

The options for a hung parliament

Analysis

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The nation's political leaders have been left trying to figure out their next move following the failure of any party to achieve a majority share of the vote in the UK general election.

This is not the first time a UK general election has produced a hung parliament.

As the political parties weigh up their options, it is worth remembering that all the precedents - 1910, 1923, 1929 and 1974 - point towards a minority government and not a coalition.

In March 1974 Edward Heath and the Conservatives won the popular vote but ended up with fewer MPs than Labour.

Edward Heath tried and failed to do a deal with the Liberal Party led by Jeremy Thorpe.

Coalitions

Archive documents reveal that the then prime minister was willing to consult Jeremy Thorpe on the contents of the government's legislative programme, the Queen's Speech.

The Liberals could either support Conservative measures without "formal participation in government" or join a coalition with seats in the Cabinet for Jeremy Thorpe and one or two of his colleagues.

The Liberals rejected the deal and Labour went on to form a minority government.

Similar choices now face David Cameron and Nick Clegg.

The Liberal Democrats could enter into what is known as a "confidence and supply agreement".

This means they would support a minority Conservative government if there was a motion of confidence and make sure it got the money it needed to carry out its policies.

This sort of arrangement has happened in New Zealand.

In return the Lib Dems could expect to have a say about what went into the Queen's Speech.

There could be a much looser arrangement with the Liberal Democrats agreeing to work with the Conservatives on a measure by measure basis.

Or we could about to see a much rarer thing - a peacetime coalition government with Nick Clegg and other senior Liberal Democrats becoming ministers.

Numbers game

Any one of these options would give David Cameron a clear parliamentary majority.

If the Liberal Democrats walk away from a deal with the Conservatives we know that Gordon Brown and Labour are waiting.

The options could be the same - co-operation short of a coalition or a formal agreement involving Liberal Democrats in the government.

But it is still a numbers game.

Even with Liberal Democrat support Gordon Brown would not have enough votes to command a parliamentary majority.

He would still have to get agreements from other political parties.

If the politicians cannot agree then the most likely outcome is a minority government and another general election.