

What hope for a Conservative minority government? Ask me again tomorrow

Written by The Conversation

Will no one come to the rescue of Britain's beleaguered political pundits? Seemingly not. Those revered traditional game-changers of UK elections – the budget, a bruising interview with Jeremy Paxman – have come and gone without making things any clearer. This pushes the temptation to speculate beyond the limits of human tolerance; but at the same time it makes it much more likely that our guesswork will leave us looking stupid on May 8.

Like any scrupulous scholar, I have already prepared a list of alibis should any of my remarks turn out to be laughably inaccurate. If [brain fade](#) can strike politicians, detached observers like myself can scarcely be immune. The normal equipoise with which I view the British political scene might equally have been deranged by the recent controversy involving [Jeremy Clarkson](#).

Subject to this disclaimer of all personal responsibility, I feel strong enough to advance one prediction: even if the Conservatives decide to form a minority government after the election, it is unlikely to survive for very long.

Some light maths

An examination of all the possible permutations might uncover a scenario in which a minority Conservative administration could indeed survive for a bit, as it might have done if it had [chosen this option in 2010](#).

For example, if the Conservatives increase their representation to (say) 320 seats, the Unionist parties in Northern Ireland bag their usual quota of seats, and the Liberal Democrats exceed expectations by clinging on to more than 30 of their present contingent, David Cameron could negotiate a deal that could ensure his victory in a confidence vote.

More likely, though, a result this good would make Cameron swallow his apparent [dislike of the idea](#) and form another coalition.

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In other words, if things go very well for Cameron's most plausible coalition partners, a coalition would probably take shape before long (if not immediately).

The relevant scenario to consider, then, is one in which the Conservatives retain roughly their current number of MPs (303) and combine with other parties that are prepared to sustain them in office. This could provide Cameron with a theoretical roster of about 340 MPs.

In such circumstances, Cameron would be faced with two alternatives. His proposed legislative programme, enshrined in the Queen's Speech, could be based on the Conservative Party manifesto, with minimal concessions. The snag here is that very few Liberal Democrat MPs would support it.

On present assumptions, most Lib Dem MPs who survive the election will owe their positions to personal popularity. This will make their parliamentary behaviour very difficult to predict; but one can be pretty sure that most of them will find plenty of objectionable proposals in a Queen's Speech that makes no allowance for Liberal Democrat sensitivities. For example, they have denounced Tory plans to cut inheritance tax, and there is no chance of a tuition-fee style conversion on that issue.

The second possibility is that Cameron unveils a legislative programme that waters down Conservative manifesto proposals in order to win Lib Dem support. In that case, though, the right wing of Cameron's party – the MPs who talk the UKIP talk but have as yet lacked the courage to walk the Farage walk – will be faced with a horrible choice.

On our scenario, UKIP will only have two or three seats; but it will have polled respectably, apparently reinforcing the right-wing Conservative argument for a more robust line on the EU and immigration. Conservative MPs from this stable will not be able to stomach any more concessions to the infernal Lib Dems.

After May 7, there will be enough of these rebels-in-waiting to kill a lily-livered, Lib Dem-influenced Queen's Speech, either through abstention or outright opposition. And even the drafters of the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act have not managed to find a way for government which loses a vote of confidence can survive without an abrupt parliamentary change of heart.

Definitely, maybe

Based on all this, I am ready to make a rash, yet at the same time unmistakably tentative and readily-disowned prediction. A minority Conservative government would have a short lease of life after May 7.

On that basis, one would expect Cameron to think twice before embarking on the experiment. But since another hung parliament seems likely – and he must have considered all of the options – Cameron might have reconciled himself to the possibility that this last-ditch gambit will be pretty futile.

If that happens, Cameron will be able to say that he did his best and was only defeated by circumstances. Even so, there would have to be another election, and the Conservative Party would have to find a new leader. Such a person would have to be sufficiently right-wing to appease core Conservative votes and to retrieve UKIP defectors, while having enough charisma to attract support from unusual quarters.

Step forward – or rather, step even further forward – the newly-elected MP for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, [Boris Johnson](#) .

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