

Post-electoral negotiations

Britain: No to cuts, yes to proportional representation

Wednesday 12 May 2010, by [Socialist Resistance \(Britain\)](#) (Date first published: 11 May 2010).

The outcome of the general election was the one long predicted, with no party winning a majority. Labour lost and the Conservative Party (known as the Tories) failed to win. The Liberal Democrats (or Lib Dems) lost the surge they had expected and the result was the first hung Parliament for over 30 years. The Lib Dems got 25% of the votes and under 10% of the seats.

None of them received the mandate they had wanted in order to implement their cuts agendas in the face of an escalating economic crisis. Whatever government emerges, therefore, the workers movement has to gear itself up for a fight on cuts.

The election arithmetic has made the Lib Dems the power broker in any post-election coalition arrangements; however, giving them the best opportunity for several generations to change the scandalous voting system with which Britain is saddled. If they blow this opportunity they will face another very long period of time rendered irrelevant by a corrupt and bizarre electoral system which awards power to political parties with scant regard to the votes they receive.

Clegg has gone to the Tories first, presumably on the basis of comments extracted from him during the campaign, to discuss a possible Tory/Lib Dem coalition on the basis of electoral reform. It is a dangerous game. Cameron responded with a typically disingenuous offer and will follow it up with cabinet positions and a taste of power for the Lib Dems to help make his offer more palatable.

Moreover, these negotiations are taking place during a crisis of the EU and growing financial instability which were sparked by the crisis and conflict taking place in Greece and which threatens to spread across southern Europe and beyond. There is a real danger that this will be used to bounce the Lib Dems into supporting the Tory cuts agenda.

This is an extremely dangerous game that the Lib Dems are playing. The Tories will stop at nothing to get their hands on the levers of power and then cling onto it. They will hope for a honeymoon period on the basis of the disingenuous manipulation of policy whilst looking for a chance for an early general election.

There is now a huge campaign by the Tory media to push the Lib Dems into the clutches of the Tories. The chance of the Tories making a genuine offer on electoral reform, however, is remote, and if they do they will ensure that it is a deal they can break. The Tories will stop at nothing to preserve the status quo. They occupied government throughout more of the 20th century than any other party on the basis of first-passed-the-post, and their aim is to repeat the performance in the 21st century.

Meanwhile the priority of the Tories is to get their cuts budget through in the fastest possible time and are no doubt putting heavy pressure on the Lib Dems over this. But any deal the Lib Dems might make in order to allow them to get this through either as part of a coalition arrangement or as a deal to keep a minority Tory administration in office would not only be disastrous for the working class

but ultimately disastrous for the Liberal Dems themselves — given their stance in the election campaign. The alternative for the Lib Dems is to seek a deal with New Labour and the nationalist parties, a combination of which could also command a Commons majority. This would be no less democratic than a Tory/Lib Dem arrangement since between them Labour and the Lib Dems won 14 million votes against the Tories 10 million.

True, Tony Blair stitched the Lib Dems up of course, over PR after 1997. He made an agreement with them and then kicked it into the long grass when he didn't need them any more. Brown, however, is in a very different position. A deal with the Lib Dems is the best option open for new Labour for the foreseeable future and it would be worth a genuine offer of proportional representation, which appears to be what he has offered. It would also make a future majority Tory government very unlikely since they would have to win more than 50% of the vote.

Brown has already made the offer of early legislation and an early referendum on electoral reform, though there may well be a demand for him to resign and open the door to a new Labour leader before a deal can be struck

This makes more political sense from a Lib Dem point of view than deal with the Tories — which would be bitterly controversial within their own party. They are closer to new Labour than they are to the Tories and if they go in with the Tories they would soon be faced with supporting a George Osborne emergency budget costing millions of jobs.

We do not call for a Lib-Lab-led coalition: but we are not neutral on whether the Lib Dems line up with the Tories or against them. It is clear that a Lib-Lab coalition may be less of an immediate and long-term threat than allowing the Tories to get their hands on power – through a coalition or as a minority government.

But we know that neither of these leading parties represents the interests of the working class. This would not in any way be “our” government, but a second choice option for a ruling class that could not overcome suspicion of Cameron to deliver a majority for the Tories. It is clear that even if a Lib-Lab coalition is lashed together, it will still come under massive pressure from the international markets and the Tory media to implement the Tory cuts agenda.

This makes it even more important to campaign for the trade unions, most of which have so far remained largely passive in the face of cutbacks, to link up and mobilise alongside pensioners and the public to fight any cuts or privatisation in welfare or public services. The unions and labour movement must demand that gaps in the budget created by the banking crisis are tackled through the cancellation of wasteful spending such as Trident, the Afghanistan and other wars, ID cards, etc, along with energetic collection of taxes from big business, the banks and the rich: corporation tax should be raised back to at least the levels levied under Thatcher. We must not leave the issue of PR to the Lib Dems or Labour, but seek to build a mass campaign in the trade unions and labour movement to press for the rapid implementation of progressive electoral reform based on PR. And the labour movement must also rally against the dangerous slide towards racist, anti-immigrant policies. A Lib-Lab coalition would not in itself be a progressive option: but the fight to keep it from implementing reactionary policies could be a focus for a progressive radicalisation of the trade union movement.

Years of trailing meekly behind Blair and Brown have brought us to the very brink of a Tory government: only the movement of the working class can save the unions from fresh, massive and damaging attacks.

Socialist Resistance

P.S.

* From International Viewpoint Online magazine : IV #424 - May 2010.

* Socialist Resistance was founded in 2002 by British Marxists who supported the recomposition reflected by the Scottish Socialist Party, the Socialist Alliance and the Respect party. In July 2009 its supporters refounded it as the British section of the Fourth International.