Britain's election on the morning after: "who here has a mandate"

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In the speech of thanks at his Parliamentary election early this morning, Conservative leader David Cameron asserted, “It is clear that this Labour Government no longer has a mandate to govern.”

Maybe so: but it is not clear who does have that mandate.

In recent hours things have firmed up: 1) the Conservatives will not achieve an overall majority; 2) the Liberal Democrats have failed to make a significant advance; 3) Labour faces the difficult decision of if it wishes to forge a coalition and how it does so. The numbers at the moment out of 650 seats in the House of Commons: Conservatives 294, Labour 252, Lib Dems 52, Others 27.

The Tories have gained seats. They need 116 to achieve a majority, however, and there are not enough targets left to pick up 28 more from either Labour or the Liberal Democrats. So while the other two major parties are dealing with disappointment this morning – Labour down 81 seats and the Lib Dems, more surprisingly, down 5 from their 2005 performance – they are not bowing down before a Blue Wave.

Nor is the raw percentage of vote, for what it’s worth, any more supportive of a Conservative victory. The Tories only added four percent to their 2005 total, rising to about 36.5%. Labour is at 28.7%, in line with pre-poll projections, but the Liberal Democrats are down from those projecitons (though up slightly from 2005) with 22.8%.

If I was to attempt an academic soundbite – be snappy but invoke history – this was no 1997, when Tony Blair’s Labour swept away the Conservative Government, with leading Tory Ministers falling on their swords in defeat. A couple of former Labour Ministers did lose, but nothing which even merited a front-page photograph.

So what do we have? Muddle.

We have muddle in the results. The BBC’s 2-D Swingometer has now imploded amidst outcomes that might take four dimensions to map. There was no uniformity in the shifts or non-shifts, with individual seats bouncing around depending on boundary changes, some regional trends, three and four-way splits in the vote, and – dare it be say – local issues and the strengths of individual candidates.

So Labour was not only to resist the Lib Dem challenge but, in some places, to push back against the Conservative claim of rule after 13 years of Blair and Brown Governments. For example, in our home area of Birmingham, Labour retained what used to be a Conservative stronghold in Birmingham Edgbaston, clung on – despite talk of a student vote tipping seats to Lib Dems – to Birmingham Selly Oak, and, in one of the most intriguing results of the night, kept Birmingham Hall Green (the Respect Party, formed on the strength of opposition to the 2003 Iraq War, finished second in a four-way fight with more than 25 percent of the vote).

And we have muddle in what is to come. The stark politics of the numbers is that the Conservatives are projected to fall about 20 seats short of a majority. However, Labour and Lib Dem are projected, even in coalition, to be about 10 seats shy of the mark, which would mean bringing in a couple of smaller parties for a majority.

Under the laws and practices of this land, Labour gets the first shot at forging a Government. Paradoxically, however, given their scare talk of how votes for the Liberal Democrats will unsettle the country: the lack of a Lib Dem surge means that they can only bring a weakened party into a coalition.

The Conservatives will bang away at how the largest number of seats means that, sooner rather than later, Gordon Brown should step down and let them put together a Government. But it appears there are not enough scraps on the electoral table, i.e., a few Northern Irish Unionists, to weld a coalition without approaching the Lib Dems. And those Lib Dems, even in a shaken state, will stick insist on major changes in the British electoral system (if you want an unspoken headline from last evening, the numbers this morning show how skewed Britain’s “first past the post” elections are). That’s not a demand that the Tories will be eager to meet.

So from the messiness of “democracy” to the murkiness of individual politicians testing others, sounding out deals, assessing the price of getting power.

The silver lining? Well, there may be quick redress for those hundreds (thousands) of voters who had the doors of polling stations shut in their faces at 10 p.m. local time last night. For, in less than a year, with no party establishing a right to govern, there could well be another Election Night in Britain.

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