

Continental coalition politics can work but the media won't tell you that (guest blog)

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2010-5-11

My colleague [Bart Cammaerts](#) is a leading political communications analysis. He is also a Belgian who used to work at the heart of their rather complex and fraught party politics. His homeland is often cited as a warning against those in the UK who preach the virtues of 'collaborative' party politics and 'balanced' parliaments. But here he argues that we shouldn't be so frightened of the example set by Belgium and other continental power-sharers. And he says that the media and political classes are failing to explain the real logic behind coalition government.

Hang The DJ by Dr Bart Cammaerts

Historical memories are notoriously short. It has been 35 years since the UK electoral system has produced what is called a hung parliament. The current political elites, most of the voters and most importantly most of the journalists, and there are many more of these than 35 years ago, have never known this situation.

However, as we all know from Andrew Marr's political history of modern Britain a hung parliament is not that unusual in this country. The most obvious conclusion we can make at this point is that this 'situation', which did not produce one clear unambiguous result, preventing a smooth and straightforward transition of power from one party to the other, creates a lot of nervousness and anxiety, amongst the politicians, the media and I assume also amongst the population at large.

On the continent negotiations, compromising and backroom deals between parties in order to forge a majority in the parliament is common-place after every election and this takes time and needs some degree of discretion to come to fruition.

This is only logical, as parties who have fought each other dearly and at times aggressively during the political campaign now have to sit together, build trust and make agreements, thus compromising between often-irreconcilable positions, giving and taking. Besides this there is also the party as a whole that needs to be convinced of supporting the compromises made by their leaders. That is the nature of politics in most (proportional) democracies and is not seen as abnormal.

I would argue that this creates better government, whereby policies are the result of bargaining between parties that represent more than 50% of the electorate and the different parties within the coalition watch each other and keep each other in check. Although, I do admit that the 5 months it took to form a Belgian government in 2007 and the political turmoil that ensued after that is not exactly a good case for proportional representation, as some of the British or should I say Tory press has been pointing out.

My counter-argument is that the conflicts on institutional reform between Dutch and French-speaking Belgians would not be served by a majoritarian system whereby one party, one language group and one set of interests prevails over all the others, on the contrary I would argue.

The first past the post system is designed to produce a clear winner and supposedly strong government, whereby consensus has to be sought within one party rather than across parties. If it does not produce one clear winner with an over-all majority, then it actually means that the party poised to win has in fact lost or to put it more mildly has 'won' a pyrrhic victory.

At the moment it seems though that two democratic logics and sets of principles are clashing head on in the current media war. Yes, let us not forget that this post-electoral process is also and maybe foremost a war of words as Gramsci so eloquently described. On the one hand there is the Tory logic of having the most seats of any single

party, giving them the moral right to govern, which complies with the first past the post paradigm and on the other hand there is the Libdem logic, which Labour has now also adopted hesitantly, which reasons in terms of most number of votes, concurring with a proportional paradigm.

However, the headlines in the Tory press are already an early indication of what might happen if 'the majority' (representing in effect almost 65% of the UK population) decides to govern without the Tories. It would be labelled undemocratic and 'unelected', while it is completely legitimate and acceptable from a proportional logic. The very nature of this debate and the terms in which it is fought unfortunately signals that the logic of proportional representation has not quite sunk in yet.

I am not going to speculate here about the outcome of this process, academics are no futurologists, but the pressures on the Libdems to seal a deal, whatever that may be, are clearly propped-up artificially high due to the lack of political memory, a hyper frantic and railing journalistic corps gagging to usher the Right into government and because it is said that the elusive invisible hand of the markets demand it.

I guess we will see soon quite how important electoral reform really is for the Libdems. Because lets face it, a referendum on an AV system which is not even proportional as such and against which your future coalition partner will undoubtedly lead a viciously no campaign, is not that appealing of a prospect.

This article by [Dr Bart Cammaerts](#), senior lecturer, [Media and Communications](#)

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