

## *Introduction*

The forging of a coalition government in May 2010 was a momentous event in British political life. Few of the electorate actively sought a coalition government. Many indeed believed that such a government would be weak, unstable and incapable of dealing with the country's massive economic problems. The Conservative campaign had played on the fear that a hung parliament (that is, a parliament in which no single party holds an overall majority of seats) would be destabilising and damaging for the country, partly as a way of targeting the Liberal Democrat vote.

But once a hung parliament had materialised, and produced a coalition government made up of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties, the new Prime Minister, David Cameron, was naturally keen for it to be seen as a significant moment in modern history. The Conservative–Liberal Democrat government represented nothing less, he proclaimed, than ‘an historic and seismic shift’ in British politics.

The sort of behind-the-scenes horse-trading and compromise which is routine in so many countries in Europe and beyond had simply not been a feature of post-war British politics. Single-party majority government – Conservative or Labour – had become the assumed ‘British way’. Even during an election campaign in which all the polls united in shouting ‘hung parliament’, the Conservative Party leader gave little attention to the idea of a coalition, as opposed to a minority government of one hue or the other.

There had of course been a torrent of rhetoric during the general election campaign about ‘new politics.’ The country appeared to be yearning for a different style of politics and promises were made to the cameras by all party leaders to end the murky cronyism and bed-feathering that the public felt had been luridly exposed during the parliamentary expenses scandal. This episode, more than any other in recent history, saw the standing of MPs and the whole Westminster system sink to new depths in the public estimation.

As leader of a third party, Nick Clegg in particular was anxious to press his claim to represent a politics that was fresh and different, detached from the creaking established system. And as his star ascended after the first of the televised leader debates, both Gordon Brown and David Cameron enhanced their own rhetoric calling for a new kind of politics. They assured the electorate that they too, after all the scandals of New Labour and MPs’ expenses, yearned for a new way of doing things.

Many were cynical. The electorate had heard plenty of talk of ‘new politics’ before – not least when Tony Blair swept to power in 1997 – and all too often the reality had failed to match the expectation. But as it turned out, the election of 2010 truly did produce something surprising and new. Few could have imagined quite how quickly a ‘new politics’ – in terms of the nature of the government, if not necessarily of its moral purity – would arrive.

Commentators frantically dug out their history books. Many – particularly those who chose to be sceptical about the coalition’s prospects – reached straight for the famous remark by Benjamin Disraeli: ‘England does not love coalitions.’ Some quoted him further: ‘Coalitions, although successful, have always found this, that their triumph has been brief.’

Sober historians were equally quick to point out that what Disraeli was talking about was short-term tactical alliances, not coalitions in the modern sense of a binding together of parties in government. More importantly, they noted, for much of English parliamentary history in the age of democracy, whether England loved coalitions or not, it certainly got them. Between 1885 and 1945 governments by more than one party were the norm and single-party government was the exception. In this fifty-year period, majority single-party government ruled for only ten years.

Some of these coalitions were 'national governments' in times of war, or great national crisis, but by no means all were. And the new government of 2010, of course, was quick to emphasise the critical budgetary situation which it faced and which had made the forging of a strong combination government so critical.

At one level, of course, coalition is simply a basic political fact. Just as evolution is written, if one knows where to look, in the bones and body structures of species now alive, so modern parties contain in their basic anatomy the vestigial shapes of once independent political groups. In the case of the 'Lib Dems', the conjunction of words says it all: the party was born as a coalition, between the Liberals and the Social Democrats. And the Conservatives have thrived in the past by absorbing once distinct groupings, such as the Liberal Unionists of Joseph Chamberlain. This fact has been the source of much anxiety for modern Liberal Democrats such as Charles Kennedy and Menzies Campbell, alarmed by the lessons of the 'history book' in terms of the grave dangers of partnership with the Tories.

At another level, of course, all parties are coalitions. Few could doubt that David Cameron and Nick Clegg have more in common with each other, politically speaking, than either does with the more

extreme wings of his own party (to the right in Cameron's case, to the left in Clegg's). While in recent years the leadership of all three parties has scrapped over the middle ground, their MPs and party memberships fan over a broader spectrum.

But for all that coalition and compromise is a basic fact of political life, it remains the case that the events of May 2010 were truly remarkable in recent British history. Since the end of the Second World War, Britain has been a country of almost unbroken single-party government. Before 2010, every general election bar one has returned either Labour or the Conservatives to office with an overall majority (even if on three occasions that majority was measured precariously in single figures, and on two of those occasions it evaporated during the term after defections or by-election defeats). For over sixty years now the political culture of this country has been that elections are a 'winner-takes-all' tussle between the fighter in the red corner and the fighter in the blue corner – and preferably decided by a knock-out.

Nor was David Cameron wrong to assume that even without a majority, the outcome would be a single-party minority government. In the only post-war election to fail to return a majority – that of February 1974 – this is how it was done (albeit briefly). Such a surprise was this particular result that the Queen's presence in the country had not been assured: she was on her way back from a trip to Australia. The widespread confusion as to basic procedure which followed served to intensify the general fear in Britain of any election result which was 'inconclusive'. Hence the general anxiety – which must have puzzled many watching on the Continent – to have matters resolved within a few days, for fear first that the markets would take fright, and second that the population at large would react angrily to a perceived failure of the political class.

There is no doubt that those involved in negotiating the coalition behind the scenes felt the pressure of this unfamiliar national event. (Some seemed to regard it even as a ‘national crisis’.) The way in which our politicians responded, and the way the deal was done – as well as the alternative arrangements which were explored – is a story that deserves to be told.

Access to key figures involved from all three political parties enables me to tell it in a manner and a depth in which it has not been told before. It enables me to shed further light and answer questions to which even the negotiators themselves would have dearly loved to know the answers. Which concessions were genuinely necessary to persuade the other party to agree to a full coalition? What was Labour offering in its desperate bid to stay in power? Could it have delivered it? What was said in the one-to-one meetings between the party leaders? What contact and preparation between the parties occurred before and during the general election? Were the different parties as straight-talking and honest with each other as they affected to be? Why did the Conservatives decide to offer a referendum on the Alternative Vote? When was the Liberal Democrat decision to do the deal with the Conservatives actually taken?

Naturally this book does have opinions, but it is not an attempt to write a Conservative account of what happened, nor to apportion criticism or blame to the various participants, their parties or their leaders. Wherever it was practical in explaining events, I have left readers to draw their own conclusions. Its main intention is to document faithfully and historically what happened, so as to provide a contemporary map of history in the making: the order things happened, the meetings, conversations, the documents and first-hand memories of the key participants.

The account in the following pages is based on almost sixty interviews with key players in the hung parliament negotiations, including Cabinet ministers past and present, MPs, peers and aides. Where the source of a quotation is not otherwise explained in the text, the quotation is taken from these interviews. The memory undoubtedly can play tricks, and participants' recollections of events are sometimes hazy. I have tried, as far as possible, to cross-reference participants' accounts of events.

If this book is accessible, interesting and readable to a wide audience and adds to the knowledge of what happened in those critical five days in British political history, it will have achieved its purpose.