Gillard hangs on, but her uneasy coalition may have stormy waters ahead - Australian Federal election update

Nov 7 2010

In August, Patrick Dunleavy blogged that every key 'Westminster model' country now had a hung Parliament, following Australia's election. With a referendum on introducing the Alternative Vote for House of Commons elections due in May 2011, and the coalition government due to announce plans for replacing the House of Lords with a PR-elected chamber in January, there is a real prospect that Britain's future constitutional and electoral arrangements may look thoroughly Australian in their design. Chris Gilson presents an update on post-coalition forming developments 'down under'.



Back in September, after a week of post-election uncertainty much akin to our own in May, the incumbent Labor Prime Minister of Australia, Julia Gillard announced that she would be forming a minority government. The government now comprises 72 Labor MPs, 1 Green MP and 3 independent MPs, on which support for the government hinges as there are 74 MPs in opposition. The House is elected using the Alternative Vote (AV) system (for more information please see our Simple guide to voting systems), which is the system to be proposed for the UK in a referendum next May. We have updated our earlier table to reflect the final result:

House of Representatives final election outcome

<u>Edit</u>									
Party	%votes	Seats	%seats						
Australian Labor Party	38.5	72	49.7						
Liberal/National party	43.2	72	48						
The Greens	11.8	1	0.7						
Country Liberal Party	0.3	1	0.7						
Independent	2.5	4	2.7						
Other parties	4.1	0	0						
Totals	100	150	100						

The coalition is a boon for the Australian Green party with (like the UK this year) their first seat in the lower house. As the third largest party in parliament, they will be able to use their influence, and Gillard is expected to press forward with environmental reforms, also hoping to erase the electorate's memory of her predecessor Kevin Rudd who failed to proceed with promised carbon trading legislation. To the surprise of some, Gillard has let Rudd back into government, with a cabinet post as Foreign Minister – a position in which he may be able to exercise some power, with his previous experience as a diplomat being one of his main assets.

What will be interesting to see will be how Labor holds together this 'rainbow coalition'. While the Greens can be relied on for support, the three rural, independent MPs in the new government have widely differing priorities, and may only support Gillard's government in matters of confidence and supply. One of the independents, Rob Oakeshott, has declined a cabinet posting as regional development Minister, which will ensure that he remains independent of the government in policy terms.

Senate final election outcome

<u>Edit</u>									
Party	Percent of Votes	Seats won in 2010	Total seats	Change	Percent of Seats				
Liberal/National Coalition	38.3	18	34	-3	44.7				
Australian Labor Party	35.2	15	31	-1	40.8				
Australian Greens	13	6	9	4	11.8				
Family First Party	2.1	0	0	-1	0				
Democratic Labor Party	1.1	1	1	1	1.3				
Independent	0.4	0	1	0	1.3				
Other	9.9	0	0	0	0				
Total		40	76	-	100				

^{*40} Senate seats were not contested in 2010, because their incumbents were elected in 2007

In the elections for the senate, which uses the Single Transferrable Vote (STV) system (for more information please see our <u>Simple guide to voting systems</u>), 40 of the 76 senate seats faced election, and ten changed hands. The Greens especially benefitted from the STV system, gaining 13 per cent of votes, and nearly 12 per cent of seats. Compare this to their 12 per cent vote share and less than 1 per cent seat share in the House of Representatives. The importance of the senate is clear, with Gillard appointing 17 Cabinet posts to senators.

While the new senators do not take their seats until July 2011, the results means that Gillard does not have a majority in the senate as well as in the lower house, and will also have to rely on the Greens for support – a Green/Labour block, would give 40 votes, up from 37 in 2007, compared to the Liberal/National Coalition's 34 seats, down from 37.

As with the lower house, Gillard will have to make concessions to the Green party in order to pass her legislative programme through the senate – there will inevitably be horse trading over the course of this government, with the Greens wanting to extract tougher environmental concessions in exchange for support.

If Gillard can keep her government going until next July, she may however prefer the enhanced Green presence in the senate – even with concessions, a combined Labor/Green block of 40 seats may be able to get legislation through the senate more easily. At present both sides have 37 seats and are subject to both a left-leaning, independent (Nick Xenophon) and the right-of-centre Family First party holding the balance of power.

The senate in Australia has the quirk that while using a system of proportional representation, each state has 6 senators (the two territories have two each), regardless of population differences. This gives smaller states a greater than normal voice in the senate as compared to the lower house.

Looking at individual states, we can see that even with STV, vote share is not necessarily a guarantee of election. In Victoria, the Democratic Labor Party gained a senate seat with a lower vote percentage than the Family First Party.

Senate seats won and vote shares by party across Australia's states and territories

		<u>Edit</u>									
	Liberal/National Coalition				stralian Family F Greens Party				Democratic Labor Party		er
Seats	Per	Seats	Per	Seats	Per	Seats	Per	Seats	Per	Seats	Рє

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New South Wales	3	39	2	36.6	1	10.7	0	0.9	0	8.0	0	12
Victoria	2	34.4	2	37.8	1	14.7	0	2.6	1	2.3	0	8.2
Queensland	3	41.5	2	29.4	1	12.8	0	3.4	0	0.5	0	12
Western Australia	3	43	2	29.7	1	14	0	1.1	0	8.0	0	11
South Australia	3	37.3	2	38.3	1	13.3	0	4.1	0	0.7	0	6.0
Tasmania	2	33.1	3	41.5	1	20.3	0	1.2	0	0.5	0	3.4
ACT	1	33.7	1	41.3	0	23.2	0	0	0	0	0	1.8
Northern Territory	1	40.9	1	34.6	0	13.6	0	0	0	0	0	10
Total	18		15		6		0		1		0	

The Australian senate results under STV are of special interest in the UK – the STV system is also widely recommended for the UK in replacing the House of Lords ($\underline{\text{click here for more details}}$).

As in the UK, Australia's politicians have little prior experience of coalition government. With so little difference between the number of government and opposition MPs, Julia Gillard will no doubt be watching the UK's progress with interest.