Asserting legitimacy: coverage of the coalition negotiations after the 2010 UK general election

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Abstract: This paper examines television news coverage of the outcome of the 2010 UK General Election, especially the period between May 7th and May 12th, when the three major parties were engaged in negotiations to form a government. In particular it focuses on the narratives that were used to construct rhetorical claims to legitimacy, identifying three key messages: constitutional arguments, those that draw on constituencies of various magnitudes, and consequentialist claims, constructed around the effects that various outcomes could generate. In addition it examines the extent to which the process of negotiations was both mediated and mediatized. Here it is found that an attempt to de-mediate the process was partially successful, with news media remaining unaware of important information. However, mediazation remained central to the process, with the most dominant rhetorical arguments – including presidential narratives and fears of a major financial contagion – being inescapably linked to media logic.

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Failing to produce a governing majority for a single party made the 2010 British General Election an unusual event. There has been no such occurrence since February 1974. The outcome of the post-election period – five days when significant haggling and horse-trading took place between all three major parties – was even more historically unusual, leading to the first peacetime coalition in the country since 1931. In one way at least though, this process was not just unusual, but unprecedented, since it took place under the relentless gaze of the media. This would create additional pressures, unfamiliar to participants from earlier generations.

In this sense, the coalition negotiations fitted into a larger pattern, not just in politics, but in broader social life, wherein the media is playing an important role in shaping human activity. In broad terms, the evolution of the media has changed the relationship citizens have with time and space, and their proximity to great events. This shift has been rolled up in two terms: mediation and mediatzation (Stromback, 2008, pp. 229-231). It is important to differentiate these two concepts though. Mediated politics occurs when the media is the main link between the people and government, and allows information to be exchanged between the two groups. In contrast, mediazation, is a more dynamic development, and relates to which the extent individuals, institutions and processes are inducted into and influenced by media culture (Stromback, 2008, pp. 231-232).

By these definitions, there can be little doubt that the hung parliament negotiations in the United Kingdom were certainly a mediated event, subject as it was to 24 hours rolling news, huge press interest and continual comment. The extent to which it was a mediatized process is more questionable. Indeed, there were conscious efforts by the civil service to “de-mediatize” discussions between the parties, as there was concern that a media feeding frenzy could make an agreement harder to reach (Kavanagh & Cowley, 2010, p. 204). During discussions held by the Commons Justice Select Committee on the constitutional processes that would occur in event of a hung parliament, Gus O’Donnell, the Cabinet Secretary, and the person ultimately responsible for overseeing the process of negotiation, noted that the British media had very limited experience of covering these types of negotiations, and that it would be hugely important to keep both journalists and the British public informed of how the process was playing out (Justice Select Committee, 2010, p. ev16).

The situation was certainly precarious. Aside from the role of the media itself, there were other factors that made the hung parliament and negotiation scenario especially combustible, especially the various arithmetical permutations the electorate might deliver, including the potential mismatch between the national share of the vote and parliamentary outcome; and the time it might take to negotiate a coalition arrangement against the backdrop of a Europe-wide financial crisis and falling markets.

O'Donnell's comments were also based on a cultural concern. The United Kingdom, unlike countries that use proportional election systems, was unused to the ambiguity created by a hung parliament, where it would not be entirely clear which party had "won" the election. Inevitability then, when this scenario did come to pass, there was a vacuum to be filled, in which different claims to legitimacy – essentially, the right to rule – could be articulated. It is these different arguments, and how the media reported and framed them, that are the concern of this paper.

The Politics of Coalition Formation and the Idea of Legitimacy

In some ways, it could be argued that the ultimate formation of the House of Commons after the election was not as cataclysmic for the political system as it might have been. A far more damaging scenario could have played out had there been a mismatch between the party with the most seats and most votes.[i] Nonetheless, the result created a complex situation. The actual outcome, both in terms of vote share and seats won in the House of Commons, are shown in Figure 1.

(Insert Figure 1 about here)

One thing is for certain: these numbers created what the former Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown referred to "a painful torture mechanism" for his party (quoted in Fox, 2010, p. 609). This was because there seemed to be four possible outcomes:

- A minority Conservative government assuming office and pursing a legislative programme.
- A minority Conservative government assuming office, but with a confidence and supply agreement with the Liberal Democrats, wherein the smaller party would vote for or abstain on budgetary legislation or at any other moment where the survival of the administration was threatened.
- A formal coalition between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats, involving a sharing of executive power.
- A coalition between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, as well as the other regional parties required to create a slim working majority.

The problem for the Liberal Democrats was that the arithmetic of the Commons suggested one outcome, namely a Conservative-Liberal Democrat arrangement of some kind, able to command a solid majority. In contrast though, the recent history of the party had been firmly on the centre-left of British politics, and there can be no doubt many MPs and supporters would have been happier working with Labour. However, the numbers made this a very unlikely outcome. Technically, a majority in the House of Commons requires 325 MPs. However, given that five Sinn Fein members will not take their seats, this figure drops to 322. A Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition would contain only 315 MPs and, as a result, would always have to rely on smaller parties to survive. Such an arrangement was a recipe for instability.

More broadly, political scientists have attempted to offer explanations as to how coalition negotiations play out. Undoubtedly the most famous of these is the idea of the minimum winning coalition, a piece of positive political analysis devised by the American academic William H. Riker (1962). Employing game theory logic, Riker theorized that parties engaged in coalition negotiations would seek to achieve office and to generate outcomes that advanced their own policy positions to the greatest degree possible. As a result, the minimum winning coalition was inevitably the most rational outcome. This was because larger coalitions would inevitably dilute the influence of any

participating organization, in comparison with the minimum winning alternative. In the British case then, Riker's argument would point to a Conservative-Liberal Democrat arrangement of some kind being likely, as this represents the simplest combination to achieve stable government.

However, Riker's theory has proved very controversial, and has frequently been criticized. First, analysis of real world coalition formation, especially in Europe, has suggested that the minimum winning coalition is actually less likely to occur than other permeations of governing arrangements (Druckman & Thies, 2002). This finding is important, as it suggests that outcomes of negotiations are not preordained by numerics, but instead subject to other variables. Indeed, this leads to the second important critique of Riker's work. The idea of minimum winning coalitions is firmly grounded in the American tradition of positive political science (Laver & Schofield, 1998). However, this approach to analysis neglects a number of important factors, any number of which might be significant during coalition negotiations. These include the personalities involved, the ideological distance between parties, and specific policies where deals can be made or no agreement forged. In addition, Riker is frequently accused of oversimplifying institutions. Parties are not homogenous units, but contain a range of opinions and motivations, while countries have different governing arrangements, including multiple legislative chambers. This can also considerably complicate outcomes (Volden & Carrubba, 2004). Crucially for this paper, Riker does not take into account issues of legitimacy, and the role it may play in the debate surrounding coalition formation.

Political legitimacy is often broadly thought of as being popular support. The classic work on the topic by David Easton (1965) defines legitimacy as being the extent to which citizens trust politicians to do the right thing. Easton divides legitimacy into diffuse and specific support, the former representing a long-term set of beliefs about the nature of the political system, while the latter relates to specific outcomes created by decisions. Coalition negotiations, by their nature, bridge the gap between these two definitions, though, in that they both generate specific outcomes but are also the product of system arrangements, such as electoral systems and constituency boundaries.

What is interesting in the British case in particular is the extent to which different arguments were deployed in an effort to claim legitimacy. These are evident in Figure 1. Three distinct variables standout: the share of seats in the House of Commons, the share of national vote share, and whether parties had advanced or declined from previous election results. As we shall see, all of these variables played a role in the debate that was to take place in the days after the votes were counted.

Television coverage of the hung parliament discussions

In order to analyze the debate about legitimacy in the days after the election, this paper will draw on a sample of two news programmes: the ITV evening news and BBC Newsnight.[ii] Between them, they cover a spectrum of British news broadcasting. The ITV programme is a popular, "tabloid" style news show, going out in an early evening slot on ITV1 and carrying a range of stories. Politics, especially during the election result period was central, but there was frequently time for human interest and sports stories, for example. Newsnight, broadcast every weekday night at in the late evening on BBC2, has a more "broadsheet" style, offering in-depth debate and is known for its tough interviews of public figures. The lead story is almost always political, although art and culture are also

discussed. The programme was on more frequently during the election campaign due to an extra early evening Saturday broadcast.

Studying both programmes, what becomes apparent are a set of three distinct narratives of legitimacy emerging. These are:

- **The constitutional narrative**. This is based on claims related to established institutional practices and constitutional norms.
- **The constituency narrative**. This set of arguments, essentially moral in tone, calls on leaders to respect the wishes of various groups who may have put their trust in them. It functions at a number of levels: parliament party, party activists, party voters and the country as a whole.
- **The consequentialist narrative**. This is to do with the likely result of possible outcomes to the negotiation process. This narrative frequently employs the term "national interest", and is also linked to economic crisis that was taking place within the European Union and state of financial markets.

Each of these narratives carried weight and had power for different reasons, grounded in broad social processes, the longer British experience or the outcome of the 2010 election. Furthermore, they were not politically neutral, but might better suit the objectives of one party or a faction within a party. It is worth considering them in more depth, as well as seeking to understand the forms that they took.

The constitutional narrative

This narrative is perhaps the most traditional, and is recognizably grounded in British institutional history as a parliamentary democracy. In this sense, it goes back to the classic constitutional doctrine that the requirement for a government is simply to be able to pass a Queen's Speech, a budget and defend itself against any motion of confidence. This understanding of coalition negotiation is informed by the idea of parliamentary sovereignty, wherein nobody or group has the ability to abridge or reject the will of parliament (Dicey, 1889). In addition, it had been agreed before the election that, regardless of the numerics of any hung parliament, the Prime Minister should remain in office until a new government could be formed (Justice Select Committee, 2010, p. 8).[iii]

Needless to say, this narrative was especially useful for pro-coalition elements of the Labour Party or Liberal Democrats who favoured a centre-left alliance, or at the very least were seeking to engage in active negotiations with both of the large parties. Thought of in these terms, no one had "won" the election, making all parties broadly equal in their negotiations. Furthermore, any outcome that produced a governing majority might be considered legitimate, regardless of which parties it contained. Examples of such views can be found in both programmes:

> ***Tom Bradby:*** *"As Gordon Brown flew back to London last night, he was still refusing to concede defeat… To be fair, he was simply sticking to the constitutional and frankly logical position that the existing Prime Minister stays right where he is until someone else proves they can govern" (ITV Evening News May 7th, 2010).*

> ***Michael Crick:*** *"Mr Clegg is now in a strong position because the other party can't rule without his say-so… The 57 Liberal Democrats hold the balance of power" (BBC Newsnight 7th May, 2010)*
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> ***Alistair Campbell:*** *"It would be incumbent on all of the leaders to explore all of the possibilities. And I think that is a perfectly proper constitutional thing... The people have delivered a verdict that is very unclear… All three parties did not have the election result they wanted" (BBC Newsnight 7th May, 2010).*

There are also discussions where this view of the process is confronted with alternative claims to legitimacy. Perhaps the starkest such moment was a discussion between former Alliance and Liberal Democrat leader David (now Lord) Steel and an ITV newscaster:

> ***Newscaster:*** *Tom Bradby [ITN political correspondent] talking just a few minutes ago about an unseemly Dutch auction. Won't this be the way public will see it?*
> ***Lord Steel:*** *Well you have to remember that nobody was given an overall majority at the election. Therefore it was inevitable there was going to be a discussion, and it shouldn't be a one way street. It was desirable that it should be with both parties…*
> ***Newscaster:*** *But do you think, I repeat my point, the electorate will accept a cobbled together deal that does not include the party that won most seats, and to all intents and purposes won the general election?*
> ***Lord Steel:*** *They did not win. Nobody won in that sense. To win you need to secure a majority. More people actually voted Labour and Liberal Democrat than voted Conservative (ITV / ITN, 2010).*

This debate highlights the problem with the constitutional narrative and, more broadly, a traditional reading of British constitutional practice in a mediatized age. It is a highly elite form of politics, where governing arrangements are created in a manner that is seen to be removed from public opinion. For this reason, a government, as one journalist put it, "decided in some dark corner of Westminster" (Kirsty Wark on BBC Newsnight 7th May, 2010) seemed to be so controversial.

The constituency narrative

This constituency narrative can best be understood as the counterpoint to the constitutional reading. Instead of arguing that any arrangement made between political elites are de facto legitimate, it instead focuses on the idea that legitimacy ultimately rests in the hands of a number of groups, ranging in magnitude. At its most micro-level, the constituency narrative looks to the parliamentary party (and thus reiterates one of the classic critiques of Riker), who may prove troublesome for leaders seeking to form a coalition. During coverage of the hung parliament debate, this issue was debated with reference to all three parties.

In the case of Labour these discussions started to be particularly problematic, when a number of high profile former cabinet members, as well as several backbench MPs, commented that they would not support a coalition in principle and nor would vote for key elements of any possible coalition agreement, including any legislation promoting electoral reform. Due to the potential numerics of a Labour-Liberal Democrat deal, barely capable of achieving a majority in single figures even with minor party support, these interviews had the potential to greatly undermine negotiations (for a particularly good example of this debate, see the interview with Tom Harris MP on BBC

Newsnight May 10th, 2010. There is also an especially bitter exchange between Dianne Abbott MP and Polly Toynbee on Newsnight on May 12th).

At the meso-level, the constituency narrative looked to those who had supported a party in some way – either as members or as voters – to provide or undermine legitimacy. Conservative members were frequently seen as being an obstacle to a coalition agreement. This narrative was boosted by the presence of Tim Montgomerie, editor of the blog ConservativeHome, who appeared on Newsnight twice and the ITV news once during the period when the coalition government was being formed. During the previous parliament the site had gained a reputation for speaking on behalf of the party's grassroots members and not following lines dictated by the leadership. During the first hours of the interregnum, ConservativeHome ran a poll of party members and found that 86 per cent of them favoured a minority administration, as opposed to a coalition (Montgomerie, 2010). These data was cited on as evidence of a division between the Conservative leadership, and rank and file (BBC Newsnight May 12th, 2010).

Similarly, there was discussion about those who had supported the Liberal Democrats. In part, this was a reflection of the party's unusual and highly decentralized mode of decision making process, known as the "triple lock", wherein any coalition deal had to be approved by a complex array of MPs and the Federal Executive as well as, potentially, a special conference and a postal ballot of the membership (Barker, 2010).

In addition, there was discussion about the motivations of those who had worked for and voted Liberal Democrat. This debate had its roots in the last days of the election campaign, when Labour minister Ed Balls had advised Labour supporters to vote Liberal Democrat in seats where the third party was in competition with the Conservatives (Hasan, 2010). How many voters were interchangeably deciding to vote Labour or Liberal Democrat based on the political circumstances in their constituency is questionable. However, the point was frequently made that Liberal Democrats were instinctively on the left of British politics, that they shared progressive political instincts with Labour and above all, that many Labour supporters had voted Liberal Democrat because they wanted to avoid a Conservative government.

> ***Philippe Sands, former Liberal Democrat advisor:*** *"I have to say when I took to the streets of my constituency to actively support a Liberal Democrat candidate, a very good candidate, I didn't do it to get a Conservative government" (BBC Newsnight May 12th, 2010).*
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> ***Alistair Campbell:*** *"The Liberal Democrats are in a very difficult position. They have a had lots of people vote for them, and a lot of people voted for them because they did not want a Conservative government. And those people are now seeing David Cameron walk into Downing Street (BBC Newsnight May 12th, 2010).*

It therefore follows (or at least suited Labour to argue) that any accommodation between Clegg and Cameron would be seen as a betrayal of these groups.

At the macro-level, the constituency narrative drew on an imagined national constituency of voters. This narrative took a number of forms. Some equated the balanced parliament with the will of people. This in turn was taken as a sign that a "new politics" was required, which had to be more consensual in nature.[iv]

> ***David Kynaston:*** *"But it is not an equally hung parliament. The Tories did better than either of the other two parties. I think the collective message, as expressed through our rather clumsy electoral system is that the tories should have a go, but cannot quite be trusted to have a go in a way that obliterates memories of the harsh Thatcherite era of the 1980s… that there should be some check and balance" (BBC Newsnight May 8th, 2010).*

More common were arguments based upon either size of or support for a party. By definition, these bestowed legitimacy on the Conservative Party, while pointing out relatively weak positions of Labour and the Liberal Democrats:

> ***Jeremy Paxman:*** *"Tonight, British politics for beginners. 27 million, eight hundred and 95 thousand of us vote, and the man that fails to come up to expectations becomes the centre of attention… two days after we all voted and the only apparent certainly is that the leader of the party that came third has the power to make or break the next government"(BBC Newsnight May 8th, 2010).*

> ***Newxcaster:*** *[The Conservative Party] to all intents and purposes won the general election? (ITV / ITN, 2010).*

An extension of this view was a tendency to conflate Britain's system with a presidential model. Clearly, in an institutional sense, this is an absurdity in a parliamentary democracy. However, the "presidentialization" of parliamentary democracies has been a common point of discussion in recent decades (see for example Poguntke & Webb, 2005). This has taken a number of forms. Crucially, an important element of the process has occurred in electoral communication, wherein there has been far greater focus on the leader and, using the power of mass media, more direct linkages between voters and those who would sit on the executive. Unsurprisingly then, there was a huge focus on the men who would be Prime Minister and their various claims to power.[v] For example, it was frequently claimed that Gordon Brown was "unelected" (see for example ITV Evening News May 7th, 2010; ITV News Bulletin May 10th, 2010).

Indeed, viewed in these terms, the 2010 UK election presents something of a paradox. The result, and subsequent deal-making was a clear reminder that the country was a parliamentary democracy. However, in many ways, campaign was the most presidentialized contest the country had ever seen. This was largely due to the highly publicized *Leaders' Debates*, where Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Nick Clegg faced each other to discuss their competing visions of the future. This was the very first time that such a broadcast had taken place in Britain, leading to great attention being directed at the would-be Prime Ministers.

Indeed, the debates became especially significant when Gordon Brown resigned on Monday night after the election, suggesting that the Liberal Democrats would find it easier to enter into a coalition with a new Labour leader. However, any newly elected leader would not have appeared in the broadcasts and was not in charge of the party at the time of the election.

> ***Kirsty Wark:*** *"The deal making and horse trading going on now is the flip side of the slickly managed TV debates" (BBC Newsnight May 10th, 2010).*

> ***David Grossman:*** *"But hang on. Remember those debates that everyone made such a fuss about? It seems our new Prime Minster might not have even been there" (BBC Newsnight May 10th, 2010).*

While forming a new government in this manner would have been completely correct within the British system, the fact that the new leader had not been held up to public scrutiny during the election campaign was argued to be a source of illegitimacy. This is a very practical consequence of televised debates on UK politics.

The consequentialist narrative

A third narrative was deployed during the news coverage of the negotiations. In contrast to either constitutional or constituency rhetoric, it instead focused on the future, and where events might lead, especially if there was a prolonged period of negotiations between the party, or if a weak and unstable coalition was formed. This argument has its roots before election day, when the Conservative Party were trying to persuade the British public that a hung parliament would be a very bad outcome (WebCameron, 2010).

After election day, it became common for politicians to talk of working in the national interest. This was especially true in the case of high profile Conservatives:

> ***John Major****: "The important thing is to tackle the problems we have with the economy. They are very serious. I don't think people realize how serious the structural deposit is. It has grown up over ten years. It needs to be dealt with comprehensively. That can best be dealt with by a government that is secure in the House of Commons. If the price of that are a couple of Liberals in the cabinet, it is a price I would be willing to pay" (BBC Newsnight 7th May, 2010).*

> ***Ken Clarke****: "This is a test of whether we can put the national interest first… what we have to do is try to get some compromise between our positions. We have to produce a strong programme for a strong stable government that has to last two or three years, as it will take that long to deal with the overriding problems facing the country, which is a series economic crisis and the serious deposit we have to deal with" (BBC Newsnight 7th May, 2010).*

For the Conservatives, arguing in favour of the national interest had two useful consequences. First, it suggested a level of urgency in the process, which would necessarily put them – as the largest party and an essential element of the simplest coalition – in a controlling position. Also, it highlighted the arguments they had made during the election campaign about the precarious state of the British economy and the need for urgent action to curtail government spending.

These arguments had particular power because of concurrent events, taking place in continental Europe and frequently reported on the same news bulletin. At the same time as the coalition negotiations were occurring, European finance ministers were meeting to plan a bailout scheme for Eurozone countries whose economies were likely to fail (BBC Newsnight 7th May, 2010; ITV Evening News May 9th, 2010). This provided a powerful backdrop to the narrative of crisis, and generated a great sense of urgency.

Conclusion: partially mediated, but inescapably mediatized

One of the striking successes of the coalition negotiations, especially after Gus O'Donnell's original concern, was how effectively the media were kept at bay (Kavanagh & Cowley, 2010). Even at the time, journalists were willing to admit that they had been kept at arm's length from the process (David Grossman on BBC Newsnight May 12th, 2010). In this sense, then, the process was partially *de-mediated*.

This process was only partial though, as there were moments when the media did seem to become an important conduit for information. This was especially true when a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition started to look more plausible, and a number of prominent ex-ministers and MPs took to the airwaves to attack the idea. In this example, then, the media was being used as a conduit between political elites. Their message was clear and unmistakable: any deal involving a wafer thin majority, as well as assorted minor party coalition partners was going to be inherently unstable.

What is striking though is how little de-mediation equated to de-mediatization. The big political and social processes driven by media logic *still* had the power to influence the course of events and the discourses that were employed to understand and frame them: the presidentialization of politics provided a counterpoint to traditional understandings of the constitutional process, with a more direct link between voters and Prime Ministers being claimed; the very existence of the televised debates during the campaign seemed to undermine the claims of any potential Premier outside the three participants; the existence of the blogosphere offered a set of vocal party supporters, willing to comment on the actions of their leadership; and the potential speed of financial contagion seemed to create a ticking clock which was the backdrop to negotiations.

It was the arguments based in these understandings of the event, especially the constituency and consequentialist narratives that seemed to carry the day, both in terms of dominating the media and in justifying the eventual outcome that was to transpire. At this point it would be very easy to take a normative view, and criticize media coverage for misrepresenting the nature of British political institutions, and covering the story in an overly simplified or even partisan manner.

However, there is an alternative reading of these events, dependent on how we define political institutions. If we go beyond a narrow, legal definition (encapsulated in the constitutional narrative), we would include broader, repeated patterns of behavior and norms of action (March & Olsen, 1984). This broader definition allows us to think of the consequences of mediatization not as an alien imposition on our political processes, but instead as an element of a dynamic political system, constantly responding to the changing patterns of our existence.

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Party	Seats	Change	Vote share	Change
Conservatives	306	97	36.1	3.7
Labour	258	-91	29	-6.2
Liberal Democrats	57	-5	23	1
DUP	8	-1	1.2	-0.3
SNP	6	0	1.7	0.1
Green	1	1	1	-0.1
Sinn Fein	5	0	0.6	-0.1
Plaid Cymru	3	1	0.6	-0.1
SDLP	3	0	0.4	-0.1
Allliance	1	0	0.1	0
Sylvia Hermon (Ind)	1	1	0.1	NA

Figure 1. 2010 UK Election Result, in Seat and Vote Share Outcome

[i] Indeed, this outcome could have led not only to constitutional problems, but some very strange rhetorical outcomes. One possible scenario was Labour winning the most seats, but the Conservatives winning the most votes. In the event of hung parliament negotiations then, the Conservative Party, the major British party most committed to the first-past-the-post election system making the argument that it was entitled to form a government because it had the greatest proportion of votes.

[ii] This is a provisional version of this paper based only on televisual analysis. In the future, I hope to augment with additional work, including a range of newspaper coverage.

[iii] This was, as the above extracts demonstrate, a convention at least acknowledged on the television news, albeit begrudgingly. That was not the case in the national press. The Sun newspaper, for example, accused Gordon Brown of "squatting" in Downing Street in its 8th May edition. These arguments will be considered in a future version of this paper.

[iv] Indeed, this was a motif that David Cameron and Nick Clegg picked up on in the press conference they held on the first day of their new administration.

[v] Hypothetically, it was even possible that Nick Clegg could become Prime Minister. Such an outcome is not unheard of under the UK system. After the 1918 election, Lloyd George's Liberals had just 145 seats, while the Conservatives, his coalition partners had 362. However, Lloyd George retained the Premiership. Unsurprisingly, in our more presidentialized age, there was no reference to the chances of Clegg leading a coalition, aside from one visual image in an episode of Newsnight, where a bookmakers board was shown, and Clegg's name was at the very bottom, listed as a possible successor to Brown.