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Hung councils and local coalitions:

where are they going, and how?

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ABSTRACT

A few years ago, the 'political control' of the biggest group of councils in Great Britain was not Conservative or Labour, but 'hung' – in the arithmetical sense of no single party on a council holding more than 50% of the seats. Nationally, just one General Election in the whole post-war period (February 1974) had produced a hung parliament, followed by a few months of single-party minority rule, and no coalition government had been formed afresh after a General Election since the mid-19th Century. In local government, however, the initials NOC – No Overall Control – had become commonplace, and for many councils almost a permanent state of affairs. Moreover, throughout the transition from committee-based to executive decision-making, power-sharing or coalitional arrangements (although the c-word itself was rarely used) were for most hung councils the preferred mode of operation – rather than single-party minority government.

That was then. Today, we have at Westminster the first peacetime coalition government for more than 70 years, but in local government the fewest hung councils since 1985. This statement is true of Great Britain as a whole, but in fact the decline in hung councils generally and in coalitional arrangements in particular has been confined almost entirely to England. From a 2005 total of 132, the number of hung councils has dropped to today's 57, with single-party minority administrations outnumbering coalitions by 2 to 1. Indeed, there are as many coalitions – and far more involving three or more parties or groups – among Scotland's 32 authorities as among England's 352. This Briefing examines these developments and provides some of the statistics behind them.

The key statistics

It has become almost a platitude amongst political scientists, and indeed electoral reformers: the declining two-party hegemony in British politics. The statistics and assertions are familiar. A third of General Election votes in 2010 went to parties other than Conservative and Labour – the highest proportion since 1922. 13% of MPs represent third or minor parties, despite a discriminatingly non-proportional electoral system. Single-party majority government, we are advised, is set to

become the exception, rather than the rule. As so often, though, in the local government world things are different – very different.

Figure 1: Party affiliation of GB councillors since 1973

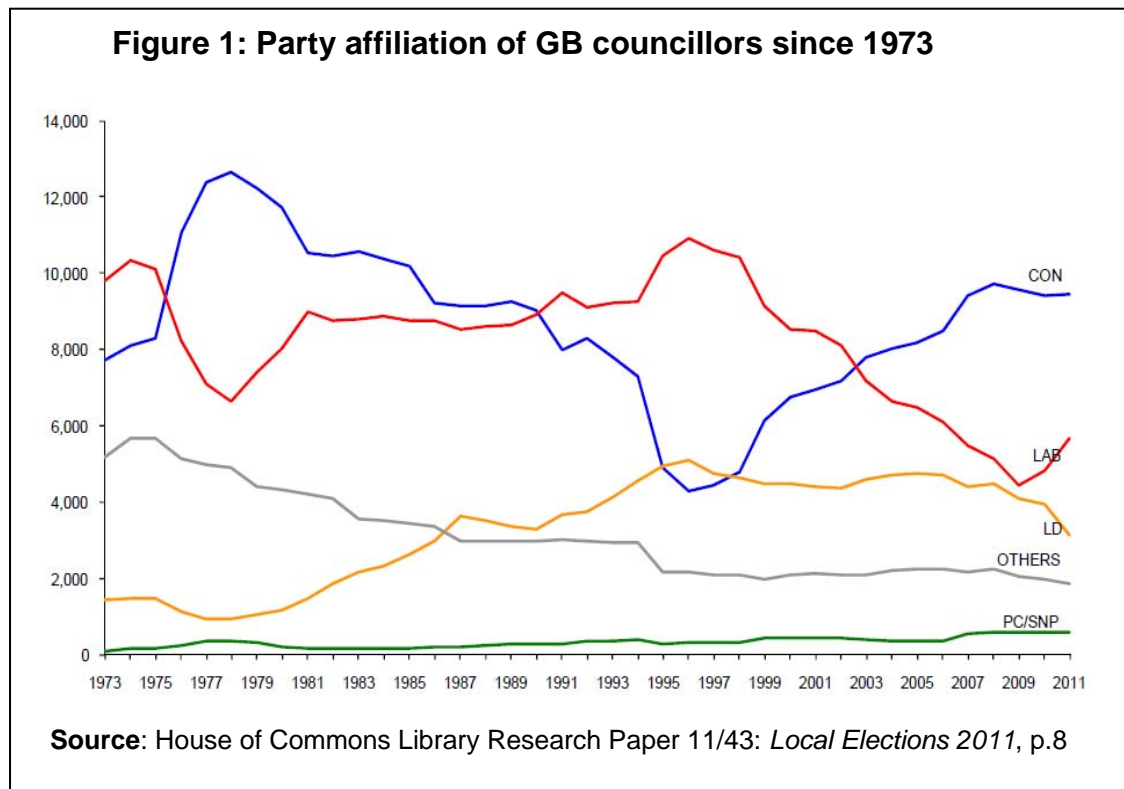**Source**: House of Commons Library Research Paper 11/43: *Local Elections 2011*, p.8

Figure 1 plots the fluctuating numbers of councillors by political party, which is useful, but unfortunately takes no account of the nearly 20% fall in councillor numbers over the period – from 25,710 in 1974, immediately after the nationwide restructuring of local government, to the current (though still falling) 20,679. The visual effect is what photographers would call an angle error – in this case making the whole graph tilt slightly to the right, or downhill.

Figure 2 straightens the picture, as it were, by plotting the same data in percentages – from which it is easier to see that **today's nearly 74% of GB councillors representing one of the two main parties – 46% Conservative, 28% Labour – is at the highest level for over 20 years, and currently rising**.

Figure 2: Party affiliation of GB councillors since 1973 (%)
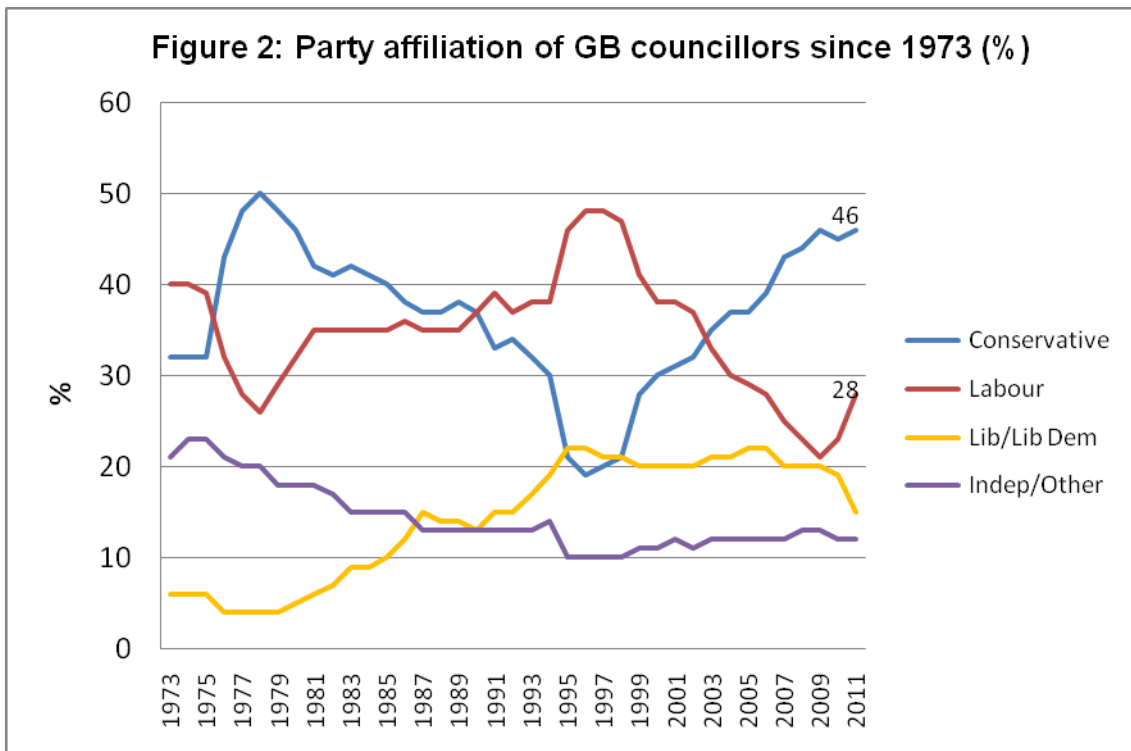
This two-party dominance is reflected in the statistics for councils' political control. Figure 3 shows that the two main parties control proportionately more councils – 71% in GB, 79% in England – than for over 30 years.

Figure 3: Political control of GB councils, 1973-11
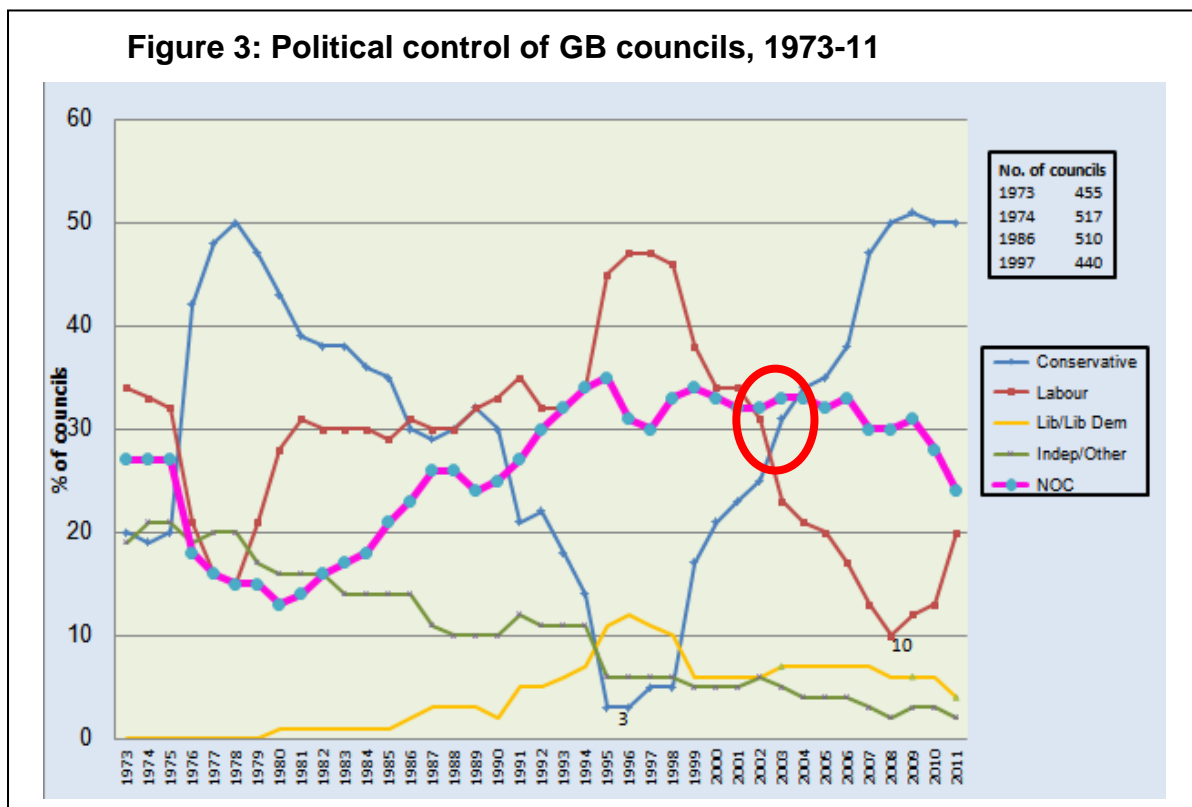
Some of these gains have been straight from the Liberal Democrats and Independents, but **the much bigger change in recent years has been the steady reduction in the number of hung councils – those under arithmetical No Overall Control (NOC), with no single party holding more than 50% of the seats – from over a third of GB councils (147) in 2005 to well under a quarter (95).** Furthermore, those GB figures incorporate the big increase in hung councils – from 14 to 27 – that followed Scotland's 2007 switch to the Single Transferable Vote (STV) in local elections, which means that, as shown in Figure 4, **the fall in the numbers of English hung councils has been sharper still**. By July/August 2011, their number was down to just 57.

Figure 4: Political control of English councils, 2005-11

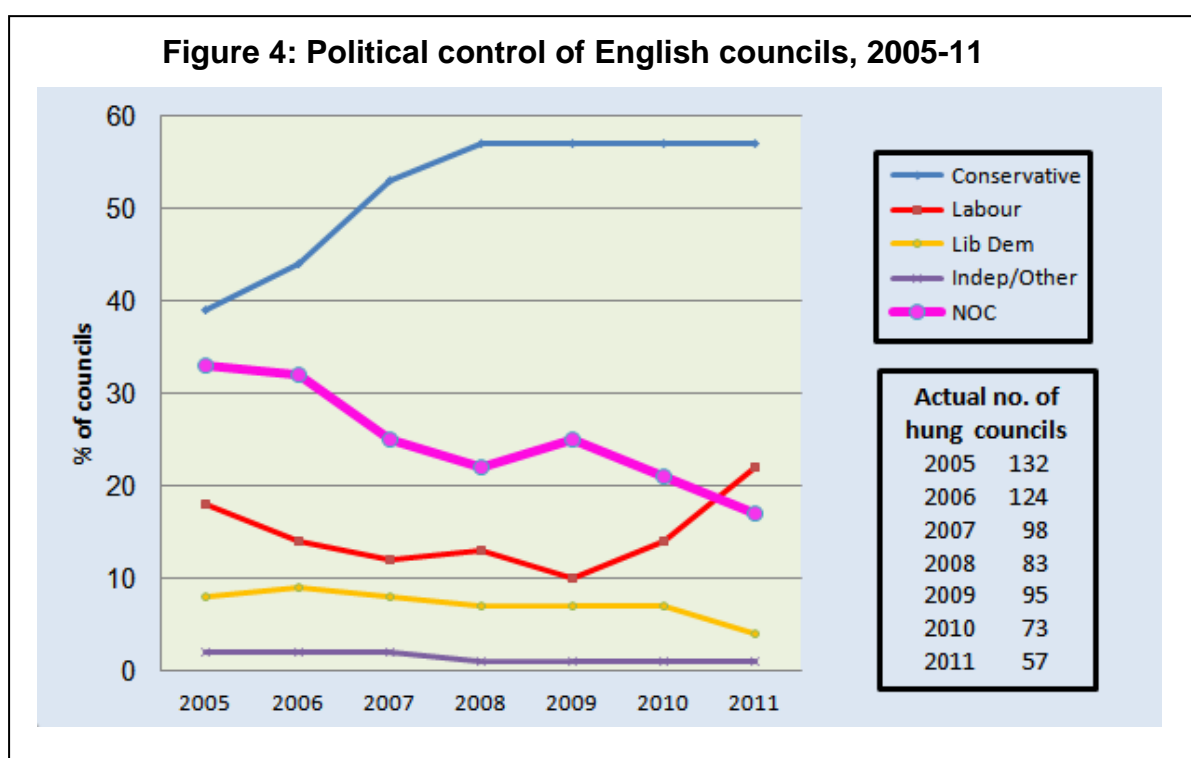| Actual no. of hung councils	
2005	132
2006	124
2007	98
2008	83
2009	95
2010	73
2011	57

Figure 5 shows the actual 2011data contained in the data lines in Figures 1 to 4: data compiled, it should be noted, immediately following the 2011 local elections. Eagle-eyed readers, emeritus professors, and the political science equivalent of those film fans whose main enjoyment derives from recording continuity editing errors may have observed that there were at that time 59 NOC councils in England and 99 in Great Britain – two more than the figures cited in Figure 4, in the Abstract of this *Briefing*, and that will be used throughout the text, parts at least of which were updated to late July. For the record, the two 'disappeared' councils are Rochdale –

Figure 5: Council composition and control, Great Britain, May 2011

	Number				%total			
Councillors	CON	LAB	LD	OTH	CON	LAB	LD	OTH
London	716	876	246	23	38%	47%	13%	1%
Metropolitan boroughs	534	1,435	366	110	22%	59%	15%	4%
Counties	1,262	148	346	102	68%	8%	19%	5%
Unitary authorities	1,325	1,002	508	292	42%	32%	16%	9%
Shire districts	5,281	1,537	1,321	763	59%	17%	15%	9%
England	**9,118**	**4,998**	**2,787**	**1,290**	50%	27%	15%	7%
Welsh unitary authorities	174	345	158	587	14%	27%	13%	46%
Scottish unitary authorities	143	348	166	565	12%	28%	14%	46%
Great Britain	**9,435**	**5,691**	**3,111**	**2,442**	46%	28%	15%	12%

	Number				%total			
Councils controlled	CON	LAB	LD	NOC	CON	LAB	LD	NOC
London boroughs	11	17	2	2	34%	53%	6%	6%
Metropolitan boroughs	3	25	0	8	8%	69%	0%	22%
County councils	26	0	0	1	96%	0%	0%	4%
Unitary authorities	24	16	1	14	44%	29%	2%	25%
Shire districts	137	19	10	34	69%	10%	5%	17%
England	**201**	**77**	**13**	**59**	57%	22%	4%	17%
Welsh unitary authorities	2	2	0	13	12%	12%	0%	76%
Scottish unitary authorities	0	2	0	27	0%	7%	0%	93%
Great Britain	**203**	**81**	**13**	**99**	51%	20%	3%	25%

Source: House of Commons Library Research Paper 11/43: *Local Elections 2011*, p.7

whose Liberal Democrats defected in 2010/11 in greater numbers than probably anywhere else in the country and enough of whom have now joined up with Labour to give that party overall control – and Stroud, where a single Conservative defector re-ratted, as Churchill once put it of himself, and restored an overall Conservative majority.

Hung councils – a perennial presence

For most of the past quarter-century, as shown in Figure 3, the proportion of hung councils has hovered about between 25 and 35%, or about 130 to 170 GB councils. The variance, as might be expected, has been noticeably less extreme than that of the fortunes of the major parties, as recorded in Figures 1 and 2. The Conservatives' nadir came in 1995-96, when their total of councillors fell, for the only time since reorganisation, below 20% (around 5,000), and their councils controlled to a scarcely credible 13 or 3%. Labour never hit quite such depths, their lowest total of councillors being 21% after the county council elections of 2009, at which point their majority-

controlled councils were down to 43 or 10%, thanks substantially to their retention of 12 of the 36 metropolitan boroughs.

Hung authorities, then, became the perennial presence in our local government landscape, a feature of numerical stability around which the major parties' shares of councils soared and plummeted, the Liberal Democrats peaked and plateaued, and 'Independents and others' fell away, gradually but seemingly inexorably. For a couple of years (2002-04), captured in the small triangle highlighted in Figure 3, NOC was statistically the most prevalent form of 'political control', which is interesting, at the very least, given an electoral system geared locally, as nationally, to turning minority votes into majority administrations.

That triangle also draws attention to the obvious point that, while the NOC line on the graph may appear relatively stable, the councils it represents are anything but a stable group. For most, NOC serves as a kind of staging post at which they stop off for maybe one or two electoral cycles before a changed political mood and the electoral system combine to return them again to majority control. In that brief 2002-04 period, for instance – which covered three sets of local elections, but excluded the English counties altogether – there was a 'churn' of around 50%. By 2004 almost half of the 2002 group had gone, at least two-thirds to Conservative majority control, and had been replaced by a similar number of mainly formerly Labour councils.

NOC, in short, is where you'll find many, and frequently most, of the really significant results of any set of local elections – which are, of course, the changes in councils' political control. There will be those that switch directly from majority control by Party A to majority control by Party B – and often examples of the reverse movement at the same elections. But, with a third of English councils having elections in three years out of four, and with the increased number of third and minority party councillors, considerably more councils nowadays will spend some time in NOC *en route*. In 2011, roughly 60 councils experienced some arithmetical change in their political control, which in four-fifths of cases came from moving into or out of NOC. The number was exceptional, this being a year in which all district councils had elections, but not the phenomenon.

Falling numbers and changing form

Two things have changed, though, in recent years. First, as already noted, the NOC group has lost even its numerical stability. Since 2006 the number of English hung authorities has fallen from around 130 to today's 57, while the GB figure, though boosted by a doubling in Scotland following the 2007 switch to STV, has dropped from around 150 to 95, or proportionately from over a third to under a quarter. At the same time, it seems that, at least in England, the *form* of hung council government has also changed significantly. As shown in Figure 6, **there has been a move away from what are nowadays regularly termed coalitions, but used in local government to be known generically as 'power-sharing arrangements', and towards more single-party minority administrations**. In other words, just as MPs – and the national media – are struggling to get to grips with a form of government that many local authorities have been familiar with for years, local government itself is moving in the opposite direction.

Figure 6: Forms of hung council government, 2011

	Total Minority/ Coalition		MINORITY CONTROL					COALITION, PARTNERSHIP involving:					
	Minority	Coalition	Con	Lab	LD	Ind	Grn	Con	Lab	LD	Ind	Grn	Total
Counties (27)	0	1						1		1	1		1
Unitaries (56)	10	3	3	3	3		1	2	1	1	2		3
London boroughs (32)	1	1		1				1		1			1
Metropolitan boroughs (36)	5	3	1	3	1			2	2	3			3
Districts (201)	22	11	12	7	2	1		8	4	7	7	1	11
ENGLAND (352)	38	19	16	14	6	1	1	(14)	(7)	(13)	(10)	(1)	19
SCOTLAND (32)	6	20	1	2			SNP 3	(10)	(7)	(12	(10)	(8)	20
WALES (22)	2	10		2				(4)	(4)	(8)	(8)	PC (5)	10
TOTAL (GB)	46	49	17	18	6	1	4						49

In England, certainly, local coalitions have in the past few years become distinctly unfashionable. Comparisons with Scotland here need to be treated with caution, because, while UK ministers a decade ago were attempting to straitjacket all but the smallest English and Welsh authorities into one of three executive-based models of

political management, the Scottish Executive explicitly encouraged – and achieved – a 'rich diversity' of models. Most authorities retained their committee systems – some modestly streamlined, more apparently not – and even those that moved to some form of executive did so with executives proportionately much larger than their English equivalents, and often cross-partisan. In a Scottish hung council, therefore, the party make-up of an executive/cabinet, even where one exists, may not be as firm a guide as in England to the council's actual political control and form of political management. At what point, for example, does a conditional voting agreement, plus a few committee posts with enhanced 'senior councillor' salaries, become a coalitional arrangement? It should be noted, then, that the Scottish numbers in Figure 6 are derived from the descriptions of councils' political control posted by COSLA (The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities - http://www.cosla.gov.uk/scottish-local-government) – according to which, **there were in July 2011 more coalitions (or power-sharing partnerships) among Scotland's 32 authorities than among England's 352.**

Scotland may present its own institutional difficulties in this kind of taxonomic exercise, but the rest of Figure 6 needs some explanation too. Establishing the number of NOC councils at any one time, and even over time, is a fairly straightforward counting exercise. It is not helped by the fact that, unlike in some local government systems, not all councils have odd numbers of seats – which means that 50% plus a mayor's casting vote can amount in effect to a single-party majority. But we live with these things.

The next steps, however – keeping that list up to date, and establishing what each council's NOC status actually means in practice – are less straightforward. Each and every change in a hung council's elected membership can potentially affect its political balance and ultimately an authority's administration. Nowadays this means not just resignations, deaths and resulting by-elections, but the seemingly increasing numbers of councillors defecting from and/or changing their party groups – over 60 Lib Dems alone between the 2010 and 2011 elections (1.6%, since you ask), according to blogger Laurence Durnan's estimable Political Scrapbook spreadsheet (http://politicalscrapbook.net/2011/04/more-than-50-liberal-democrat-councillors-have-quit-since-may-2010/) .

Even more important is identifying what NOC really means in terms of political control. Which party or parties actually run the council by, in non-mayoral authorities, having a majority of members in the cabinet, executive or equivalent? This information, fundamental to understanding how any council operates, ought to be accessible at a maximum of one or two mouse clicks from any council's website home page – but, even in the case of unchangingly single-party majority administrations, it seldom is. With NOC councils, 'seldom' becomes 'almost never': a citizen's wanting to know who runs the council they helped elect is treated almost as a vexatious request. The curious visitor, if they haven't lost their curiosity or even the will to live, is left to trace the political affiliation of each executive/cabinet member, one at a time, and thereby work out for themselves the council's probable control.

Until recently, that is. Keith Edkins has long done his best, with his continuously updated table of Council Political Compositions (http://www.gwydir.demon.co.uk/uklocalgov/makeup.htm), but could hardly be expected to unpack the *Realpolitik* behind every NOC. Others, like the team commissioned officially to evaluate the move to executive-based political management, have chosen not to attempt it. Let us give thanks, then, to David Boothroyd's local council election news blog, and to Indigo Public Affairs who host the blog, together with an updated political control table of all GB councils (http://www.indigopublicaffairs.com/index.php?page=ipa-council-database), and who have now produced an iphone app, which makes all these political data plus maps available for free (http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/councilmap/id376579315?mt=8). As an irredeemable cyber-sceptic, I still feel bound to check, say, whether Babergh's 'all-party' administration really is, or whether Broxtowe's 'LD/Lab' does indeed exclude the Conservatives, but that's my problem. As far as the present discussion is concerned, it means that not only the overall picture conveyed by Figure 6, but even the individual figures, are more reliable than they would have been in the past

That overall picture appears to be that English local government has, in its approach to the political management of hung councils, come full circle. In the 1980s and early 1990s, single-party minority administrations were by far the most common form of control, for several reasons. Committee-based decision-making meant there was less emphasis on forming an administration (indeed, 'no

administration' was a feasible option), less influence in being a portfolio holder, and, particularly for a council becoming hung for the first time, less incentive to consider forming alliances with your longstanding political opponents. These were ideological times, and all parties shared an instinctive suspicion of cross-party co-operation, but Labour's opposition was both most vehement and official. National guidelines to local Labour parties were emphatic: no chair-sharing, pacts or formal arrangements with any other party to control the council. And, parenthetically, especially not with the SDP/Liberal Alliance (1981-88), theoretically perhaps their closest allies, but whose Social Democratic leaders were forever Labour 'traitors'.

Confirming these circumstances and attitudes, the authors of the principal study at the time, Steve Leach and John Stewart, found that single-party minority administrations outnumbered all three other forms – formal policy-based coalitions, chair-sharing agreements, and 'no administration' or rotating chair arrangements – more than twice over (*The Politics of Hung Authorities*, 1992). The preference for going it alone was shared by all parties.

From the mid-1990s, though, and particularly after 1997, the Labour/Liberal Democrat 'Agreement' at Westminster – a joint approach to constitutional reform, including the appointment of Lib Dems to a cabinet committee – both signalled and reflected that times were changing. Locally, as nationally, there developed a much wider degree of co-operation between the two parties than had previously existed, and a greater readiness generally among councillors to explore different forms of power-sharing arrangements. The Labour Party, in the face of strong local pressure, relaxed first the interpretation of its guidelines and later the guidelines themselves, leading to a considerable number of what were in effect Labour/Lib Dem coalitions. **The outcome was that, by the time the committee system gave way to executive-based decision-making following the Local Government Act 2000, two- or multi-party power-shares comfortably outnumbered single-party minority administrations, by probably at least three to two.**

Local coalitions today – a delayed impact of executive local government?

The arrival of cabinets and executives might have been expected to redress this balance almost immediately, with portfolio holders now having not just the status of committee chairs, but individual and collective decision-making authority and increasingly enhanced Special Responsibility Allowances. But it appeared not to, and it is only relatively recently that, in England, single-party minorities have come to dominate. As Figure 6 shows, these currently number 38, while, even applying a generous interpretation and including 'Alternative Arrangements' authorities like Babergh, there are only 19 power-sharing partnerships or coalitions. They include, as shown in Figure 7, an impressive range of permutations, but, although the national Conservative/Liberal Democrat template is the most frequently represented, it accounts for just five: Birmingham, Derby, Redbridge, Chorley, and Newcastle-under-Lyme.

Both Figures 7 and 8 are set out as they are, with accompanying party arithmetic, mainly in the hope that this additional information may be of interest to readers; *not* to suggest that there are any significant or consistent relationships between this arithmetic and the resulting form of administration. There was a time when coalition theorists, learning of the increasing numbers of hung councils in the UK, anticipated that this new cache of data might help them investigate all kinds of more and less feasible hypotheses. In particular, was the primary objective of negotiating politicians really to put together, as game theory suggested [small 'g' – nothing to do with me!], the *smallest minimal winning coalition*, thereby maximising their party's voting weight relative to that of their coalition partners? It took some time, but the answer proved to be: no. Or, to quote Wikipedia's pleasingly succinct summary of the subject: 'the assumption that governments will form on the base of minimal winning coalitions, has a poor empirical foundation in Western European multi-party systems' – and that goes for local as well as national governments.

It was the policy-blindness of this kind of proposition that perhaps most irritated practising politicians, as well as many political scientists. The left-right ideological dimension may be simplistic and flawed, but to ignore altogether the idea that coalition formation might have at least something to do with the compatibility of the

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Figure 7: The 19 English local 'coalitions', July 2011

Coalition	No.	Council	Party make-up of council				Largest party % and whether involved in the coalition	Comment
			C	L	LD	Other		
Cons/LD	5	Birmingham (MB)	39	55	24	2	46X	Lab now largest party, but 2004 'Progressive Partnership' continues
		Derby (U)	15	22	12	2	43X	Lab now largest party, but 2010 anti-Lab agreement continues
		Redbridge (LB)	29	26	7	1	46✓	LDs lose seats, 2010, but join previous Cons minority in anti-Lab coalition
		Chorley (DC)	23	20	2	2	49✓	Cons lose majority control, 2011, and recruit LDs
		Newcastle-u-Lyme (DC)	20	25	12	4	42X	Lab, now largest party, was 'open to offers', but C/LD coalition continues
Cons/Ind	4	Cornwall (U)	47	1	40	35 (30 Ind)	38✓	Coalition formed in 2009 when county became unitary
		Eden (DC)	16	0	9	13	42✓	Now leader/exec system; pre-2009, unique Joint Leader '4th Option'
		Mole Valley (DC)	17	0	18	6	44X	LDs largest party, but previous Cons minority prefer coalition with Indeps.
		Staffs Moorlands (DC)	23	7	4	19 (11 Ind)	41✓	Cons lose seats, 2011, but Cons/Independent Alliance continues
Lab/Green	1	Lancaster (DC)	15	24	0	20 (8 Grn)	40✓	LDs lose all seats, 2011; L/G 'joint arrangement' replaces all-party cabinet
Lab/Ind	1	Stockton-on-Tees (U)	12	27	4	13 (4 IBIS)	48✓	Lab just short of majority; L/IBIS coalition replaces 'rainbow coalition'
Lab/LD	1	Calderdale (MB)	21	13	13	4	41X	Continuation of coalition that displaced Cons minority in 2010
LD/Ind	1	North Devon (DC)	18	0	14	10	42X	Indeps gain seats, overthrow Cons majority, and join up with LDs
Cons/Lab/Ind	1	Cumbria (CC)	39	24	15	6	46✓	Lab lose minority control in 2009 and join in Cons/Indep coalition
Cons/Ind/LD	1	Scarborough (DC)	25	6	3	16	50✓	Minor seat changes, but 2007 anti-Labour coalition continues
Lab/LD/Cons	2	Sefton (MB)	14	28	23	1	42✓	LDs lose seats, 2011, but 25-year all-party coalition continues
		Broxtowe (DC)	18	17	9	0	41✓	Lab, now lead party in L/LD coalition, offer Cons non-portfolio seats in cabinet
LD/Lab/Ind	1	Colchester (DC)	24	7	26	3	43✓	No seats change hands, so 2008 anti-Cons coalition continues
Con/LD/Ind/Lab	1	Babergh (DC)	18	3	12	10	42✓	No executive, but all political groups represented on Strategy Committee

Note: IBIS = Ingleby Barwick Independent Society, one of three such Associations/Societies currently represented on Stockton-on-Tees Council.

Figure 8: The 38 English 'minority control' administrations, July 2011

Party in MC	Council	Party make-up of council				Total	MC party % of total
		C	L	LD	Other		
Lib Dem	Bath & N E Somerset (U)	29	5	29	2	65	45
Green	Brighton & Hove (U)	18	13	0	23 Gr	54	43
Lib Dem	Bristol (U)	14	21	32	2	70	46
Conserv.	Milton Keynes (U)	21	9	18	3	51	41
Labour	North East Lincolnshire (U)	14	19	9	0	42	45
Lib Dem	Northumberland (U)	17	17	25	8	67	37
Conserv.	Poole (U)	21	0	18	3	42	50
Labour	Reading (U)	16	22	5	3	46	48
Conserv.	South Gloucestershire (U)	34	15	21	0	70	49
Labour	Thurrock (U)	22	24	0	3	49	49
Labour	Merton (LB)	27	28	2	3	60	47
Labour	Bradford (MB)	28	44	11	7	90	49
Labour	Kirklees (MB)	22	27	14	6	69	39
Lib Dem	Stockport (MB)	11	18	30	4	63	48
Conserv.	Walsall (MB)	28	26	5	1	60	47
Labour	Wirral (MB)	27	30	9	0	66	45
Labour	Allerdale (DC)	12	28	0	16	56	50
Lib Dem	Burnley (DC)	5	18	21	1	45	47
Labour	Cannock Chase (DC)	13	17	11	0	41	41
Conserv.	Carlisle (DC)	22*	24	4	2	52	42
Conserv.	East Lindsey (DC)	30	10	2	18	60	50
Conserv.	Forest of Dean (DC)	19	17	1	11	48	40
Labour	Exeter (DC)	11	19	9	1	40	48
Labour	High Peak (DC)	15	21	3	4	43	49
Conserv.	Newark & Sherwood (DC)	22	15	3	6	46	48
Labour	Norwich (DC)	2	18	4	15	39	46
Labour	Nuneaton & Bedworth (DC)	14	16	0	3	34	47
Conserv.	Pendle (DC)	18	16	12	3	49	37
Lib Dem	Purbeck (DC)	12	0	10	2	24	50
Indep.	Richmondshire (DC)	14	0	4	16	34	47
Labour	Rossendale (DC)	16	17	2	1	36	47
Conserv.	St Albans (DC)	29	3	24	2	58	50
Conserv.	Taunton Deane (DC)	28	3	23	2	56	50
Conserv.	Thanet (DC)	27	26	0	3	56	48
Conserv.	Torridge (DC)	18	1	16	11	36	50
Conserv.	Waveney (DC)	23	23	0	2	48	48
Conserv.	Weymouth & Portland (DC)	16	7	10	3	36	44
Conserv.	Winchester (DC)	27	1	27	2	57	47

Note: * = second largest party, with informal support of Liberal Democrats

political views of potential partners seemed demeaning, as well as misguided. The outcome has been that most of those who have studied the formation and operation of hung councils have seen their findings as illustrating the great and continuing diversity of our local government, rather than its conformity to any mathematical patterns or formulae. A local authority's political culture, history of political control, degree of party politicisation, nature of inter-party and inter-personal relations, and numerous other factors are as likely to provide the key to understanding its chosen form of hung council administration as its party arithmetic. The arithmetic is obviously not irrelevant, and certainly not uninteresting, but it is only the starting point.

One immediate arithmetical observation from Figure 7 of some interest is that, **in nearly a third of these coalition-run authorities (6 of the 19), the party with currently the largest number of council seats is not part of the coalition**. It may be that in some instances the explanation lies in that adverb 'currently'. Some of these coalitions were initially formed several years ago, when their councils' arithmetic was rather different, and it might be argued that today's arithmetic would produce a different outcome. Perhaps – although the arithmetic of the council with which I personally am most familiar, Birmingham, after seven years of Conservative/Liberal Democratic control, happens to be back almost exactly where it started in 2004: Conservatives 39, Labour 53, Lib Dems 28. It is possible that the various party leaderships would behave in different ways today, but they wouldn't be prompted to simply by the figures.

What does seem undeniable is that there are powerful negative as well as positive driving forces behind these coalitional negotiations: to keep out the largest party. Maybe it was in office for several years and has now lost its majority, or has just won enough seats in the recent elections to become the largest party. Either way, its rivals have an opportunity that may not quickly recur in as favourable a form. In Derby, having run the authority for a time in coalition with Labour, the Conservatives subsequently found themselves some new friends, and in 2010 followed their party leader's example at Westminster and negotiated a two-year anti-Labour 'agreement of mutual support' with the Lib Dems. Good thinking, as in this year's elections Labour took seats off both parties, became easily the largest party group, but found the agreement to be ongoing.

By way of conclusion, it seems worth noting the way in which Figure 7 and its arithmetic administer their own kicking to the coalition theorists and their smallest minimal winning coalitions. It also enables us to clarify some of the terminology that was so carelessly thrown around in the bewildered media during last year's famous 'five days in May'. There were either 10 or 11 parties in the Commons – depending on whether you include Sinn Fein MPs, notwithstanding their refusal to take their seats – which meant there were $2^n - 1$ (1,023 or 2.047) mathematically possible coalitions (C. Henretty, 'The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in comparative perspective', http://chrishanretty.co.uk/blog/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/article2.pdf). In most hung councils, $2^n - 1$ will amount to a mere 15 or 31, but, in any case the mathematical total will need whittling down, so some basic definitions are useful:

- A **MAJORITY** or **WINNING** coalition is one that has 50% + 1 seats in the legislature/council. Even Labour recognised that there wouldn't be much point in cobbling together a minority coalition, although it is occasionally done in local government – as at present in Dumfries & Galloway, which apparently is run by a Conservative/Lib Dem coalition, despite its having a combined voting strength of 20 on what is a 47-seat council.

- A **MINIMAL WINNING** coalition is one that would cease being a winning coalition if any one of its constituent members withdrew. At Westminster, a Cons/LD coalition was a minimal winning one; a Cons/LD/DUP (Democratic Unionist Party) coalition would not have been. Rather, it would be a **SURPLUS** coalition, like each of the bottom six in Figure 7. In each case at least one party group could withdraw without the coalition's full voting strength falling below 51%. Minimal wining coalitions *per se* are not what turn coalition theorists on, but it is where some serious confusion starts …

- The **SMALLEST MINIMAL WINNING** coalition – or **MINIMUM WINNING** coalition, for short – is the one with the smallest number of seats, which therefore maximises the relative voting strength of each of the partners. Just over a third of those in Figure 7 are minimum winning coalitions: Birmingham, Derby, Chorley, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Mole Valley, Calderdale, and North Devon – which may seem quite, or not, a lot, depending on your point of view. Several of these need

just about every seat to get them over the 50% + 1 line, and, while I doubt that coalition calculus was the main explanation of any of them coming into existence, 'the math', as Americans would say, is fascinating. A stronger explanation, in the real political world, would seem likely to be connectedness.

- A **MINIMAL CONNECTED WINNING** coalition is one in which the members are politically connected in terms of ideology and/or policy, and which would be either no longer winning or no longer connected, if any one of those members withdrew. Even 'power-sharing arrangements' in the days of the committee system were substantially programmatic. Now that they have become more formal and explicit coalitions, involving executive/cabinet seats and policy portfolios, they are even more so. If there isn't a minimal and recognised connectedness among a coalition's members, even the neatest arithmetic won't keep it flying long. Likewise at Westminster, where it would be surprising if, between them, the two minimal winning coalitions available to the Conservatives – by joining up with the SNP, the DUP and either Plaid Cymru or the Social Democratic and Labour Party – were considered for as long as it has taken me to type this sentence.

So, winning is obviously important, but minimal connectedness is likely to trump minimum winning pretty well every time. All of which leaves the six surplus coalitions in Figure 7 still requiring explanation. They confound coalition theory, but they also appear to confound my supposition about executive local government increasing parties' concern to maximise their share of cabinet seats and policy influence. The only possible explanation would seem to be that the 18 councils in Figure 7 represent between them close to the full range of political cultures in our diverse local government system. While one third of them are doing their utmost to ensure that the electorally most popular party is excluded altogether from council policy making, another third are choosing voluntarily to share that power and status with those whom voters might well see as their political opponents. There, I said the arithmetic was interesting, didn't I?

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