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Bipartisanship 101, UK Style

Bipartisanship” is not a word that comes easily to the lips of British political leaders. Parliamentary systems of government like Britain’s, when combined with a first-past-the-post electoral system, generate a binary political mindset and an adversarial practice. But the inconclusive May 6 parliamentary election gave neither of the two main parties an overall majority, producing a “hung parliament.”

This outcome forced party leaders to confront the necessity for cross-party cooperation. Within hours of the close of polling the leaders of the two main parties were falling over themselves to offer olive branches to the third party, the Liberal Democrats, whose support they would need in order to govern. Following several days of high drama and backroom horse-trading, Prime Minister Gordon Brown resigned and the Conservatives offered a full coalition to the Liberal Democrats. The Liberal Democrats accepted that offer and enter government for the first peacetime coalition in 70 years.

Many had expressed the hope that, whatever the exact composition of the new government, the election result would herald a new era of cross-party cooperation. Such cooperation is, in fact, already pervasive throughout the system. It is standard fare in local government. The three “Celtic” legislatures—the Scottish parliament, and the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies—are elected by versions of proportional representation, so it is well-entrenched regionally as well. British members of the European parliament (MEPs) have been exposed to coalition-style politics for a generation. Cross-party cooperation is even routine in the national parliament, albeit below the radar. Legislation is often supported by more than one party, and parliamentary committees often proceed by consensus.

So those who argue that cross-party cooperation is alien to our system are just plain wrong. If a new dawn of bipartisanship is rising, it will be an evolution out of current practice not a radical break with the past. That said, the territory of national coalitions

is unfamiliar and unsettling to our party elites and a media which thrives on pantomime confrontation.

One of the most important factors determining whether this process continues will be whether electoral reform—a key Liberal Democrat demand—actually takes place. A big obstacle to a more representative parliament—and to a more deliberative political culture—is the first-past-the-post system. As in the USA, this effectively disenfranchises millions of voters whose party choices get no or vastly reduced representation in the national legislature, and massively over-rewards those who support the two largest parties. This time the Liberal Democrats won 23% of votes cast but secured only 9% of seats, while Labour won only 29% of votes but garnered 40% of seats. Equally, the Conservatives won 17% of the vote in Scotland but only 1 out of 59 seats in the region. This system systematically distorts voters’ choices, marginalizes smaller parties, and restricts entry to new ones. It thwarts the capacity of parliament to fulfill its crucial function of representing the full diversity of the nation’s political convictions and interests.

Members of the political class routinely warn that a more proportional voting system will mean unstable and ineffective government. They misrepresent continental European governments elected by proportional systems as precarious, hamstrung, and vulnerable to sectional minority demands. They cling to the dream of a single party—theirs—winning a monopoly of governmental power, even on a minority of votes. (Tony Blair got a clear parliamentary majority in 2005 on a mere 35% of the votes.) Waking up from this dream and embracing a politics which allows fair compromises to emerge out of dialogue between diverse communities of political conviction, will be a prerequisite for UK politicians to register for Bipartisanship 201.

—Jonathan Chaplin, Director
Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics (UK)