Con-Lib Coalitions are now the norm in Europe

Jun 7 2010

The novelty of a peacetime coalition government in the UK has meant that most media commentators have been alternately baffled or sceptical about its prospects – on the grounds that novel things must fail. Yet Simon Hix’s survey of European governments shows that coalitions are very common indeed, and that the largest group of governments across the continent are centre-right coalitions.

For people who thought that a Lab-Lib ‘progressive coalition’ was more natural than a Con-Lib coalition, it might come as a surprise that a coalition between a mainstream centre-right party (either Conservatives or Christian Democrats) and a Liberal party is now the most common form of government in Europe. For example, amongst the 27 EU member states the current government formations are as follows:

Ten countries (including three of the big four EU countries) have a Cameron-Clegg style coalition between the mainstream party on the centre-right (either Conservative or Christian Democrat) and a one or more liberal parties:

- France
- Germany
- UK
- Denmark
- Sweden
- Estonia
- Latvia
- Lithuania
- Finland
- Belgium (plus one of the two Belgian Socialist parties)

Also on the right, five more countries currently have centre-right governments (either single-party or coalition governments):

- Italy (coalition)
- Poland (coalition)
- Hungary
- Bulgaria
- Malta

Four further countries have a “grand coalition” between the main centre-right and centre-left parties:

- Netherlands (plus the Calvinists)
- Austria
- Romania
- Luxembourg

Four countries (all in Southern Europe, and three with major public spending problems) have centre-left governments:

- Spain
- Greece
- Portugal
- Cyprus

Two countries have a government that might be considered a “progressive coalition” between social democrats and liberals:

- Slovenia
- Slovakia (although this government also includes a party on the radical right!)
And then there are some harder-to-classify cases. One country – Ireland – has a coalition between a centre-right party and a Green party. And finally one country – the Czech republic – has a technocratic government led by an independent politician.

In this sense, at least, Cameron and Clegg have put Britain squarely in the mainstream of recent political trends in Europe.