The General Election, 2010
Transcript

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Ladies and gentlemen, this is the fifth of six lectures on post-War General Elections. The sixth one, on the 19th May, will be on the forthcoming Election, but I thought it better to wait until the Election has actually occurred before talking about it, though it may be that what I say today may offer some pointers as to what will happen on the 7th May, but that is for you to decide.

I think the elections I have discussed so far have all had specific themes - one can attach a theme to them. For example, the last one, in 1979, was the Winter of Discontent Election, which was very much influenced by that. The February 1974 Election, known as the “Who Governs?” Election, took place, you may remember, in the middle of a miners’ strike. The 1959 Election is always known as the “Never Had It So Good” Election, though the Conservatives never actually used that slogan. The slogan was “Life’s Better with the Conservatives – Don’t Let Labour Ruin It” – perhaps they might use that slogan this time as well, I do not know.

But in 2010, there were really two themes, I think two major crises, one of which did affect the Election and one, to many people’s surprise, did not. The first one was the economic crisis, the credit crunch, the downturn and collapse of financial markets, which led to a run on Northern Rock Bank in September 2007, the first run on a British bank since the nineteenth century, and then further banking crises which meant the Labour Government of Gordon Brown had to re-capitalise the banks, in effect nationalise them, with taxpayers’ money. This caused anger towards the bankers and financiers, who were thought to have acted recklessly, but also of course anger towards the Government of Gordon Brown, which, it was alleged, had failed to anticipate the collapse and the troubles, and of course the collapse and the recession meant that tax receipts declined very heavily and so the Government’s budget deficit increased as well, and Gordon Brown’s Labour Government was accused of not having put money aside for a rainy day, as it were, or, in another metaphor, not repairing the roof while the sun was shining, so that Britain was exposed to an economic crisis. Most people forecast, correctly, that this would cost the Labour Party many seats.

Now, the second crisis was the expenses’ crisis, and that was caused by the abuse by a large number of MPs of their expenses’ claims, and these included some that were fraudulent and some that were unreasonable or unwise, and this was exposed by the Daily Telegraph and it said that there had been “a systematic and deliberate misappropriation of public funds on an extravagant scale”. This did cause great public resentment and it led to the resignation of the Speaker, who had tried to prevent details of MPs’ expenses from becoming public – the Speaker, Michael Martin, was forced to resign. That was the first time this had happened to a Speaker since 1695.

And, for some reason, which is not to me wholly clear, it fuelled a rather brief demand for constitutional reform. For the first time I think since before the First World War, constitutional reform became a popular issue. Normally, sadly for the sale of my books, constitutional reform is not a very popular issue, but it did, for a brief time, become that, and there was a general feeling that Parliament had become too insulated and remote from the voters, and all the parties produced proposals to reform that, though after the Election, not much was heard of it, or not too much anyway.

The general prediction was that, because of the dissatisfaction with politicians, there would be a decline in turnout, which was already historically low. You had the lowest since 1918 in 2001, just 58%, and a little higher in 2005, which was 62%, and that compares with rates of over 80% in the 1950s.

Also, there was a feeling that radical alternatives would do extremely well in the Election – UKIP, the British National Party, the Greens, and also, not an extreme party but a smaller party, the Liberal Democrats. Now, these predictions proved false. The result of the Election was as follows.
Turnout was 65%, rather higher than it had been in 2005, and oddly enough – you cannot see it in the table, but oddly enough, incumbent MPs did rather better than the average in the country. One of the reasons the Conservatives did not win an overall majority is that the general swing against Labour was much less where incumbent MPs were standing. It is a paradox, because the expenses’ crisis led people to say MPs are all crooks, but nevertheless the incumbents did rather well, and perhaps people said, “Well, every other MP is a crook but my MP is actually quite good.”

The smaller parties did not make much of an impact, or at least not as much as people suggested, though UKIP got 3% of the vote, which was the highest for any party other than the big three since well before the First World War – it is an extraordinarily high level for a party which is not Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat or Nationalist. They did not win a seat but they got 3% of the vote.

The British National Party doubled its vote: it got nearly 2% of the vote. People did not notice that the Leader of the British National Party, Nick Griffin, had stood in Barking against Margaret Hodge and was soundly defeated. Many people were pleased about that, but they did not notice that nearly two in every hundred voters supported the British National Party.

The Liberal Democrats gained about 1% of their vote from 2005 but, paradoxically, they lost five seats, and that was a great surprise to many people. I remember, when the BBC exit poll appeared, just after the polls closed, after the ballot boxes closed, it predicted the result almost exactly, and everybody said “That cannot be right – the Liberal Democrats are going to do a lot better than that,” because it was thought that Nick Clegg had made a great impact in the TV debates and so on, that this would shoot up the Liberal Democrat vote, but it actually did not much.

Before the Election, the Governor of the Bank of England, Mervyn King, said that this 2010 General Election was one that “…any rational party should wish to lose” because the scale of the cuts to eliminate the deficit, the deficit of nearly £170 billion, Mervyn King said would be so severe that any Government implementing them would find itself in opposition for a long time. Now, I think that all the parties tried to win the Election, but I think they were all very disappointed in some way with the result. Now, there is a sense in which all three failed to win the Election.

The Labour Party was the most obvious loser, and its campaign was a disaster from the start, and if the IT people can show us the first film, you will see one of the disasters that hit Gordon Brown. I must be careful because I also have a mic, so you will see what happened...

[Clip plays]

Voter (GD): “You can’t say anything about the immigrants because you’re saying that – well, all these Eastern Europeans what are coming in, [where are they flocking] from?”

GB: “A million people have come from Europe, but a million people, British people, have gone into Europe. You do know that there’s a lot of British people staying in Europe as well. Education, health, and helping people – that’s what I’m about. That’s what I’m about. It’s been very good to meet you – a good family.”

Voter (GD): “And the education system in Rochdale, I will congratulate it.”

GB: “Good – it’s very nice to see you.”

Commentator: “Bizarrely, it was one of his better voter encounters. He’d actually brought a straying supporter back to the fold, if only he’d remembered as he got in his car that his radio microphone was still transmitting...”
GB: “That was a disaster - should never have put me with that woman. Whose idea was that?”

“I’ve no idea - Sue I think.”

GB: “Just ridiculous!”

“I’m not sure they’ll [go with] that one.”

GB: “They will [bill] it.”

“What did she say?”

GB: “Oh, everything – she was just a sort of bigoted woman that said she used to be Labour…”

Commentator: “When journalists heard what Mr Brown had said on the open microphone in the car, they told Gillian Duffy.

Journalist: “When he got into the car…”

GD: “What did he say?”

Journalist: “Well, you might not like this, but he said, “What a disaster – who got me to talk to that woman? She’s a bigot,” or words to that effect, and we want to know your response to that.

GD: “You’re joking!”

Commentator: “Mrs Duffy, a retired former worker, with disabled children, said she wanted to hear the recording for herself…”

GB: “Oh, everything - she was just a sort of bigoted woman, said she used to be Labour…”

Journalist: “What do you think about that Mrs Duffy?”

GD: “Disgusted – very.”

Journalist: “So, you have there, I mean, he called it a disaster and then said…he called you bigoted, and I mean, how do you respond to that criticism?”
GD: You heard it, didn’t you, on that then?

Journalist: Yeah. You said to me before that you were a Labour supporter.

GD: Yes.

Journalist: I mean, what’s this done to that?

GD: “Well, I don’t think I’ll vote. What was bigoted in that, what I said?”

Commentator: “Gordon’s Brown’s next engagement was a BBC radio interview, and the cameras rolled as he heard himself back…”

GB: “I do apologise if I’ve said anything that has been hurtful and I will apologise to her personally.”

Radio Interviewer: “Someone has just handed me the tape – let’s play it and see if we can hear it…”

GB: “That was a disaster - should never have put me with that woman. Whose idea was that?”

“I’ve no idea - Sue I think.”

GB: “Just ridiculous!”

“I’m not sure they’ll [go with] that one.”

GB: “They will [bill] it.”

“What did she say?”

GB: “Oh, everything – she was just a sort of bigoted woman, said she used to be Labour - I mean, just ridiculous…”

Radio Interviewer: “That is what you said…”

Well, that is a reminder to me to switch my microphone off when the lecture finishes I think... Remarkably, Mrs Duffy did actually vote Labour, despite that, and Labour did hold the Rochdale seat where that interview occurred. But one of the criticisms of the Labour Party was it had not taken sufficient account of worries about immigration.
If you look at the Labour Party’s vote of 29%, it is the second lowest since it became a mass party in 1918. It’s lowest was in 1983 when Michael Foot was the Leader. It had lost over 6% of its vote in 2005, about one-sixth of it, and in large parts of Southern England, it had been wiped out. In the South, outside London, it won just 10 out of 197 seats, and the Labour Party after the Election had no MPs in Cornwall, Somerset, Wiltshire, Dorset, Sussex, Kent, Essex, Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire, Rutland, Warwickshire, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire, Gloucestershire, Worcestershire or Herefordshire. One analyst on Election Night said that this had “dismembered New Labour’s 1997 electoral triumph”, that Tony Blair had tried hard to make Labour sympathetic to the aspirational voters in the South of England as well as traditional votes in the conurbations of the Midlands and the North and Scotland and Wales, and what you might call the alliance between Hampstead and Humberside was now collapsing, that Hampstead had been lost – though the Hampstead seat was kept, but you see what I mean – and that the aspirational voters in the South of England had been lost to the Labour Party. The Blair project seemed at an end. Labour seemed to have been forced back to its traditional heartlands and New Labour seemed dead.

The Liberal Democrats had hopes of making an electoral breakthrough because the banking crisis and the expenses crisis seemed to resonate with their cry that the political system was somehow broken and that politicians could not be trusted. Again, if the IT people can help, we can see Nick Clegg railing against broken promises...

[Clip plays]

Broken promises… There have been too many in the last few years, too many in the last thirty years. In fact, our nation has been littered with them, a trail of broken promises… You remember them: fairer taxes – a promise broken; better schools for everyone – a promise broken; cleaner politics – a promise broken. I believe it’s time to do things differently, I believe it is time for fairness in Britain. I believe it is time for promises to be kept. Britain is a strong country, but despite everything we have got going for us, life is still too unfair for too many people, people like you, who have made us the nation we are today, and you deserve fairness more than anything. Putting fairness back into our society, for ourselves and for our children, is, in my view, the single biggest challenge we face. But we can do it, if we do it together, and here is how...

Fair taxes – under the Liberal Democrats, no one will pay any tax on the first £10,000 they earn. Just imagine what that means: it means £700 back in the pockets of almost everyone; it means tax freedom for millions of people on low pay and pensions. Now, everybody knows that money is tight and we have got to sort out the mess in the Government finances, but we can pay for fairer taxes by closing the huge loopholes that only benefit the very wealthy and making sure that polluters pay for the damage that they have caused. That is fairness.

A fair start for all our children: cutting class sizes in primary school to just twenty; investing in catch-up classes in our secondary schools so that no one is left behind. Just imagine it…opportunity for every child – that is fairness...

Imagine too a fair and sustainable economy… Let us break up the banks and make sure that they pay for the damage that they have caused as well, and let us invest billions in new green infrastructure, affordable housing, green renewable energy, high-speed rail, to build a new economy beyond the City of London, with jobs that last, for everyone, in every part of the country. That is fairness...

And finally, fair politics… If your MP is corrupt, you will be able to sack them. There will be no more dodgy donations to political parties and we will fix the system so that your vote will count no matter where you live. That is the way to put fairness back into politics...

This Election is different from every other Election. The trail of broken promises can come to an end and a new road can begin, a road into the future, opportunity and fairness for everyone. We can say goodbye to broken promises and welcome back to hope. We can make Britain the fair country we all want it to be. So, choose fairness, choose real change that works for you, choose the Liberal Democrats..."
And now, if the IT people can play Nick Clegg after the Election...

[Clip plays]

“...I’d like to take this opportunity to put a few things straight. When I meet people around the country, it’s obvious that many of you have strong and pretty mixed reactions to some of the things that Liberal Democrats have done in Government. Many of you tell me that you’re glad that, at a time of real economic uncertainty, we’ve put aside our political differences to provide our country with stable leadership; but I also meet people who are disappointed and angry that we couldn’t keep all our promises, we couldn’t keep all our promises, above all, our promise not to raise tuition fees, and to those people, I say this... We made a promise before the Election that we vote against any rise in fees, we would vote against any rise in fees, we would vote against any rise in fees. It was a pledge made with the best of intentions, the best of intentions, but we shouldn’t have made a promise we weren’t absolutely sure we could deliver. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry – there’s no easy way to say I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry, there’s no easy way to say I’m sorry, I’m sorry... When we’re wrong, we hold our hands up, but when we’re right, we hold our hands up too – you can learn from your mistakes and that’s what we will do. I accept that won’t be enough for everyone but I owe it to you – you learn from your mistakes and that’s what we will do. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry, there’s no easy way to say I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry, there’s no easy way to say I’m sorry, I’m sorry... When we’re wrong, we hold our hands up, but when we’re right, we hold our hands up too – you can learn from your mistakes and that’s what we will do. I accept that won’t be enough for everyone but I owe it to you – you learn from your mistakes and that’s what we will do. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry, there’s no easy way to say I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry, there’s no easy way to say I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry, I’m so, so sorry, I’m so, so sorry... When we’re wrong, we hold our hands up, but when we’re right, we hold our hands up too – you can learn from your mistakes and that’s what we will do. I accept that won’t be enough for everyone but I owe it to you – you learn from your mistakes and that’s what we will do. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry, there’s no easy way to say I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry, there’s no easy way to say I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry, there’s no easy way to say we’re sorry, we are sorry, we are sorry, the Liberal Democrats are sorry, there’s no easy way to say we’re sorry... And if we’ve lost your trust, that’s how I hope we can start to win it back.”

That was his apology for voting to triple student tuition fees after the Liberal Democrats had promised to abolish them. That was someone obviously mocking the whole apology.

So, the Liberal Democrats also did not do as well as they hoped, despite the television debates before the Election which did give them a lot of extra publicity.

Before the debates, a rather unscientific survey, no doubt, at the Cheltenham Races, taken before the first debate, found that 98% could name the favourite for the Gold Cup but only 26% knew who Nick Clegg was.

The Liberal Democrats, they were in a pivotal position, not because they had won seats – they had lost seats, but simply because neither of the other parties could win an overall majority. Their pivotal position depended not on their own performance but on the pattern of votes for the other two parties, and of course it could happen again.

In some ways, the Conservatives had perhaps the most reason to be disappointed because, until the summer of 2009, about nine months before the Election, they appeared well on course for an overall majority, but they did not get it, despite facing an unpopular Government and a Prime Minister whom they said had caused a recession.

If you look at the Conservative vote, that is 36% of the vote. That is the fifth lowest Conservative vote since the War in terms of percentage, and on the other four, the Conservatives were heavily defeated. It is their fifth lowest vote – the other four votes below that, they were defeated. It is interesting, in 1945, when they were so heavily defeated by Attlee’s Labour Party, the Conservatives gained 39.8% of the vote, nearly 4% more than they got in 2010, and their vote was lower than Edward Heath’s when he was defeated in February ’74, when Heath got 37% of the vote, just a bit more than that. Now, if there had been a Conservative Minority Government, which looked likely, that would have been the second Government elected with a majority on under 40% of the vote because, if you go back to the Election of 2005, you can see Labour, although it had an overall majority, had just 35% of the vote. That perhaps casts some doubt on whether our system gives you majority rule or not.

It is also a sign, on which I will elaborate later, on how the electoral system is biased against the Conservatives,
because, you can see there, they have got a 7% lead over Labour, whereas in 2005, Labour had less than a 3% lead over the Conservatives but won a very comfortable overall majority, and if you did not look at the votes, you would say Labour had an overall majority I think of 62, but the Conservatives, with a much larger lead, about double the lead, could not get an overall majority. That does show how the system is biased against the Conservatives, the boundaries. If both parties had gained exactly the same vote in the 2010 Election, Labour would have about 55 more seats, so the system is very biased towards the Labour Party.

The Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition did, of course, enjoy an overall majority in Parliament, an overall majority of 78 and, between them, they have got 59% of the vote, so you may say that is a majority government, and it is the first Government to enjoy majority support since Stanley Baldwin’s in 1935. But you can only say that on the assumption, which perhaps is dubious, that all Conservative and Liberal Democrat voters were supporters of that coalition, and I think that is partly doubtful. It is interesting, the Guardian, on the day of the Election, advocated a Liberal Democrat vote because it said that was the way to secure a progressive coalition with Labour, and if the Guardian influenced people, those people were not in favour of a Liberal Democrat/Conservative coalition.

The Liberal Democrats were, it is fair to say, discriminated against by the electoral system. They got nearly a quarter of the vote but less than one-tenth of the seats, and so they were handicapped by the electoral system.

So, of course, were UKIP: they got nearly a million votes, 3% of the vote, and in a proportional system, they would have got about twenty seats. They got more votes than the Greens, in fact three times the vote of the Greens, who did win a seat. Indeed they got nearly as many votes as the Greens, Plaid Cymru and the SNP combined, but those three parties won ten seats, and UKIP had no seats for nearly a million votes. But nevertheless, UKIP I think was not without influence in the Election because the UKIP vote in 21 seats was larger than that of the Labour or Liberal Democrat majority. If you assume that every UKIP voter would have voted Conservative in the absence of a UKIP candidate, which is not wholly impossible, then the Conservatives would have had an overall majority - they would have had 328 seats. Incidentally, as a matter of personal interest, Ed Balls would not have been in Parliament because his majority was less than the UKIP vote. If every UKIP voter in that seat had voted Conservative, Ed Balls would not have been in Parliament.

The effect of UKIP’s intervention was paradoxical because it gave the balance of power to the Liberal Democrats, who are of course the most pro-European party in British politics. If UKIP had not been there and everyone had voted Conservative, there would have been a Conservative majority, and the majority are a broadly Eurosceptic party. As it was, the balance was held by the most pro-European of all the parties.

Also, the British National Party was under-represented. It got nearly 2% of the vote. In a proportional system, it would have won thirteen seats. It is interesting that it did much better than Oswald Mosley’s Fascist Party in the British Union of Fascists in the 1930s, which, in much more difficult economic conditions, did not even put up candidates in 1935 because it was not strong enough and never got near winning any parliamentary seat. I think it did not even win a council by-election. So, the British National Party at that time was much stronger. It has since then broken up.

Now, seven parties with lower votes than UKIP and the British National Party won representation in the Commons. Four of them were parties from Northern Ireland, but the other three parties, as I’ve already said, were the Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru and the Greens, though of course the Greens were the only party fighting on a nationwide basis. But if you only look at the seats, you’ll think the Greens did better than UKIP, but in fact, UKIP got three times the vote of the Greens, and of course they got a much higher vote, percentage of the overall vote, than the SNP or Plaid Cymru.

If you look at the total vote of the two main parties, Labour and the Conservatives, it comes to 65, and that is the lowest two-party vote since 1918. There were 85 MPs who owed no allegiance to Labour or the Conservatives – in other words, 85 MPs from other parties. That is the second highest number since the War. The highest was 92 in 2005. Even the three-party vote, which was 88%, was the lowest, by far the lowest, since the War.
Of course, all this shows a striking contrast with the immediate post-War Elections. If you go back to 1955, well over 95% voted for the two main parties, and there were just nine MPs who were not Conservative or Labour. Six of them were Liberal and three from Northern Ireland. So, it is a great change.

Furthermore, the Election I think showed that Britain was a far more geographically-segmented society than it had been in the past. I mean, in Northern Ireland, you had an entirely separate election, where the key question was not whether you were Labour or Conservative, but whether you are a Nationalist or a Unionist.

In Scotland, and this is true today as well of course, the prime battle was between Labour and the SNP. The Conservatives just had one seat in Scotland, and the Liberal Democrats had eleven.

In the South-West, the electoral battle was between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives. Labour was very much the third party in that region: in 25 seats in the South-West, Labour held just four. The South-West is now a key battleground between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, and the Conservatives are hoping to win a number of seats from them.

Also, you have got a fragmentation between the cities and the countryside because, although they were the largest party by far in the Election, the Conservatives did not win a single seat in the industrial conurbations of the Midlands, the North, or Scotland. They have no seats in Birmingham, Bradford, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Leeds, they have one seat in Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, or Sheffield. Those cities, apart from Leicester with one, they did not return a single Conservative.

I have already said that the gap between the parties was much larger than in 2005 when Labour had an overall majority. Now, had the result been the other way round, had Labour got 36% and the Conservatives 29%, Labour would have had a huge majority, and you can see that from the result here. You can see that if Labour had got 36% and the Conservatives 29%, they would have had a huge majority.

The lead of the Conservatives over Labour was larger than the party had secured over Labour in any General Election since the War, except 1979, '83, '87 and '92. If you look there, you can see the bias against the Conservatives. Eden won a comfortable majority in 1955, with a 3% lead; Macmillan, a larger majority on a 5% lead; Heath, a perfectly adequate majority on 3%; and Margaret Thatcher, roughly the same lead as Cameron and Cameron, with that large lead, got no overall majority, and that is clearly a great problem for the Conservatives. It was predicted that the Conservatives, to get an overall majority, would have needed a lead of about 9% or 10%, whereas Labour would get an overall majority, as we saw in 2005, would need about 3% or 4%. It is paradoxical that the Conservatives are the only party to support the first-past-the-post system wholly, which is so biased against them. It is a great hurdle for them, and a hurdle for them probably in this Election as well.

Now, as you can see, the General Election of 2010 yielded a Hung Parliament, the first since February 1974, and when the Election result was declared, Gordon Brown spoke from Number 10, and if the IT people could help us, we can hear his speech...

[Clip plays]

"With the outcome of the General Election, we find ourselves in a position unknown to this generation of political leaders, with no single party able to have a Commons majority and therefore have a majority government. I therefore felt that I should give you, and through you, the country, my assessment of where we are. I do so as Prime Minister, with a constitutional duty to seek to resolve the situation for the good of the country, not as the Leader of the Labour Party, less than a day after the Election.

What we have seen are no ordinary election results. People have been talking for some time, inside and outside Government, about the possibility of a Hung Parliament. That possibility has now become very real and pressing.
The question for all the political parties now is whether a parliamentary majority can be established that seeks to reflect what you, the British people, have just told us.

First, it is well understood that we face immediate economic challenges that must be met. A meeting of the Euro Group is being held tonight to discuss Greece and other issues. In advance of this, the G7 Finance Ministers, including America and Britain, are meeting by conference call to discuss the deteriorating situation in the Euro area. Alistair Darling is participating for the UK. Our economic priorities for Britain are to support economic recovery this year, 2010, and as the recovery stabilises, to move swiftly to implement our deficit reduction plan.

On the critical question on the formation of a Government which can command a parliamentary majority, I have of course seen the statements of other party leaders. I understand and completely respect the position of Mr Clegg in stating that he wishes first to make contact with the Leader of the Conservative Party. As you know, we already have in place mechanisms and facilities that will give the political parties any Civil Service support that they may need. Mr Cameron and Mr Clegg should clearly be entitled to take as much time as they feel necessary.

For my part, I should make clear that I would be willing to see any of the party leaders. Clearly, should the discussions between Mr Cameron and Mr Clegg come to nothing, then I will of course be prepared to discuss with Mr Clegg the areas where there may be some measure of agreement between our two parties. There are two areas in particular where such discussion would be likely to focus: the first is the plan to ensure continuing economic stability, where there is substantial common ground; and the plan to carry through far-reaching political reforms, including changes to the voting system. Both of us have made clear our commitment to both of these areas in our manifestos, and the electorate has sent us a very strong message which must be heard. My view is clear: there needs to be immediate legislation on this to begin to restore the public trust in politics and to improve Parliament’s standing and reputation. A fairer voting system is central and I believe that you, the British people, should be able to decide in a referendum what the system should be.

What all of us need to be mindful of is the imperative for a strong and stable Government and for that to be formed, with the authority to tackle the challenges ahead and one which can command support in Parliament. It is with this in mind that all of us should be facing the times ahead.

I understand, as I know my fellow party leaders do, that people do not like the uncertainty or want it to be prolonged. We live, however, in a parliamentary democracy. The outcome has been delivered by the electorate. It is our responsibility now to make it work for the national good. I am sure that you will understand that this is all that I have to say at this stage today. Thank you all very much.”

Gordon Brown was attacked by some people for being what they called a squatter in Downing Street. Constitutionally, he was perfectly entitled to stay in Number 10 until a new Government was clearly available, but you might think, politically, that he ought to have resigned or should have resigned.

The Labour Party had gone down from 356 seats to 258 – it had lost 98 seats. It was not quite the position of Heath in 1974 because the Conservatives in that Election had more votes than Labour but just four fewer seats, but this was a very clear result and you may say the electorate no doubt was sending a mixed message but one message it was sending was it did not want Labour to be in Government, and you may say, politically, Gordon Brown should have resigned immediately. That is a matter for your judgement.

Anyway, he did not do that, and he stayed on and he tried to get an agreement between what he called the two progressive parties, Labour and the Liberal Democrats, though that, as you will see, would not have itself given a majority – it would have given you 315, and you need 326 for a majority, 323 if you face the fact that Sinn Fein’s five don’t come to Parliament, 323. It would give you 315, but then you might hope the Scottish Nationalists, Plaid Cymru and the Green MP and perhaps one or two MPs from Northern Ireland would get you over the line. But anyway, he made a statement on the Monday after the Election saying that the outcome had shown the existence of a progressive majority in Britain and he said it could be in the interests of the whole country to form a progressive coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, and of course it lay with the Liberal Democrats whether to do that. The former Liberal Democrat Leader, Paddy Ashdown, I think summed up the position. He
said the voters had “...invented a deliciously painful torture mechanism for the Liberal Democrats because our instincts go one way,” that is to Labour, “but the mathematics go the other way, to the Conservatives.”

Brown said a coalition of the left was more logical than a Conservative/Liberal Democrat Government because most Liberals, he said, regarded themselves on the left, and that was shown to be true in opinion polls. Most Liberal Democrat voters more defined themselves as being on the left than being on the right. On the day before the Election, a telephone poll showed that just 22% of Liberal Democrat voters would prefer to go with the Conservatives, but 40% would prefer to work with Labour.

Then, in the Election campaign itself, on the budget deficit, the Liberal Democrats had taken the Labour view: they had said that reducing the deficit should be done gradually rather than within a single Parliament, as the Conservatives proposed. Just before the Election, in March, Nick Clegg had spoken to the Liberal Democrat Spring Conference and had said that if the Conservatives were the largest party, he would try to stop them from carrying out their pledge to begin cutting the deficit immediately, and he looked at their programme for rapid cuts and he said, “If we want to go the direction of Greece, where you get real social and industrial unrest, that is the guaranteed way of doing it.”

A week before the Election, Clegg told the Guardian that there was “a gulf in values between myself and David Cameron” and that the Conservatives had “no progressive reform agenda at all”. Two years before that, he had said: “The day before I was elected Leader, Mr Cameron suggested we join them. He talked about a progressive alliance. So I want to make something very clear today: will I ever join a Conservative Government? No.” But he also said: “Will I ever join a Labour Government? No.”

Gordon Brown, when he had formed his own Government in 2007, had offered a post to the then Liberal Leader, Sir Ming Campbell, who was a close friend of his, and he had also offered a post to Paddy Ashdown, the former Leader, but both declined. But he did show himself sympathetic to the Liberal Democrats and, as we saw from that speech, he said that Britain needed a reform of the electoral system, which was of course a key Liberal Democrat hope. The Conservatives were much more strongly against any reform of the electoral system. Gordon Brown said that the Liberal Democrats and Labour had worked well in devolved Governments in Scotland and Wales and they were ideologically similar, so he very much hoped there would be a progressive Government, and he said if he personally was the obstacle to that, he would resign as Labour Leader if that would assist the negotiating process.

There were negotiations on the Monday between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, and there are different versions of what happened and no one is precisely clear. But it seems that Labour was prepared to offer a referendum not just on the alternative vote but a multi-question referendum on proportional representation as well and that Gordon Brown said he would actively campaign for the alternative vote.

But the trouble was that many in the Labour Party, led by Jack Straw, who had been Justice Secretary in the Brown Government, said they were against any reform of the electoral system and would vote against it. Some Labour Ministers, while these negotiations were going on, said that there should not be a coalition, that the Party had been defeated in the Election and should go into opposition.

David Blunkett, who had been a senior Minister in the Government, he said the Liberal Democrats were “behaving like every harlot in history” by switching their favours.

Lord Falconer, who had been Lord Chancellor in the Blair Government, said that Labour was doing itself damage in trying to do a deal. “The sense that people will bargain on any basis in order to stay in power is unacceptable.” He said, “Labour should call it quits and go into opposition.”

So, it was not clear whether Labour would have been able to deliver on its hopes for electoral reform or indeed anything else. Of course, the fundamental problem, as I have indicated, was, even if you got a coalition, it would not itself have had a majority and it would have looked like a losers’ coalition because both Labour and the Liberal
Democrats had actually lost seats in the Election, a rejection of the verdict of the voters, and it was just too weak really to form a coalition.

The Conservatives, to most people’s surprise, were willing to concede a referendum on the alternative vote, and they did so because they realised the Liberal Democrats could switch their favours, and that increased the leverage the Liberal Democrats had. They were in a very strong position really. But it is paradoxical: if the Conservatives had won, shall we say, another five or six seats, you might have had a Conservative Minority Government because then a Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition would have looked impossible, so the Conservatives could have gone ahead regardless and the Liberal Democrats would have had much less bargaining power. They were very fortunate in the precise figures.

Now, Clegg said that the right thing to do for him would be to talk with the largest party, which of course would be the Conservatives. On the day after the Election, David Cameron, the Conservative Leader, said that he would make the Liberal Democrats “a big, open and comprehensive offer” and it was a clear hint that he would be prepared to discuss coalition.

On the Tuesday, the day after negotiations between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, Gordon Brown, appreciating they were not going to get anywhere, he resigned, and Cameron was called to the Palace and he announced the formation of Britain’s first peacetime coalition in nearly 80 years, since 1931. Liberal Democrats got five out of 23 Cabinet posts and 14 junior ministries. That meant 19, which was a third of the Liberal Democrat MPs, had posts in the Government, which was very generous. So, it is a paradox that the Liberal Democrats, the weakest of the three parties, decided which of the other two parties should be in government.

It accepted the policy by the Conservatives of immediate expenditure cuts, which was diametrically opposed to the policy on which they had fought the Election, and the crucial policy agreement that sealed the Coalition was a referendum on the alternative vote. The alternative vote was something dismissed by both Conservatives and Liberals before the Election: the Liberal Democrats because it was not a form of proportional representation, and Clegg called it a “miserable little compromise”; for Conservatives, because they were against change anyway. The only party which actually supported the alternative vote was the Labour Party, though once the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats agreed; the Labour Party said it was opposed to the alternative vote.

But the Liberal Democrats supported the coalition, to many people’s surprise. There was very little opposition to it amongst MPs, peers or the Members, and oddly enough perhaps, or perhaps not, that although, before the Election, most Liberal Democrats had preferred Labour, once the Coalition came about, Liberal Democrats thought it was the right thing. A poll asked them whether Clegg was right to form that Coalition, and 74% said he was right and only 22% that he was wrong.

The Liberal Democrats felt themselves in a very responsible position to help ensure a stable Government because they had said they were in favour of proportional representation and almost every election under PR would lead to a Hung Parliament. Now, if a Hung Parliament was going to lead to chaos, people were not going to vote for proportional representation, so they had to show that you could actually make a Coalition Government work and prove stable. You were not going to get a Liberal Democrat majority in the near future. One Liberal said, in the late-1990s, “Anyone who campaigns for proportional representation but rules out a coalition is suffering from a serious logic deficit. So, there seemed an opportunity here to prove that Coalition Government could actually work and the Liberal Democrats said that would strengthen us and also strengthen the case for electoral reform – if we do not join, then Cameron will form a Minority Government, he will do what Wilson did in ’74, perhaps have a second election and he might win, and then we will completely lose our leverage and our position of influence”.

Paddy Ashdown summed up the problem again. He said: “If we joined with Labour, that would be a rainbow coalition,” and he said it would be “...the worst sort of advertisement for the politics of coalition because a weak coalition would kill stone-dead the possibility of winning a referendum on electoral reform”. He said you would have weeks of indecisive government, buying off the Welsh, the Irish, the Scottish on every single vote and then, after months of this, you would go to the public and say “Please would you vote for the alternative vote or proportional representation or whatever so we can have more of this type of government in the future?” and he said, “A coalition with Labour is impossible, doing nothing is impossible – that must point to a deal with the Conservatives.”
Another Liberal Democrat MP, David Laws, said that a broad coalition of Labour, Liberals, perhaps with the aid of Nationalists and Northern Irish, that sort of coalition was known in Germany as a traffic-light coalition, of red, yellow and green, but he said, in Britain, it would be not a traffic-light but a car-crash and would not work.

So, you can see the logic of it all...

Cameron preferred the Coalition because, even if he had a second election and won a majority, unless he won a large majority, he would be at the mercy of his right-wing, anti-European block, and anyone who followed the fortunes of John Major’s Government in the 1990s, when you had a majority of 21, will know that his Government was de-railed continuously by a small number of Euro-sceptics on the right because, with a majority of 21, any 11 can de-rail you. John Major apparently used to say he had a majority of 21, 13 of whom were “completely mad” and would undermine him all the time. I suspect Cameron much preferred to work with the Liberal Democrats than be dependent and at the mercy of his own right-wing.

The arithmetic then obviously made it sensible, but there was also an element of personal chemistry, and I think if one of Clegg’s two predecessors, Sir Ming Campbell or Charles Kennedy, had been Leader, I think the Coalition might not have come about because they were much more to the left, and I think if David Davis, rather than David Cameron, had been Tory Leader, that might not have come about. Conversely, if, instead of Gordon Brown, Tony Blair or David Miliband had been Leader of the Labour Party, things might have been different, because Liberal Democrats felt that Brown was a tribal Labour politician without much sympathy for them, though I think that, in part, was unfair. So, I do not think the Coalition was inevitable, although some of the arithmetical pointed towards it. It depended, in part, on personal chemistry.

There was also some ideological similarity resulting from Nick Clegg as leader of the Liberal Democrats because he belonged to what is called in the Liberal Democrat Party “the orange book wing” because, in 2004, a volume of essays was published to which Clegg contributed, called “The Orange Book”, and what they said was that they had a lot more sympathy than the Liberal Democrats had in the past with the economic liberalism of Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph, and that they should not have moved as far as they did in the direction of social democracy, that Liberals should reject what one called “nanny-state liberalism” and that Liberals should accept markets’ choice, the private sector, and capitalism, and they should not be a statist party, as they said the Labour Party was. David Cameron noticed this when that book came out, and he made a very prescient comment. He said: “There is a question mark over the future of the Liberal Democrats, between the Orange Book Liberals and what we might call the Brown Book Liberals, who look forward to a Coalition Government with Gordon.” So, David Cameron was hinting that he could work with the Orange Book wing, if you like, of the Liberal Democrats, and that was given a boost when, in 2007, Clegg became Party Leader of the Liberal Democrat Party.

So, I think it was not just the arithmetical logic, it was not just the personal chemistry, and it was not just those things but also a certain degree of ideological convergence.

Many people, including I have to say myself, thought the Coalition would not be stable and it would not last, but, in retrospect, it is clear why that was wrong, that both the parties had a tremendous interest in it lasting: the Liberal Democrats to show that coalition could yield stable government, in particular; and the Conservatives in not, as it were, cheating by taking the rug out from under the Liberal Democrats. Therefore, you had, by contrast with the Hung Parliament in 1974, which was a highly fragmented Hung Parliament, and which you might have next time if no two parties can get a majority in May, which looks possible, it may be that Liberal Democrat strength is so reduced that a two-party coalition does not have 326 seats – that is perfectly possible. That is what happened in 1974, a much more fragmented Hung Parliament. You did not get that. You got a manageable Hung Parliament, and I think it is fair to say, whatever your personal views about the Coalition, whether you think it is been a good Government or not, it has produced strong and stable government and has worked, on the whole, very much like a single-party government. It is never really been in danger of defeat in the House of Commons, and it has worked, on the whole, effectively, and it has shown, to this extent, as Liberal Democrats said, that coalition government can be stable, and the Liberal Democrat argument would be, if we had proportional representation, we would get stable governments of that sort, rather than the weak minority government say we had in 1974 or on past occasions when we had Hung Parliaments.
The problem was, of course, that the Coalition Government was formed after the Election and there is no way of knowing whether the people who supported the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats favoured it or not. No voter could have voted for the Coalition. That is a contrast with the 1931 National Government, which went to the country as a Coalition Government, and also, the programme it drew up, the so-called Coalition Agreement, which superseded the manifestos, was never seen by a voter. It was drawn up after the Election and I think that does cause some problems for democracy. You might say that the officer class waited until the votes were all counted and then decided what Government the rest of us should have, and you may say that is not quite what we mean by democracy. This may happen again this time, in spades. I mean, we all vote – if the result is as it seems today in the opinion polls, the politicians will decide after the Election what sort of Government we get. We, the voters, will not decide; the politicians will make their own decisions.

Now, a further interesting feature I think about the formation of the Coalition is that, despite what many people thought, the Queen was in no way involved, and she, I think very wisely, remained at Windsor for the five days of the negotiations so no one could say that she had intervened in any way.

That is a great contrast with the last peacetime Coalition in 1931, when George V played a very active role. He had the three Party Leaders to Buckingham Palace - he more or less locked them in a room and told them to produce a National Government fairly quickly because the country had an economic crisis. It is said, though I have never seen it recorded in print, but it is said that he told Ramsay MacDonald, the Prime Minister, “You got us in this bloody mess - now get us out of it!” but that may or may not be true. But it is interesting that, when the National Government went to the country as a Coalition in September 1931, George V said to the then Cabinet Secretary, “Of course, you are going to vote,” and the Cabinet Secretary said he rather made a point of not voting, as Cabinet Secretary. “But this time,” the King said, “it is different. I want the National Government to get every vote possible.” The Cabinet Secretary enquired whether this was in the nature of a command, and on being told that it was, he declared, “Very well, Sir – Your Majesty can claim to have canvassed one vote for the National Government.”

Now, that did not happen this time. The Queen kept quite out of it. The view of the Palace, I think, which is right, is that it is up to the politicians to sort things out – it is for them to decide, and once they have decided, the Palace will endorse whatever decision they make. I suspect this is what will happen this time: the Queen will in no way be involved in the decision-making process, that the politicians must come to a decision themselves. It is up to them, and the decision will be justified or not justified by what happens in Parliament, by whether a Government has support of the Queen’s speech, by whether it gets a majority in the Queen’s speech or is defeated, when it will almost certainly have to resign, but that will not affect the Queen in any way, and the steps are all mechanical: when one Government resigns, the Queen will send for the Leader of the Opposition. So, she will not be involved in any way or embarrassed by what happens.

I think, apart from the intrinsic interest of the Election itself, it leaves open a number of questions about 2015, and perhaps I will end by putting these questions to you...

The first is, of course, “Will it lead to another Hung Parliament?” which it seems on the polls at the moment that it will.

The second question is: if it does, will it lead to a coalition, which we got here, or a minority government, which we got in 1974?

The third is: if it is a Hung Parliament, will it be a manageable one, like this one, or a fragmented one, like 1974, in which no two parties can get over the limit?

The fourth question is: will these parties outside the mainstream, which everybody thought would do terribly well in 2010 but did not. Will they do better this time? Not, in my view fortunately, the BNP, which has disappeared, but the Scottish National Party, it does look as if that will do very well. UKIP may not get many seats but almost certainly a higher vote than 3% - its current poll rating is about 10%. And also, the Greens are doing much better than the 1% they got last time - they probably will not win many seats, but will they get a higher vote?
And, a further question, a deeper question, more difficult question to answer, which is this: in 1974, people saw the Hung Parliament as an aberration, and I think a lot of politicians saw the Election of 2010 as an aberration, but is this a permanent change in Britain? Is our political culture changing so that we are more willing to vote for non-established parties, less willing to give the Conservatives or Labour an overall majority? In other words, is our political culture changing so that the era of single-party majority government is passing away, that it is something of the past, and that we will look on this Coalition, oddly enough, as a last period of stability before multi-party politics really kicks in? And then you have to ask the question: if we are moving into this era of multi-party politics, is that compatible with strong government and effective decision-making, and is it compatible with democratic government? Because, after all, in 2010, the Coalition was formed after the Election and behind closed-doors and no one could have voted for the Coalition or for the Coalition’s programme, and these seem to me to be very important and difficult questions to answer. I am not going to answer them now, but I may be able to give you some answers in the next and last lecture, which is on May 19th, when we will know what you, the people, we, the people, have decided.

Thank you.

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