

A national interest coalition

With electoral reform in the UK a real possibility, coalitions could well become the norm

Can two rival politicians who are young, keenly ambitious, look similar, but have divergent political philosophies really not work together? Is it inevitable that the media will create 'split' stories? That having two rival power bases will create indecision, weak leadership, factions and paralysis?

In the Labour Party's case, the answer seemed to be yes, and David Miliband has bowed out of frontline politics. But for David Cameron and Nick Clegg, it has been relatively plain sailing. If splits have emerged, they have not been between the coalition partners, but internally in the Conservative Party as Cabinet ministers wrestle with the Treasury over the consequences of the cuts.

The Tories had produced an election broadcast that talked of the threats to the economy and politics from a fictional 'hung parliament party'. But there was no major slide in the value of the pound or a stock market crash and the process of assembling a coalition did not involve protracted internal horse trading. And today, many ministers – from Cameron to Clegg to Kenneth Clarke – seem to relish being in a coalition of the 'national interest'.

As public affairs professionals, there are some important points to remember when engaging a coalition administration. There is new power for both minority parties (not just the Liberal Democrats) and for specific interest groups, as we saw with the emergence of a wave of protests around electoral reform during the coalition negotiations.

The decision-making process may also become more complex. With the need for agreement with another party, predicting a political outcome becomes harder. The Lib Dems' federal structure requires not only sign-off by key ministers, but also discussion with their MPs.

This new style of political discourse can provide new entry points for adept



PHIL RUDGE

Views in brief

Which public sector budget cut is likely to be the toughest for the Government to push through?

The Ministry of Defence.

Who would make the better lobbyist – David or Ed Miliband?

This is a politician's answer – but neither. They both have a future in politics, if in different roles.

Which public sector organisation has made the best case for ringfencing its budget or minimising any cuts?

As the first answer would imply, The Ministry of Defence.

campaigners. On a practical level, the election of select committee chairs gives backbenchers a new-found independence from the party whips, although the relative inexperience of the 251 new MPs will mean they take a while to find their voice. The committee stage will remain crucial for scrutinising the detail of legislation, but balancing the need to cut the deficit with supporting MPs' favoured issues on a tight parliamentary vote will cause a headache for the whips.

Some things stay the same. Briefing

ministers is still critical, as is having a positive relationship with special advisers and civil servants. Not all members of the coalition are created equally either, so efforts should be focused on senior partners to be effective.

Finally, it is critical never to try to play political games between parts of the coalition. We must remember that the old methods of briefing separate parties need to be adapted to the reality of a cross-party ministerial team. Such joint working has been evident during the party conference season

with a visit from Danny Alexander to Birmingham to open discussion on the sidelines about the next election – is it conceivable after five years working together that the Lib Dems and Tories will have competing manifestos and campaign against each other?

There are many places we can look for guidance on how to engage with coalitions, from Germany to Scotland. Engagement in Brussels, for instance, has always been based on building cross-party support and negotiating compromises between major groups.

Learning the lessons of how to approach coalition governments requires us to relearn many of the skills of engagement and communication – and to make them appropriate for the new political reality. The UK has not had a formal coalition government since World War II, but with electoral reform a possibility, coalitions may well become the norm.

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