplinary pessimism is the fact that as many commentators have noted, namely, that third parties have been a factor in British politics surprisingly often.

Coalition Theory

The inter-party bargaining that followed the election should be a goldmine for game theorists (assuming they care about real-world elections.) I have argued that the outcome of the bargaining joined two parties in government that were not ideological neighbors. This observation does not negate coalition theory. Coalition theories differ on whether they seek to explain strategies aimed at maximizing office-holding or policy outcomes (Budge and Laver 1986). Usually, maximizing policy outcomes implies that coalition partners will be ideologically close. If this is not the case, then a party, by joining a coalition and helping it achieve power, may be increasing the likelihood that policies it deeply dislikes will be adopted.

However, if a party is committed to one goal above all others combined, this constraint may be abandoned. All sorts of irritations may be overlooked in pursuit of the single most important objective. Countries such as Israel have often seen odd partners join a coalition on the basis of a promise of a single policy, such as preventing El Al from flying on Saturdays. It is obviously possible that the over-riding goal was electoral reform for the Liberal Democrats and simply holding power for the Conservatives. These objectives were valued more highly than ideology or positions on a variety of policies. The most plausible candidate for such single-policy promise of over-riding importance was a more proportional voting system or at least a referendum on one.

It is worth recalling that both Labour and the Conservatives offered the Liberal Democrats this outcome, and at a crucial moment, Brown seemed to go further than the Conservatives by offering a switch to the alternative vote system *without* a referendum. No other single policy can be suggested which would have been more powerful than all others combined. Thus formation of an ideologically odd coalition remains a puzzle. We should also note that coalition theory is likewise concerned to explain the breakdown of coalitions, and we can only

assume that at some point, the coalition in the UK will provide a useful case study for empirically minded game theorists.

Conclusion

The UK is embarking on an interesting experiment in peacetime government. We shall have to see if this experiment is successful in addressing the country's problems or not. We shall also to wait to see whether this experiment in coalition government is a momentary departure from the normal practices of British politics or the beginning of a lasting transformation.

Bibliography

Budge, Ian and Michael Laver 1986 "Office Seeking and Policy Pursuit in Coalition Theory" *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 11 No. 4, 485-506.

Barker, Anthony and Graham K. Wilson 1997 "Whitehall's Disobedient Servants? Senior Officials' Potential Resistance to Ministers in British Government Departments" *British Journal of Political Science* 27 223-46.

Campbell, Colin and Graham K. Wilson 1995 *The End of Whitehall: Death of a Paradigm?* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Clarke, Harold D., David Sanders, Marianne C. Stewart and Paul Whiteley 2009 *Performance Politics and the British Voter* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Duverger, Maurice 1963 *Political Parties, Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State* North B. and North R tr. New York: Wiley Science Editions.

King, Anthony S 2007 *The British Constitution* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

King, Anthony S 1985 Margaret Thatcher; The Style of a Prime Minister in Anthony S. King (ed.) *The British Prime Minister* 2nd ed., Houndsmills: Macmillan 96-140.

Neustadt, Richard E., 1960 *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership* New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Riker, William 1982 "The Two Party System and Duverger's Law: An Essay on the History of Political Science" *American Political Science Review* 76 No. 4 753-66.