



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Hung parliaments

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## Summary

A crucial aspect of the British system of government is that the government of the day must enjoy the confidence of the House of Commons.

General elections are held to return MPs to the House of Commons. Most commonly, one party has a majority of seats, and this party then forms a government. If a general election produces results in which no party has a majority of Members this is known as a 'hung Parliament'. Both the May 2010 and the June 2017 general elections produced 'hung Parliament' situations which also occurred several times during the twentieth century.

Hung Parliaments may result in formal coalition agreements, or government by a minority administration, possibly by way of a "confidence and supply" arrangement.

The general election on 8 June 2017 concluded with the Conservative Party being the largest party in Parliament with 317 (of 650) seats. On 9 June, the Prime Minister, Theresa May, announced that she would form a minority government "continuing to work with friends and allies" in the Democratic Unionist Party who won 10 seats. This does not suggest a formal coalition arrangement.

In May 2010, no single party obtained a majority. Following negotiations between the political parties, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties formed a coalition government. At that point, the UK had not been governed by a formal coalition in peacetime since the National Government of 1931-40.

Having governed as a minority government after the February 1974 general election, Labour won a small majority in October 1974. However, during the course of the Parliament, it lost its overall majority. Facing a motion of no confidence it sought the support of other parties. The Labour/Liberal pact of 1977-78, the only formal cross-party UK parliamentary agreement between 1945 and 2010, did not go further than support on key votes. The terms of the agreement between the two parties were announced in the House of Commons by the Prime Minister, James Callaghan.

There had been some negotiations between Labour and the Liberal Democrats on political reform before the 1997 election. However, in the event no coalition was considered necessary although the then Liberal Democrat leader did temporarily sit on the Cabinet Committee concerned with constitutional reform. There have, however, been coalition governments in both Scotland and Wales since devolution.

This note sets out a variety of situations over the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries where there has been no overall control in the House of Commons. The operation of the Conservative - Liberal Democrat coalition government is explained in Library briefing, [\*The 2010 Coalition Government at Westminster\*](#).

# 1. What is a 'hung Parliament?'

A crucial aspect of the British system of government is that the government of the day must enjoy the confidence of the House of Commons.

General elections are held to return MPs to the House of Commons. Most commonly, one party has a majority of seats, and this party then forms a government. If a general election produces results in which no party has a majority of Members this is known as a 'hung Parliament'.

Both the May 2010 and the June 2017 general elections produced 'hung Parliament' situations which also occurred several times during the twentieth century.

## 1.1 Next steps after a 'hung Parliament'

Hung Parliaments may result in formal coalition agreements, or government by a minority administration by way of a "confidence and supply" arrangement.

If no party or group of parties is able to form a government, a further general election might be triggered under the *Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011*. It is possible that over the lifetime of a Parliament, two or more of these options might occur.

When a general election is called, the government at the time remains in office over the general election period. If the governing party is returned, they stay in office. In general terms, if the incumbent government loses their majority they resign. The monarch would then ask the leader of the party which can command control of the House of Commons to form a government. However, if no party commands a majority, the previous government remains in office until it is clear who can form a government either in coalition or as a minority administration.

A separate briefing paper, [What happens after an indecisive election result](#), provides more detail.

Until the *Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011* Parliament was dissolved by the monarch on the advice of the Prime Minister. However, under the 2011 Act, the dissolution of Parliament is no longer a prerogative power. The Act means that general elections occur every five years, unless an early general election is triggered. This would happen if:

- a motion for an early general election is agreed either by at least two-thirds of the whole House or without division or;
- if a motion of no confidence is passed and no alternative government is confirmed by the Commons within 14 days.

If a new Government cannot be formed within this time period, then a general election has to be held.

## 5 Hung parliaments

This note draws on commentary given in a number of sources, particularly in David Butler's *Governing without a majority*.<sup>1</sup> The election results, other than those for the 2010 and 2017 general elections, are taken from Butler and Butler, *Twentieth Century British Political Facts, 1900-2000*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Butler, *Governing without a majority*, 1986

<sup>2</sup> David Butler and Gareth Butler, *Twentieth Century British Political Facts 1900-2000*, 2000



## 2. Minority Governments

The early twentieth century saw a number of elections results where no one party returned a majority of Members and minority administrations were formed:

- The December 1909 and December 1910 elections both resulted in Liberal minority Governments
- The December 1923 election resulted, after the failure of Stanley Baldwin to win a motion of confidence proposed as an amendment to the King's speech, in a minority Labour administration
- The 1929 election led to another minority Labour administration.

Later in the twentieth century, the February 1974 resulted in a minority Labour administration.

However, there were also occasions where majorities held by governments were lost due to by-election defeats and defections:

- The general election of October 1974 resulted in an overall majority for Labour of 3, however, this majority had fallen away by 1977.
- In 1992 John Major's Conservative Government had a majority of 21, however, by February 1997 the majority had been lost.

These minority governments were able to survive (sometimes for short periods) due to agreements with other parties. As David Butler, Fellow of Nuffield College Oxford, has explained:

Minority governments have survived on different kinds of understanding. From 1910 to 1914 the issue of Home Rule made the 80 Irish Nationalists eager to keep the Liberals in office. In 1924 the Liberals thought it expedient to give the first Labour government a chance and they were dismayed when, after nine months, Ramsey Macdonald opted for a general election because the Liberals had voted against him over his refusal to hold an inquiry into the Campbell case. In 1929 they again gave Labour mistrustful support in return for a promise of electoral reform. In March 1974 Harold Wilson offered no understandings but gambled on winning an election if it were forced on him. After 1976 when Labour's new majority had evaporated, Jim Callaghan negotiated with the Liberals and in 1977-78 entered into the formal Lib-Lab pact. In February 1997 John Major found that by-elections and floor-crossings had whittled his majority of [21] down to minus one; however, a general election was imminent and the loss of his current majority was the least of his problems.<sup>3</sup>

This section provides more detail on instances of minority government during the twentieth and 21st centuries.

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<sup>3</sup> David Butler, 'Hung parliaments: context and background', in Hansard Society, *No overall control: The impact of a 'hung parliament' on British politics*, 2008, p11  
The Campbell case referred to by David Butler was that of John Ross Campbell, who was editor of the Communist Workers Weekly when it published an article which was accused of being against Mutiny laws. Although the Attorney General advised prosecution, the Labour Government forced the charges to be withdrawn. The Liberals and the Conservatives then united against Labour, accusing the party of being under the control of radical left-wing groups.

## 2.1 Minority Liberal Government (1910-1915)

The General Election of December 1909 (returned the House of Commons in January 1910), which was called following the rejection of Lloyd George's 'People's Budget' by the House of Lords, returned more Liberals than any other single party, but a minority of Members overall. A further election in December 1910 returned equal numbers of Conservatives and Liberals.

### General Election December 1909

Conservative	273
Liberal	275
Labour	40
Irish Nationalist	82

### General Election December 1910

Conservative	272
Liberal	272
Labour	42
Irish Nationalist	84

The Liberals governed with support of the Irish Nationalists (who had been supporting the Liberals in government since 1906 even though they had a majority at the time). After the passage of the *Parliament Act 1911* the Government gave priority in the next three sessions to getting the *Irish Home Rule Bill* through the House of Commons. The Liberals were also passing social welfare and trade union legislation at the time, which had the support of Labour. The Liberals also had an electoral pact with Labour. David Butler has noted that:

The lesson of the Asquith administration is that minority government presents few problems when the minor parties have nowhere else to go and when the party in power is, in any case, minded to do what the minor parties want.<sup>4</sup>

## 2.2 Minority Labour Government (1924)

In December 1923, six months after becoming Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin called an election on the issue of tariff reform. He lost his majority; the election produced no overall control of the House of Commons.

### General Election December 1923

Conservative	258
Labour	191
Liberal	159
Others	7

<sup>4</sup> David Butler, *Governing without a majority*, 1987, p40

Baldwin remained as Prime Minister, despite being 50 seats short of an overall majority. However, any attempts to form a coalition did not come to fruition. When Parliament assembled in 1924, a Labour amendment to the King's speech prepared by Baldwin's Conservative Government was carried by 328 votes to 256.<sup>5</sup> The motion asserted:

it is our duty respectfully to submit to your Majesty that Your Majesty's present advisers have not the confidence of this House: "—[Mr. Clynes.]<sup>6</sup>

The Labour Party under Ramsey MacDonald then took office, and operated a minority government until October 1924. The party had used the opportunity to show that Labour was capable of being a party of government, rather than forcing a further general election. The Liberals had been nervous of a further general election, so had prevented an early defeat for the Labour government.<sup>7</sup>

In October 1924, the Labour Government decided to make a vote on the so-called 'Campbell case' an issue of confidence. The case involved the decision not to prosecute the then editor of *Workers' Weekly* for sedition. The Conservatives had tabled a motion of censure, the Liberals proposed an amendment calling for a select committee of inquiry. The issue was made a matter of confidence, MacDonald told the House that "If this House passes either the resolution or the amendment now, we go. It is the end; it will be the end of ... a high adventure". Baldwin announced that the Conservatives would support the Liberal amendment, which was carried by 364 votes to 198.<sup>8</sup>

Butler has drawn the following conclusion from this period of history:

The main lesson of 1924 was surely that, even in circumstances far less favourable than those of 1910-14, minority government was still quite practicable. Another lesson was that a third party, with the power to bring a government down, is in an invidious position; certainly the 1924 election, which cut Labour from 191 seats to 142, hurt the Liberals even more, reducing them from 151 to a pitiful 40.<sup>9</sup>

## 2.3 Minority Labour Government (1929-1931)

The May 1929 general election saw the Labour Party win the largest number of seats, but they did not have an overall majority. They again took office as a minority government.

### General Election May 1929

Labour	288
Conservative	260
Liberal	59
Others	8

<sup>5</sup> HC Deb 21 January 1924 vol 169 c679

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, c532

<sup>7</sup> David Marquand, '1924-1932' in Butler ed., *Coalitions in British Politics*, 1978, p52

<sup>8</sup> See Charles Loch Mowat, *Britain between the wars*, pp183-186

<sup>9</sup> Butler, *Governing without a majority*, 1987, p45



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Within a year, informal consultations were opened with the Liberals, and the Ullswater Committee was appointed to look into electoral reform. As the economic crisis grew, David Butler explains, that MacDonald invited Baldwin and Lloyd George to confer. Baldwin refused but Lloyd George agreed:

When these discussions on broad policy got nowhere, the government turned back to party tactics and by September 1930 offered to legislate for the Alternative Vote. Both sides denied that this was part of a pact but there had undoubtedly been high-level discussions.

Butler comments that regular meetings took place during the 1930-31 Session of Parliament, with joint committees established to consider particular issues. He concludes that:

...the understanding of 1930-31... had its price. Sir John Simon and two other Liberals resigned the whip in June 1931 and others in the Liberal Party indicated their unhappiness. Closer collaboration between the Liberals and Labour would have led to further explosions. The lesson of 1929-31 may be that MacDonald should have made more of a comprehensive deal with Lloyd George earlier. But if such a deal had become public, the reactions in both parties might have been so vehement as to nullify the advantages to be gained from it.<sup>10</sup>

### 2.4 1974 Minority Labour Government, and the 1977 Lib Lab pact

Between 1945 and 1974, the electorate returned majority governments. On a few occasions, these majorities were small, but in no instance was a coalition formed.

In 1950-51 Labour governed with a majority of 5. In 1950, no attempt was made by the government to gain Liberal support during the 18 months of that administration. When the Conservatives won the election of 1951 with an overall majority of 17, Winston Churchill offered a Cabinet post to the leader of the Liberals (Clement Davies) who did not accept. In 1964-6 Labour held office with a majority of four and no approaches were made to the Liberals. Another general election was held after 18 months.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p46

**General Election February 1974**

Labour	301
Conservative	297
Liberal	14
Northern Ireland	12
Scottish National	7
Plaid Cymru	2
Others	2

**General Election October 1974**

Labour	319
Conservative	277
Liberal	13
Northern Ireland	12
Scottish National	11
Plaid Cymru	3

In February 1974, the incumbent Conservative government lost its majority. Edward Heath remained as Prime Minister for a few days while he tried to form a coalition. The General Election was held on the Thursday, and it was not until the Monday that Edward Heath resigned as Prime Minister. Edward Heath had approached the Liberal leader, Jeremy Thorpe, with an offer of a coalition and Liberal participation in Government (although this would still not have commanded an overall majority). Heath therefore also approached Harry West, then leader of the Ulster Unionists, offering 7 of their 11 Members the Conservative whip. Vernon Bognador explains that:

The Ulster Unionists, however, refused to accept the Conservative whip, while the Liberals rejected Heath's offer of coalition – although they declared their willingness to support an agreed programme from outside the government. Upon hearing of the Liberals' rejection of coalition, Heath resigned without meeting Parliament.<sup>11</sup>

Details of the events leading to the resignation of Edward Heath as Prime Minister are set out in a contemporary note written by Robert Armstrong (now Lord Armstrong of Ilminster).<sup>12</sup>

Heath was replaced as Prime Minister by Harold Wilson. Wilson then governed for six months with a minority government. John Curtice has commented that Labour were able to survive these months as a minority government "relatively easily" because of "the willingness of Conservatives to abstain on key votes – for they did not wish to precipitate an immediate second election in the wake of their earlier defeat".<sup>13</sup>

The general election of October 1974 resulted in an overall majority for Labour of 3, but a majority over the Conservatives of 42. Labour formed a government. However, by 1977-78 the Labour government had to systematically draw on the support of the Liberals. David Butler explains how this situation arose:

...By April 1976 one by-election defeat and the desertion of two MPs to the Scottish Labour Party, together with John Stonehouse's repudiation of the Whip, had cost the Labour government its formal majority in the House of Commons, and

<sup>11</sup> Vernon Bognador, *No overall majority: forming a government in a multi-party parliament*, p7

<sup>12</sup> See *Guardian*, "[1974 Hung Parliament: Document shows how Heath tried and failed to hold on to power](#)", March 2010

<sup>13</sup> John Curtice, *Dilemmas of a Hung Parliament*, March 1992, p9

therefore its majority in all Standing Committees. November 1976 saw two more by-election defeats for Labour. The Scottish and Welsh Nationalists had been willing to support the government in the hope that it would fulfil its promises of devolution. But when in February 1977 the defection of Labour backbenchers meant that a majority could not be mustered to enforce the essential guillotine on the Committee Stage of the Devolution Bill, the Nationalist attitude hardened.

On 17 March 1977, the Conservatives put down a motion of censure for [Wednesday] 23 March, and the government faced the prospect of defeat. Mr Callaghan had to recognise that, to survive, his administration must secure the support either of the Liberals or of the Ulster Unionists. For four days there were hectic discussions. Mr Callaghan and Mr Foot, the Leader of the House, had several meetings with Mr Steel and Mr Molyneux.

In his autobiography, David Steel recounts that he told Callaghan that the Liberals were not interested in an arrangement purely to prevent an early general election, but only in a long term agreement which would involve policy matters including devolution and direct elections to the European Parliament:

He [the Prime Minister] began by repeating that a defeat on Wednesday would mean an election and I told him that was not a prime consideration for us. I said we were not interested in any covert arrangement to stave off defeat for Wednesday, but only in an open longer-term agreement which would involve consultation with us on the Government's programme with particular emphasis on control of inflation through incomes policy, devolution and direct elections to Europe. The mood was sombre but amicable and we talked for over an hour, at the end of which he gave me some encouragement to think that such an arrangement could be possible; this was sufficient for me to be able to put it to my colleagues that evening and for him to discuss it with some of his team.<sup>14</sup>

In the end, Callaghan and Steel agreed terms which the Cabinet approved, reportedly by 20 votes to 4, but there were no resignations. During the debate on the Conservative Party's motion of no confidence Callaghan read out a joint statement prepared with Steel:

We agreed today the basis on which the Liberal Party would work with the Government in pursuit of economic recovery.

We will set up a Joint Consultative Committee, under the Chairmanship of the Leader of the House that will meet regularly. This Committee will examine Government policy and other issues prior to their coming before the House and Liberal policy proposals.

The existence of this Committee will not commit the Government to accepting the views of the Liberal Party or the Liberal Party to supporting the Government on any issue.

We agree to initiate regular meetings between the Chancellor and the Liberal Party economic spokesperson, such meetings to begin at once. In addition, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Liberal Party will meet as necessary.

We agree that legislation for direct elections to the European Assembly in 1978 will be presented to Parliament in this Session.

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<sup>14</sup> David Steel, *Against Goliath: David Steel's Story*, 1989, p127

The Liberal Party re-affirm their strong conviction that a proportional system should be used as the method of election...

We agree that process must be made on legislation for devolution...

We agree that the Government will provide the extra time needed...[for a Liberal Bill on homelessness]...[and that it will limit the scope of the Bill on direct labour organisations of Local Councils]

We agree that this arrangement between us should last until the end of the present parliamentary session, when both parties would consider whether the experiment has been of sufficient benefit to the country to be continued.

We also agree that this understanding should be made public.<sup>15</sup>

The full text of the agreement was reported on the front page of *The Times* on the following day, 24 March 1977. *The Times* also reported that, with Liberal support, the Government won with a majority of 24 in the no confidence debate.<sup>16</sup>

Jonathan Kirkup, lecturer in Politics, University of Cardiff, provides a detailed account of the build-up to negotiations surrounding, agreement on, extension of and ending of the Lib-Lab Pact of 1977-78. He described its "unique status as the only formal cross-Party parliamentary agreement in national politics between 1945 and 2010".<sup>17</sup>

At the end of the 1976-77 Session, it was agreed to continue the co-operation into the next Session and in January 1978 a special Liberal Party Assembly voted to give Steel the authority to continue the Lib-Lab pact by 1,727 to 520.

However, the Liberal attempt to introduce proportional representation into the European Assembly Elections Bill failed. This had been a key issue for the Liberal Party. In his autobiography Steel writes "I had already let it be known that the pact could not and should not be broken *on this issue...*"<sup>18</sup> The outcome of the vote, and the continuation of the pact afterwards, split the parliamentary Liberal Party.

In April 1977, Steel expressed the Liberal disappointment at the failure of the Government to cut income tax. In May, the Government was defeated twice during the Finance Bill, once on an opposition amendment to the Finance Bill reducing income tax by 1p and again on an amendment raising the threshold for the 40 per cent tax bracket.

On 13 May 1978 Steel declared that minority government was not only tolerable, but desirable, and on 25 May he announced the end of the Lib-Lab pact at the end of the session as it had achieved its main objective of providing political stability.<sup>19</sup> In his autobiography Steel

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<sup>15</sup> As quoted by David Steel, *Against Goliath: David Steel's story*, 1989, p129-130

<sup>16</sup> Joint discussion among the concessions", *Times*, 24 March 1977, p1; and "Liberal support gives Government victory by 24 votes", *Times*, 24 March 1977, p1

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Kirkup, *The Lib-Lab Pact: A Parliamentary Agreement, 1977-78*, 2016, p1

<sup>18</sup> David Steel, *Against Goliath: David Steel's story*, 1989, p 135

<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Foote, *A chronology of post-war British politics*, 1988

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explains that early in 1978 he had begun to discuss election prospects with Callaghan, and had told him that the Liberals needed a quarantine period before the formal ending of the pact and the general election. At the time, it was still undecided whether the election would be called for the autumn, or if Labour would hold on until 1979. In March 1978 Steel told Callaghan that he would probably seek to end the agreement in July.<sup>20</sup> In March 1979 the minority Callaghan government was defeated by one vote on a confidence motion.

Writing in 1978 Butler stated that the understanding of 1977 “fell far short of coalition”:

It took place in a time of economic crisis but it was born of parliamentary tactics rather than national necessity. It was not the child of war, as in 1915 or 1940 and it was not a reaction to a fear of imminent national disaster, as in 1931...But in 1977, as in the earlier instances, considerations of national interest were not wholly absent: politicians can easily convince themselves that the success of their principal opponents is the worst disaster that can befall the country...<sup>21</sup>

Butler and Kavanagh have explained that the agreement involved a consultative machinery which came into operation only when ministers and their Liberal shadows could not agree, with a summit between the party leaders occasionally invoked as “a final court of appeal”.<sup>22</sup>

David Coates has made the following analysis of the impact of the Lib Lab pact on government policy:

Certainly the Cabinet’s decision to include a form of proportional representation (the regional list system) in its Bill on elections to the European Assembly, in the face of opposition from within the Parliamentary Labour Party, reflected Liberal pressure. So did the Chancellor’s temporarily embarrassing inability to add a 5½p tax to petrol as part of his 1977 budget strategy. ... The eventual government proposals on industrial democracy also reflected Liberal views, as did the revamped proposals on devolution for Scotland and Wales which were presented to the 1977-78 session of Parliament. But over time it was the Liberals who were most embarrassed by their new role as maintainers in office of a government whose main lines of policy were already set. ...

Coates has noted that the main attraction of the pact to both parties “was its ability to delay the electoral annihilation to which both seemed liable in the first half of 1977”:

The two year Liberal pact, that is, saw the Labour Government through a period in which they were 16.5 per cent behind the Conservatives in the Gallup Poll to one in which they were only 2 per cent behind, and to a period in which by-election results (both in Scotland and in England) gave only an average 5 per cent swing against them.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> David Steel, *Against Goliath: David Steel's story*, 1989, p144

<sup>21</sup> David Butler, *Coalitions in British politics*, 1978, p111

<sup>22</sup> David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1979*, 1980, p94

<sup>23</sup> David Coates, *Labour in power? A Study of the Labour Government 1974-1979*, 1980, p154

However, as well as the policy influence, the Liberal Party had had other motivations: they had wanted to show how a bi-party coalition could work in the UK, and to have an experience of government.

Ben Seyd, writing in a 2002 Constitution Unit publication states that:

We can learn from this episode that the main collective forum, cabinet, was indeed, downgraded as decisions were taken in small meetings of the party leaders. The 'top down' nature of the collaboration between the parties was one of its weak points, since important actors outside the elite group, notably the parliamentary parties, were not committed to its success and subsequently brought it down. However, the Lib-Lab pact has so far been a one-off, limiting the extent to which we can draw general lessons for power sharing situations. And it should be remembered that the pact was an example of minority government, not coalition government proper, since the Liberals were never formally brought into government. The experience thus hints at various considerations that will need to be taken into account should Westminster move to coalition government, but it hardly provides a rich source of information.<sup>24</sup>

## 2.5 1997 Minority Conservative Government

In 1992 John Major won the General Election with a majority of 21. This majority was tested by a series of by-election defeats, defections, and divisions within the Conservative Party.

Differences between members of the Conservative party had come to a head over the votes which took place in May and November 1992 on the Maastricht Treaty. In May, 22 Conservative MPs voted against the Maastricht Bill's second reading. In November, there were two votes: a Labour Amendment proposing to delay consideration of the Treaty; the second was the Government's Paving Motion inviting the Commons to resume progress on the legislation. The key vote was won by 319 to 316 votes with 26 Conservative Members voting against the Government and another 6 abstaining, with the earlier Labour Amendment lost by 319 to 313 votes.<sup>25</sup>

By February 1997 Conservatives had lost their majority. Butler and Kavanagh recorded that:

Due to by-election attrition, the government's clear majority, 21 in 1992, had sunk to 11 by the end of 1994. It virtually disappeared for six months while the nine Euro-sceptic MPs were denied the whip. It was further dented when Alan Howarth crossed the floor to Labour, and Emma Nicholson, followed by Peter Thurnham, went over to the Liberal Democrats. Finally, when Barry Porter died in Wirral South on 3 November 1996, Mr Major ceased to have a majority.<sup>26</sup>

The by-election was held on 27 February 1997; Labour won the seat. The general election was announced on 18 March for 1 May.

<sup>24</sup> Ben Seyd, *Coalition Government in Britain: Lessons from overseas*, Constitution Unit, 2002, p16

<sup>25</sup> For a detailed account of events surrounding these votes, see David Baker, Andrew Gamble and Steve Ludlam in 'Whips or Scorpions? The Maastricht vote and the Conservative Party' in *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 46 No. 2, April 2003

<sup>26</sup> Butler and Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1997*, p13



## 2.6 Minority Conservative Government (2017)

At the 2017 general election, the Conservative Party was returned as the largest party but they did not have an overall majority. They obtained 317 seats.

Prime Minister Theresa May announced on 9 June 2017 that she was forming a Government and continuing to “work with friends and allies” in the Democratic Unionist Party.<sup>27</sup>

### General Election June 2017

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Conservative	317
Labour	262
Liberal Democrat	12
Scottish National Party	35
Democratic Unionist Party	10
Others*	14

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\* including Speaker

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<sup>27</sup> Christopher Hope, “[Exclusive: Conservatives and DUP start talks to agree ‘programme for government’ within days](#)”, *Telegraph*, 9 June 2017

### 3. Coalition Governments

For significant parts of the first half of the twentieth century, there were coalition administrations. However, these twentieth century coalitions only occurred at times of war, economic crisis, or as a prelude to mergers between political parties.<sup>28</sup>

For example, between 1931 and 1940 a national government, led at various points by MacDonald (1931-35), Baldwin (1935-37) and Chamberlain (1937-40) included National Labour, Conservatives, Liberal Nationals, and until 1932, the Liberals. In 1940, a wartime government of national unity was formed under Churchill which included Conservatives, Labour and Liberals, lasting until 1945. A wartime government of national unity had also been established during the First World War, which continued until 1922. No formal coalition governed from Westminster between 1945 and 2010.

#### 3.1 1915-1922: Wartime coalition and the “coupon” election

During the First World War a coalition was formed in 1915 under Asquith with the Liberals as the dominant party. The Conservatives were given 8 Cabinet positions out of 21, with one given to Arthur Henderson as the spokesman for the Labour members who supported the war. In 1916, following difficulties between the coalition parties, Lloyd George became Prime Minister of what became a predominantly Conservative coalition. Whilst the Conservatives were supportive of the coalition, Lloyd George had the support of only a minority of Liberal Members and Henderson’s continued involvement was endorsed by “the narrowest majority” in Labour’s National Executive Committee.<sup>29</sup>

At the end of the First World War, the Conservatives and Lloyd George Liberals formed an electoral pact in what became known as the ‘coupon’ election of 1918. The Coalition Conservatives won a majority of seats and formed a Government with the Lloyd George Liberals. The coalition ended with a vote at the Carlton Club in October 1922 (when Conservative MPs voted by 198 to 88 to withdraw from the coalition).

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<sup>28</sup> Vernon Bogdanor, *Coalition Governments in Western Europe*, 1983, p11

<sup>29</sup> David Butler, *Governing without a Majority*, 1987, p41

**General Election December 1918**

<b>Coalition</b>	<b>478</b>
Unionist	335
Liberal	133
Labour	10
<b>Non-coalition</b>	<b>156</b>
Conservative	23
Irish Unionist	25
Liberal	28
Labour	63
Irish Nationalist	7
Others	10
<b>Abstentionists</b>	
Sinn Fein	73

### 3.2 1931: the National Government

In 1931 a national coalition was formed, which became the National Government, due to a severe economic crisis. David Butler has explained the events leading to the coalition as follows:

Faced with a run on sterling which led banking opinion to demand more cuts in government expenditure than the Labour cabinet would tolerate, MacDonald, instead of resigning, was persuaded to accept the offers of support from the Conservatives and the Liberals. He formed what was intended to be a National Coalition before a general election in which the parties would fight separately, with 'no coupons, no pacts'. But almost the whole of the Liberal party went immediately into opposition and the other parties, after only a few weeks, decided to fight the election as a National government, with candidates of each party withdrawing in favour of whoever was the sitting tenant. The outcome was the biggest landslide in British history and, effectively, it transformed the National government into a Conservative government.

The Liberals withdrew after a year, but MacDonald remained Prime Minister until 1935; and the National label continued until 1940 with the Liberal National and National Labour parties preserving separate whips' offices and national headquarters. Yet it is hardly realistic to talk about coalition government after 1932, or to draw any lessons about how parties should work together.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p47

### General Election October 1931

<b>National Government</b>	<b>554</b>
Conservative	473
Liberal National	35
Liberal	33
National Labour	13
<b>Opposition</b>	<b>61</b>
Labour	52
Independent Liberal	4
Other	5

### 3.3 1940-45: Wartime coalition

In May 1940 Winston Churchill formed a coalition government which lasted until May 1945, after the end of the war in Europe. During the coalition the Liberals had one Cabinet Minister, Sir Archibald Sinclair, who was Secretary of State at the Air Ministry. Until the formation of the 2010 coalition government, he was the last Liberal to serve in the Cabinet.

### 3.4 2010 Conservative Liberal Democrat Coalition Government

The General Election of May 2010 resulted in a hung parliament. The creation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition took place after a series of negotiation meetings between the political parties.

#### General Election May 2010

Conservative <sup>[1]</sup>	305
Labour	258
Liberal Democrat	57
Others	29

[1] This does not include the Member elected for Thirsk and Malton, where the election was delayed due to the death of a candidate

The Commons Library briefing, [The 2010 Coalition Government at Westminster](#), provides information about the nature of the coalition agreement, the operation of the coalition in Parliament and in Government, and agreements to differ during the administration.

## 4. 1997 - The Lib-Lab consultative committee on constitutional reform

Although not a coalition government, the cross-party talks which occurred before the 1997 general election between the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties continued for some time once Labour were in government, in the form of a joint cabinet committee. The origins of the Committee are detailed in the *Report of the Joint (Labour Party-Liberal Democrats) Consultative Committee on Constitutional Reform*:

In summer 1996 Tony Blair and Paddy Ashdown asked Robin Cook and Robert Maclennan to explore the possibility of co-operation between the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties in relation to constitutional reform. Both parties had for some time been committed to a programme of constitutional change and shared a common view of the need to reform our democratic institutions and to renew the relationship between politics and the people. Following progress in the initial discussions the two parties agreed in October 1996 to establish a Joint Consultative Committee with the following terms of reference:

'To examine the current proposals of the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties for constitutional reform; to consider whether there might be sufficient common ground to enable the parties to reach agreement on a legislative programme for constitutional reform; to consider means by which such a programme might best be implemented and to make recommendations.'<sup>31</sup>

Following the 1997 General Election, Labour-Liberal Democrat co-operation was formalised in a Cabinet Committee, known as the Joint Consultative Committee. This was listed in the 'Ministerial Committees of the Cabinet' chapter of the December 1997 edition of *Vacher's Parliamentary Companion* (it was not included in the September 1997 edition). It had the following entry:

### **Composition**

The Committee will be chaired by the Prime Minister

Other Ministers and Liberal Democratic spokesmen will be invited to attend as necessary.

### **Terms of Reference**

To consider policy issues of joint interest to the Government and the Liberal Democratic Party.<sup>32</sup>

After the 2005 General Election, there was some press coverage of the establishment of Cabinet Committees. *The Independent's* report noted that the Joint Consultative Committee had been abolished:

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<sup>31</sup> *Report of the Joint (Labour Party-Liberal Democrats) Consultative Committee on Constitutional Reform*, paras 1-2, cited by Robert Blackburn and Raymond Plant (eds) *Constitutional Reform: The Labour Government's Constitutional Reform Agenda*, 1999, Appendix 2

<sup>32</sup> *Vacher's Parliamentary Companion*, Number 1088, December 1997, p135

In another decision that signals his opposition to PR, Mr Blair formally abolished the Joint Consultative Committee (JCC), he set up with the former Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown as a vehicle to discuss PR. The scrapping of the JCC slammed the door on the prospect of Labour-Liberal Democrat talks on voting reform and sent a powerful signal that relations between Labour and the Liberal Democrats have hit a new low. Mr Prescott has told colleagues: "That's all dead now."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Marie Woolf and Colin Brown, "'Sceptical' Prescott made head of committee on PR", *Independent*, 25 May 2005



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