

Name: 旅英港人

Country: Hong Kong

Organization: NA

Solution: Student

Cameron-Clegg coalition: change, chances and challenges

11th May 2010, the day a coalition government has been formed in Britain for the first time in 65 years. This is not only a new leadership, but new politics for Britain, with chances for real change as well as challenges and possible chaos lying ahead for the coalition government.

After five days of negotiations after a hung parliament was produced after the election results on 7th May, the Liberal Democrats eventually decide they will do a deal with the Conservative party. Rejecting the Labour's proposal of a progressive alliance, or "rainbow coalition", Lib Dem accepted the Tories' offer of a "full and proper coalition" which will remain in power for at least five years. This means a full stop is drawn for the New Labour government's thirteen years' rule and the first ever Liberal-Conservative coalition for Britain. The beauty of British politics is, all these happened in one day, in a few hours' time, including ministers moving out, ministers moving in, former Prime Minister resigning, and the new one coming in. You really cannot take your eyes off for a minute.

Past: Gordon Brown, better as a man, husband, father than as a prime minister

All these were triggered by Gordon Brown's sudden resignation as the Prime Minister and the leader of the Labour Party in the evening of Tuesday. Stressing the fact that a government needed to be formed, Brown resigned and thus allowed David Cameron to form a government. Nick Clegg said "it must be difficult" for Brown to resign and leaves the job he loves. Indeed Brown has faced many events during his time as Prime Minister; and economic crisis was by far the most memorable one. Yet many have already forgotten the series of unfortunate events he had in the first few months in office: Glasgow airport attack, outbreak of foot and mouth disease and flooding across the country. He tackled these problems one by one, and was far ahead of the

opposition in the polls. However, everything went negative after he refused to call a general election. That was when the honeymoon was over. Northern Rock, Britain into recession with the rest of the world just did not do him any good as the Prime Minister leading a government in power for more than a decade. In the end, he did gain back some grounds as he showed the world his strength by his performance in G20, and finally entered the general election expecting the worst, came out the second largest party in Parliament, with no party having an overall majority. After all, he was seen as a better loving husband and father, than a successful Prime Minister.

Present: Cameron and Clegg's coalition, how will it work?

After thirteen years of New Labour came five days of uncertainty, there comes the first coalition Britain has had since the Second World War. So what now? What will this government look like? First of all, David Cameron, as the leader of the biggest party, the Conservatives, in the House of Commons is now the Prime Minister, with leader of the minor party of this coalition, Nick Clegg, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, as the Deputy Prime Minister. There are four more ministers in the Cabinet who are Liberal Democrats, including the respectable Vince Cable, Chris Huhne, David Laws and Danny Alexander. There will be all together twenty odd Liberals in government; that is nearly half of their parliamentary party. The Tories, as the dominating spouse in this political marriage, fill the important posts. George Osborne, though unpopular, becomes the Chancellor of the Exchequer. We see the return of the former leaders William Hague and Ian Duncan Smith as Foreign Secretary and Work and Pensions secretary. In theory, this administration is a mixture of Thatcherism and Liberalism, which one could argue have many similarities. Yet in practice, it is all about drawing the extreme wings of both parties towards the centre, and preventing backbenchers from revolting against the coalition government. Both parties have made concessions on the basis of policies, which seem to have major differences in their manifestos. However, once this was cleared, there was no other obstacle to an official coalition government. The danger to the survival of this government, therefore, comes from the backbenchers.

Future: They have five years to prove us wrong...

Indeed, coalition governments in Britain are so rare that it has not been raised in the UK very much. Yet as all the polls before the 2010 election pointed towards a hung parliament, chances were there was going to be a coalition government. So there was one. But how many of us have predicted a Labour-Liberal Democrats Coalition was more likely than the progressive Liberals working with the extreme right Tories? How many of us predicted the Conservatives would have to run a minority government on their own, and another election will have to happen soon? In contrast, we will soon have a five year government, under the coalition of Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, with Labour as the biggest party in opposition. David Miliband listed himself as the first candidate for the Labour Party Leader's election, hoping to establish Labour as the biggest centre-left progressive force, now that the Lib Dems have gone into bed with the Tories. No matter what the result of that election turns out to be, Labour is confirmed as the biggest opposition with 258 seats. Although not enough to threaten the government, but their position in the opposition is very safe. The coalition government must make sure that they have the support of their backbenchers. If they fail to do so, they would not only find it very difficult to govern, but British people losing faith in any form of coalition governments in the future.

“This is change that works for you” ? (Liberal Democrats' election campaign slogan 2010)

All across the political spectrum, however experienced and inexperienced, politicians will tell you that these few days just after the election have been eventful and extraordinary to see. There are chances as well as challenges ahead for the government, opportunity for real change as well as crisis and chaos. The new coalition government must unite the two parties tightly together in order to maintain the stability they desperately wanted. Well, on paper anyway. (Just a gentle reminder: never fully trust a politician.) However, for those of us who predicted Lib Dem would go for a rainbow coalition, or allowing the Conservatives to form a minority government, like I predicted, we have to reflect on this. We forgot how attractive power was, especially when considering how long the Liberals have been away from power. We forgot how Tories want a long term of government, and would therefore appease the Lib Dem at any cost, in order to form a Tory-led coalition. We forgot how much politicians will do to get to power, even if this involves withdrawing their promises to their voters. No doubt, Liberal Democrats will lose their progressive voters and both Lib Dem and Tories would have a tough job distinguishing themselves from each other at the next election. But for now, the Cameron-Clegg coalition have five years to prove that this is not only “change” , but it “works” for Britain. It is wilderness ahead, and it is their job to explore.

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