

# Minority government can deliver stability and be more democratic

## AGENDA

A column for outside contributors.  
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If the polling results we have been seeing for several months hold up for tomorrow's election, we may have a minority UK government as a result. Minority governments are quite common in other parliamentary democracies, particularly elsewhere in Europe, but also in some Commonwealth countries such as Canada and New Zealand.

For people living in Scotland, the experience of 2007-11 should be familiar. For the wider British public, however, Westminster's possible move towards minority government could be worrying and UK politicians, many of whom may never have reconciled themselves to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government, may come to dread having to face even more of the challenges associated with moving away from the "majoritarian" model of democracy. Contrary to what people might think, minority government is not necessarily undemocratic.

For it to survive, the Government requires at least the tolerance of the majority of elected MPs, so it would still have a democratic mandate that could be tested in confidence motions. Indeed, minority government could be seen as more democratic than the more typical single-party UK governments sustained by party discipline and seat majorities "manufactured" by the so-called first-past-the-post electoral system.

This is because minority

government empowers the parliament, which can behave more like an actual legislature than a rubber stamp of approval for an overly powerful prime minister.

While the public (and the business community) might worry about a minority government's stability, the Cabinet Manual points out that the Fixed-term Parliaments Act makes early elections less likely. Defeats on bills that might have been seen as indicating no confidence in the government will no longer be fatal because only an explicit no confidence motion can bring a government down, provided no alternative can be found (or confidence regained) in 14 days. Furthermore, a government needs the support of at least two-thirds of all MPs to call an early election. This is

unlikely because it would require both major parties to agree to shorten the five-year term, and public opinion that favours one large party to the extent that it would like an immediate election is likely to show that the other large party would suffer.

Even if the "super-majority" could be achieved, there is a degree of risk involved in forcing people to vote again, with the parties supporting an early election possibly being punished at the polls. All of this means that you do not need a formal coalition composed of parties with a majority of seats to have stability. Indeed, reforms to parliamentary committees to allow opposition parties more influence over legislation would provide an incentive for the opposition to work constructively

with other MPs and not try to bring the Government down. Of course, the two main parties could decide to abandon any attempt at promoting consensual behaviour and repeal the Fixed-term Parliaments Act.

If a minority government forms after the election, politicians will need to rise to the occasion, changing the tone of recent campaign rhetoric. Labour leader Ed Miliband, in particular, would need to stop talking "macho" and instead talk politely to other parties. This would not require him to be overly beholden to the SNP, though; campaign hyperbole about

this is absurd because the SNP cannot allow the Conservatives to form a government if it can be prevented. Nicola Sturgeon's claims of having an "enormous influence" on a minority Labour government are greatly exaggerated.

Nevertheless, all parties will need to find ways to co-operate if they want to get legislation passed in a minority government situation, and this will require compromise. The minority SNP Government managed to do this in the past, working particularly well with the Scottish Conservatives (under Annabel Goldie) in the 2007-11 Scottish Parliament. Of course, the Scottish Parliament is elected by the mixed-member proportional system, under which politicians have an expectation that coalition and/or minority governments are more likely (though not inevitable, as the 2011 result showed). If the UK's apparent multi-party system continues, hung parliaments are more likely to occur



and Westminster politicians will need to behave in a more consensual way if they want politics to work.

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