



*Dear Simon,*

*Over the last four years, the UK has been governed by a coalition of two parties. Is this likely to happen again? How do the British citizens feel about this experience?*

It's one of the great myths of British politics that we almost always have single-party government: coalitions actually happen quite often, as with the Labour-Liberal pact in the late 1970s, or John Major's use of support from Northern Irish MPs during the 1990s.

However, in the public imagination, the UK has just one party in power at a time, so the very high chance that there will be another coalition has been the subject of much debate in the UK.

The reason that a coalition is almost a certainty is that the share of the vote going to the Conservatives and Labour is in a long-term decline. After the Second World War, they were picking up over 90% of the votes, with their broad appeal and their well-developed local associations. But the emergence of new social issues and the decline of public engagement with politics (a global trend) made it easier for other parties to gain a profile and votes.

While the first-past-the-post electoral system has maintained the representation of the two parties far in excess of their vote share, it has merely slowed the process of fragmentation. With the rising profile of the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, the new environmentalist concerns represented by the Greens or the pseudo-populism of UKIP, there is a lot of uncertainty about who will win what in May.

This is where the public's interest actually comes from: who will join up with whom? The Liberal Democrats, the current junior coalition partner, look set to lose many seats, and have internal debates about whether they should head left or right in a coalition. The Scottish National Party is more clearly left-leaning, but the price of its support might be too high, since they might see an opportunity to push again for independence. UKIP is more right-wing, but it would be very difficult for the Tories to give them any power or platform. So lots of options, none of them good.

If there is much interest in this, then we should also note that the idea of coalition government isn't a bad thing as such. The past five years have shown that it doesn't have to be a problem: indeed, according to media coverage, the Liberals have not had a high profile and only marginal influence. Maybe if the negotiations in May prove more problematic then that impression will change, but it won't change the bigger processes at work here.

Talk soon,

*Simon*

