

## Lessons from local government: Hung parliaments can work

Posted on Tuesday 4th May 2010

Following the third of the historic Prime Ministerial debates – staged, of course, here at the University of Birmingham – the possibility of the election producing a single-party Conservative majority government increased – though marginally – for the first time in weeks. Similarly, the likelihood of a less conclusive result reduced somewhat; presumably to the relief of those who have been predicting instability, legislative deadlock and parliamentary collapse as the probable outcomes of a hung parliament.

As others have noted, those predicting such political chaos might usefully have looked abroad – at the many European countries where coalition and minority governments successfully function. Or, maybe better still, they might have looked at our own local governments. Of just over 400 administrations in Britain, over 40 work as coalitions, almost 70 as minority governments (coalition and single party), and, a small number of local authorities see directly elected mayors of one party working alongside majorities of other political hues.

In most instances, it does seem that the politicians operating in these unconventional environments have successfully managed to grasp the necessities of consensual politics and the need to work with other parties. Local idiosyncrasies aside, decision-making appears to take place and political outcomes are – for most observers – democratically preferable. Decisions are more inclusive and pluralistic than those reached in single party majority situations; by virtue of more councillors being involved in the process.

This is not to say that problems do not arise, cabinet formation can prove problematic and the scrutiny process risks being hindered; especially in situations where the majority of councillors constitute the administration. While teething periods are inevitable evidence from the locality does suggest that consensual political cultures can be built and here, it is worth looking at local politics in Scotland as an example. With the Single Transferable Vote (STV) replacing Single Member Plurality in 2007, not only have the number of coalitions increased (currently 19 out of 32), new political combinations that were previously un-thought of now function successfully, furthermore, it has been suggested that learning effects are evident: it seems that Scottish councillors are adapting to the new type of politics that STV has instigated.

The Single Member Plurality system is not designed to create hung or balanced outcomes and although exceptions exist, for example Birmingham City Council has been hung for 5 years and this is likely to remain the case for the foreseeable future. However, the fact remains politicians working under the system – generally – do not expect to find themselves in situations that require consensual politics. When they do, the majority adapt and successfully meet the challenge; some however do not because of issues like a continued focus on the next election and the wish for a return to single party majority rule. These are the councils most at risk of instability and legislative gridlock. In such instances the sticking issue is not always whether coalition or minority government can work; rather it is whether the politicians involved want them to (a particularly important consideration at national level given the option for dissolution). If May the 6 does return a hung parliament and a coalition or minority government results, numerous factors will influence whether or not the end product is successful. Nevertheless it seems that the extent to which those involved actively want to make government work will be the key factor in the formation of a Westminster coalition.

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