

## PREFACE

**T**he inconclusive result of the general election held on 6 May 2010 precipitated one of the great dramas of modern British politics. It lasted five days, while Gordon Brown and David Cameron vied for Nick Clegg's support to form a government. This book tells the tale from the vantage point of 10 Downing Street, where I spent the five days at Gordon Brown's side.

Great dramas are about fateful choices and their consequences. This drama turned on two fateful choices: David Cameron's choice to forge a coalition with Nick Clegg rather than seek to form a minority Tory government; and Clegg's choice to align the Liberal Democrats with the Conservatives rather than with Labour.

A sheen of inevitability attaches to historic decisions after the event. It is rarely authentic, and certainly not in this case. In these five days choices were made rapidly, even instinctively, in the heat of extreme pressure, but they were made. The consequences will be played out over years, perhaps decades, to come.

30 June 2010

## POLLING DAY, THURSDAY 6 MAY

**W**e've got to stop Cameron and the media simply calling it for the Tories as soon as the exit poll is out tonight. How do we get it out there that even if they are the largest party, but there's no majority, they can't just walk into Downing Street and demand the keys? We've got to get onto the BBC now, so they're in the right place. Otherwise we'll be out of the game before it's even started.'

It was 9 a.m. and the third call of polling day morning from Gordon Brown, pacing around his Scottish constituency home in North Queensferry, working out how to get talks going with Nick Clegg if the election result was a hung parliament.

The possibility of Lab–Lib partnership had been a preoccupation of Gordon's since becoming Prime Minister in 2007. After the economic and political meltdown of 2008/9, it looked pretty fanciful that the Conservatives would not win an outright majority. The banking crisis, the recession, the scandal of MPs' expenses, and Gordon's personal unpopularity constantly reinforced each other. But in early 2010 the recession and the expenses crisis receded, and the polls



narrowed in the run-up to the general election and during the campaign itself.

I said there needed to be commentators on the news alongside the exit poll, explaining the constitutional position that the sitting Prime Minister stays in No. 10 until there is a replacement government likely to command a Commons majority.

‘That’s it. Vernon Bogdanor and Robert Hazell. They’re the experts. You should get onto them. I will speak to them...’

‘No, Gordon, that’s not a good idea,’ I cut in. ‘You need to be one stage removed from all this. I’ll speak to them, and Justin [Forsyth] also needs to take Nick Robinson [the BBC’s political editor] through it.’

‘OK, but we’ve got to get this moving. They’ll stop at nothing to get us out. The BBC will want big stuff to report in Downing Street in the morning whatever the result.’

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‘Look, Andrew, it’s simply not going to happen,’ said Peter Mandelson. ‘The Tories are going to win. That’s been the position for months – two years – now, and it’s still what’s going to happen one way or another. And I tell you, if the country wakes up on Saturday morning and Labour is still there, there will be a wave of national revulsion.’

It was now noon on polling day, in a side office in Labour’s deserted election headquarters in Victoria Street. I simply couldn’t get Peter to take a hung parliament seriously, as I couldn’t the week before, when I got a similar reaction. So



I had another go. 'We've got a duty to do this, Peter; there has got to be a government tomorrow and we may have to be part of it – we can't simply give up.'

'As for your Lib Dems, let me tell you about Paddy [Ashdown],' Peter sighed. 'Paddy was on the same train as Gordon and me, returning from the Newcastle rally last Saturday. So I went and plonked myself down next to him. He couldn't get away from me fast enough. It was as if I was a leper. He suddenly needed to go to the lavatory; to speak on his mobile; to do anything but speak to me or be seen with me. That's what your Lib Dems think about talking to Gordon.'

'I know all about that,' I countered. The story I heard was that Paddy had been in First Class while GB and entourage were in Standard Class, as throughout the election campaign. Much hilarity about the Lib Dems living the high life.

'I've had a similar brush-off from Paddy and the lot of them,' I said. 'That's their position until the polls close. It's a completely different position tomorrow if no one has a majority, as looks to me very likely. Let me tell you my thinking about how we handle it if that happens. Please just humour me and take it seriously.'

'OK', said Peter, opening his foolscap notebook, donning his reading glasses and taking notes as I spoke, his telltale signs of engagement. He was taking charge.

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I had phoned Paddy at 8.30 a.m. that morning. 'So it's Andrew Adonis; I wondered when you would ring,' was his



greeting, speaking over the background clatter of the Yeovil Lib Dem campaign HQ, where he was campaigning for David Laws, his successor as the constituency's MP.

'Should we be meeting today for a private chat about life after tomorrow?' I ventured.

'Yes, we should.'

He was coming up to London to do the election-night programmes, so we arranged to meet at his house in Kennington at 5 p.m. At least, that was the plan until he called back ten minutes later.

'I have just spoken to my leader. I have got to be a team player...' – 'So am I, of course, that's why I contacted you,' I interjected – 'indeed, we are both team players,' Paddy continued, 'but my team doesn't want any contact whatever while the election is on, so it can't be today. How about 10 a.m. tomorrow, matchsticks all round?'

'Done, see you then.'

Two steps forward, one back.

So too with Danny Alexander, Nick Clegg's Chief of Staff. I barely knew Danny and had to get his mobile number on polling day morning from Neil Sherlock, an Oxford university friend who went into the City and was a trusted adviser to successive Lib Dem leaders, playing David Cameron in Nick Clegg's rehearsals for the TV election debates. Neil and I had talked at length about post-election possibilities. Like most senior Lib Dems, he was an instinctive Lib-Labber and anti-Tory.

'The problem is that I simply don't see how we can do a deal with Gordon Brown, who will have been rejected by



the voters and is intensely disliked by Nick,' was Neil's view. 'But if that issue could be dealt with somehow...'

When Neil gave me Danny's number, he also asked me for Peter Mandelson's to pass on to Danny. I texted Danny at the same time as phoning Paddy. No response – until 8.30 p.m. when Danny replied: 'Would be good to talk privately later this evening.'

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By then, Gordon Brown was catching a few hours' sleep in North Queensferry, which was to make him the only non-exhausted member of his team by the end of the long night to come.

The Tories were briefing hard that with voter turnout sharply up they were on course for a small majority. Shortly after 9 p.m. came leaks of an exit poll putting the Conservatives on 39 per cent – 'which will clinch it for them', Peter Mandelson said.

Gordon had been on the phone for most of the preceding hours, laying the ground for possible Lab–Libbery to come. Key trade union leaders and Cabinet ministers were squared for the principle of negotiations if the Tories were well short of a majority. None dissented in principle. Justin had no difficulty with Nick Robinson. The BBC were clear that they would not call the election for Cameron until the Tories had won an overall majority or close to one; and they would stand by GB's right and duty to remain in No. 10 until a new government was formed.



‘Good. That makes it harder for Cameron to do a Salmond,’ remarked Gordon when we spoke in the early evening.

‘Doing a Salmond’ was shorthand for the immediate peril he foresaw if the Tories were the largest party but even some way short of a majority. Alex Salmond propelled himself into the leadership of a minority Scottish government after the 2007 Scottish Parliament election, immediately proclaiming it ‘the worst defeat for Labour in fifty years and a victory for the SNP’ and demanding the SNP’s right to power. In fact, the SNP ended up only one seat ahead of Labour and well short of a majority. But the media endlessly recycled ‘the worst Labour result for fifty years’, and paved the way for Salmond to become First Minister.

Gordon also did conference calls with Gavin Kelly and Nick Pearce, his policy directors, on negotiating positions for talks with the Lib Dems.

‘There isn’t a policy problem here,’ he said, phoning me afterwards, as we discussed different options for a referendum on electoral reform and tax changes, which the Lib Dems would want. ‘There will be other problems’ – we both knew he was talking about his own position; neither mentioned it at this stage – ‘but the key thing is to get them talking to us at the same time as the Tories, not afterwards. And to get going in the morning. Every delay helps the Tories. How are we doing on that?’

‘There’s still the Clegg doctrine,’ I said uneasily. ‘But at least we have got contacts in place to get going immediately.’

‘OK, let’s speak as soon as the results start.’

The ‘Clegg doctrine’ was shorthand for Nick Clegg’s



election statement that in a hung parliament the first chance to form a government should go to the largest party in terms of seats and votes. There is no such constitutional convention; nor does this necessarily happen in Continental countries with coalitions. Willy Brandt's great government was a coalition between the second-placed SPD and the liberal FDP; the current Swedish Conservative government is led by the second largest party, a long way behind the Social Democrats in seats and votes. So we assumed that Clegg had mis-spoken or deliberately strengthened his anti-Labour position for the TV election debates, where he resisted every invitation to 'agree with Gordon' even where he plainly did so.

Either way, we thought, surely if given the choice, Clegg wouldn't put the Tories in power, throwing over a British Liberal tradition going back a century and a half as a progressive anti-Tory party?