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Sorry Ed Miliband, but minority government is unlikely to work in Westminster

March 23, 2015 6.20am GMT

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The Conversation UK receives funding from Hefce, Hefcw, SAGE, SFC, RCUK, The Nuffield Foundation, The Ogden Trust, The Royal Society, The Wellcome Trust, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and The Alliance for Useful Evidence, as well as sixty five university members.

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There may not be much to smile about after May 7. Andrew Milligan/PA

With the election looking more and more likely to provide an indecisive result, two of our columnists look at the likelihood of the Labour Party being able to form a minority government. Here, Paul Cairney argues the Scottish experience suggests it won't work. Read Wyn Grant's more optimistic view [here](#).

You might wonder to what extent Ed Miliband's planning for the days after the May election

is based on Scotland's past political experiences. The Labour leader will be well aware that the Scottish National Party (SNP) led a successful, competent minority government north of the border between 2007 and 2011. Indeed, this was arguably the reason the party did so well at the 2011 Scottish election.

In a world where winning a majority of Westminster seats looks almost unachievable for the Labour party, it must be tempting to try and replicate what happened in Edinburgh. Yet just because it worked in Scotland doesn't mean it will automatically work in Westminster. Choosing minority government is too risky in the current Westminster system.

Staying power

Any party forming a government without a majority of seats has to weigh up its likely **strength and stability**. In Westminster, as in Holyrood, strength relates closely to parliamentary arithmetic. If you can control a majority of seats through a formal coalition, you can make decisions and initiate policy change quickly without significant opposition.

Westminster coalitions also tend to be more stable than minority governments, if only because they are less vulnerable to votes of no confidence. In parliamentary democracies, the **average tenure** of a single party majority is 30 months, compared to about 18 months for coalitions and about 14 months for minority governments.

Coalitions are also a better fit than minority governments with the traditional Westminster image of power being concentrated in central government, particularly a handful of key ministers. This image is admittedly misleading. Ministers tend to find that their aims are not reflected in the practices of a huge and complex administration, and they have little control over outcomes.

Coalitions also exacerbate this by demanding greater policy co-ordination and regular agreement across departments, since the prime minister cannot simply command ministers in the traditional way.

Yet the image remains important when election time comes around. Focus is on the old way of doing things, and party leaders still have to be seen to act as though they control politics from the centre.

The challenge for Labour would be to find a coalition partner that does not undermine its image. Even before Miliband ruled out a coalition partnership with the SNP, the Liberal Democrats looked like far more suitable candidates.

They are the most experienced coalition party in Westminster, Holyrood and Cardiff. Their image might have been tarnished by their association with the Tories, but they would still be much more acceptable government partners to an English electorate than the Scottish nationalists.

Westminster is not Holyrood

What Miliband did not rule out of course was leading a minority government propped up by parties including the SNP. These parties would provide crucial support at key moments such as the annual budget bill, in an arrangement where Labour would not have to admit that it benefited from their support.

To some extent, the SNP already did this with the Scottish Conservatives in 2007-11 in Holyrood. The stakes were high, since the Conservatives remain electorally toxic in Scotland and part of the SNP's identity is built on opposition to the UK Conservative government.



Give a Lib Dem a chance!
Chris Radburn/PA

The SNP was able to produce a relatively coherent policy programme, despite having to compromise the strength of its government. It was able to lose votes quite regularly (mostly on “non-binding” motions), often aided by Conservative opposition, even on flagship issues such as alcohol control.

This happened without any long-term effect on the stability of the administration. Yet the SNP’s success may be difficult or impossible to replicate at Westminster. For one thing, the SNP was protected by its remarkably enduring popularity.

This removed any incentive for the opposition parties to produce a vote of no confidence to prompt an early election. While it is now much more difficult to call snap Westminster elections after the coalition fixed the length of this parliament, opposition parties may still have a greater incentive to undermine an unpopular Labour minority government.

Second, the stakes in Scotland are generally lower. The strength and stability required by the UK government relates largely to issues of high politics, such as calming the markets with a clear macroeconomic strategy, and providing a relatively stable position on foreign policy.

The Scottish experience is that the minority government was unable to pursue its two main legislative promises – to hold a referendum on independence, and to reform council taxes. If the same were to happen in the UK, maybe on the renewal of Trident or the acceleration of welfare reforms, a minority government may find its position became untenable.

None of this is to say that minority government couldn’t work at UK level in theory. It might be different if the main parties could agree a shift in parliamentary convention to the effect that losing key votes didn’t automatically lead to motions of no confidence, for example. But as things stand, any notion that you can cut out the Holyrood class of 2007-11 and graft it to Westminster 2015-20 is one that should make Miliband and his ilk very wary.



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