

Why 'hung' parliaments and coalitions are normal in western Europe

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The British media, and Tory and Labour politicians, often treat a parliament with no overall majority for one party as something unusual or disastrous, a position taken to new extremes in a recent Conservative party election broadcast, or the Daily Mail front-page cartoon showing Britannia [sleep-walking over a cliff face](#). [Paul Mitchell](#) of LSE's Government Department looks more coolly at the coalition possibilities that may come into play once the results are known.



As we all now know virtually all the election predictions and polls suggest that the results on May 6 will produce what most British commentators somewhat bizarrely still call a '[hung parliament](#)' (although the Liberal Democrats and SNP understandably prefer the less pejorative but still inaccurate term a '[balanced](#)' parliament).

Virtually everyone else in Europe just calls such outcomes 'a parliament'. And far from being exceptional or even a 'crisis' (that should worry the markets and disturb our sleep patterns), by far the normal outcome of elections in Europe is that no single party has overall control of parliament.

Looking across 17 west European countries in the post 1945 period, nearly two thirds (64 per cent) of all government's were coalition cabinets. The rest were obviously single party governments, but of these 23 per cent were one-party minority governments. Only 13 per cent (one in eight) were single party majority governments, produced by 'non-hung' parliaments. Of these 53 one party majority governments, 20 of them were British. Only Norway, Greece and Ireland have ever had more than 5 single party governments since 1945.

We don't yet know (or even have a very confident prediction!) about what the final seat totals will be on May 7. It increasingly seems unlikely that a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition will be formed, because the Conservatives are highly unlikely to agree to a referendum on PR. A Labour-LibDem coalition (under a new Labour leader) might be possible. But it is unclear that it would be in the Liberal Democrats' interest to settle for what Labour have been offering so far, which is only a referendum on introducing the Alternative Vote.

Incidentally an apparently highly contagious disease seems to be spreading throughout UK journalism – in which AV keeps getting described as 'weak-PR' or 'not-quite-the-full-deal PR'. The truth is that AV is not any kind of proportional representation. It is a thoroughly majoritarian system. Australia is the only major country in the world that uses AV for its lower house. There AV has produced levels of disproportionality that are comparable with (and sometimes even worse) than the current Westminster system of single member plurality voting. There have also been no less than *nine* general elections in which AV in Australia has produced 'perverse' results – on all these occasions the Australian Liberal party has won more seats than Labour, despite having fewer votes.

So if a formal executive coalition with the Liberal Democrats may be unlikely, because it is too 'costly' (from the perspective of the Conservatives and Labour), we may well be into minority government territory in which one of the 'old two' (as Clegg labels them) look to do legislative deals with other parties.

With the exception of one or two possible independents, the only place to look for these resources is the Celtic fringe. At the last election the SNP won 6 seats and Plaid Cymru won 3. Although both claim to be aiming for a lot more, in practice their seat totals are not likely to change very much – I'd say a maximum of one or two gains each. The very canny Alex Salmond has ruled out joining a coalition – a shrewd move because his party probably was never going to be asked anyway. But the SNP will trade legislative votes for financial gains for Scotland. However, by far the biggest source of potential votes from the 'others' remains Northern Ireland which will elect 18 MPs. My other blog on voting there also sets out why the beneficiary here might be David Cameron, but not in a straightforward way.