

A new government

WORKSHEET A

Following a general election on 6th May, Britain now has a new government. The Labour Party, which had been in power since 1997, with Tony Blair and then Gordon Brown as prime minister, has been replaced by a coalition between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats. The new prime minister (and, at 43, the youngest for almost 200 years) is the leader of the Conservatives, David Cameron.

This is the first time in 65 years that the Liberal Democrats (or Lib Dems for short) have formed part of a government, because either the Conservatives or Labour have been in power ever since the end of the Second World War in 1945.

The Conservatives have tended to favour the free market, privatization and low taxation, while Labour has generally expressed a commitment to greater social and economic equality, and favoured a larger role for government and for public spending. In the last ten or fifteen years, however, both parties have become more moderate and the distance between them has decreased. Ideologically, the Lib Dems have usually been regarded as standing somewhere near the middle of the political spectrum, probably slightly closer to Labour than to the Conservatives, but with distinctive positions of their own on some issues.

In the general election the Conservatives won 36% of the votes, Labour 29%, and the Lib Dems 23%, with the rest of the votes shared by smaller parties. Of the 650 seats in the British parliament, the Conservatives won 306, Labour 258, and the Lib Dems 57. For the first time since 1974, therefore, no party had a majority (i.e. more seats than all the other parties put together) – a situation known as a hung parliament.

Though they had the highest number of seats, the Conservatives knew they would almost certainly need the support of another party to form a government. On 11th May, after five days of intense negotiations, the Conservatives and the Lib Dems announced they would form a coalition.

Observant readers might already be wondering why the Lib Dems, with almost a quarter of the votes, got fewer than 10% of the seats. This is because, unlike many other democracies, Britain does not have a system of proportional representation (PR) in which the percentage of seats a party holds in parliament is equal, or at least very similar, to its share of the national vote.

In the British system the country is divided into 650 districts (called constituencies), each of which has one representative in parliament (Member of Parliament, or MP). A general election consists of 650 separate local elections, most of which are won by Conservative or Labour candidates. In many constituencies the Lib Dems come second, but that counts for nothing – only the winning party is represented in parliament.

Understandably, the Lib Dems argue that the electoral system is unfair. Many British people (not only Lib Dem supporters) agree. In the negotiations following the hung parliament, the Lib Dems demanded a change to a much more proportional system as a condition for entering a coalition. In the end they had to settle for a compromise: the Conservatives have agreed to a national referendum on a change to an ‘alternative vote’ system for future general elections, which would be more proportional than the present system but still a long way from full PR.

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WORKSHEET B

Exercise 1

Decide whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F), or if the text doesn't say (D).

1. Britain's new prime minister is the leader of the Labour Party.
2. The Conservatives won more seats than any other party in the general election.
3. Since 1945, Labour has been in power for longer than the Conservatives.
4. There were two Lib Dem governments between 1945 and the recent general election.
5. The Conservatives and the Lib Dems announced immediately after the general election that they would form a coalition.
6. David Cameron is younger than Tony Blair was when he became prime minister.
7. Ideologically, the Lib Dems have usually been regarded as standing somewhere between the Conservatives and Labour.
8. The majority of British people would like the electoral system to change to proportional representation.
9. Each British constituency sends either two or three MPs to parliament.
10. In the negotiations following the hung parliament, the Lib Dems said they wanted a different electoral system in future.
11. Every British constituency has approximately the same number of people.
12. From 1974 until this year, British general elections always resulted in the party that won the highest number of seats in parliament having more seats than all the other parties put together.

Exercise 2

Answer the questions below.

1. Who received the votes that did not go to the Conservatives, Labour or the Lib Dems?
2. In what way have both the Conservative and Labour parties changed?
3. What is a hung parliament?
4. Why do you think the Lib Dems argue that the British electoral system is unfair?
5. In what way does the referendum on an 'alternative vote' system represent a compromise for the Lib Dems?

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WORKSHEET C

Exercise 3

The text from Worksheet A has been copied below, but now contains 30 mistakes: can you find and correct them?

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This is the first time in 65 years that the Liberal Democrats (or Lib Dems short) have formed part of a government, because either the Conservatives or Labour have been in power ever since the end of the Second War in 1945.

The Conservatives have tented to favour the freedom market, privatization and small taxation, while Labour has generally expressed a commit to greater social and economic equality, and favoured a larger roll for government and for public spending. In the last ten or fifteen years, however, both parties have become more moderage and the distance between them has decreased. Logically, the Lib Dems have usually been regarded as standing somewhere near the middle of the political trum, probably slightly closer to Labour than to the Conservatives, but with instinct positions of their own on some issues.

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WORKSHEET D

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This is the first time in 65 years that the Liberal Democrats (or Lib Dems (3) **for** short) have formed part of a government, because either the Conservatives or Labour have been in power ever since the end of the Second (4) **World** War in 1945.

The Conservatives have (5) **tended** to favour the (6) **free** market, privatization and (7) **low** taxation, while Labour has generally expressed a (8) **commitment** to greater social and economic equality, and favoured a larger (9) **role** for government and for public spending. In the last ten or fifteen years, however, both parties have become more (10) **moderate** and the distance between them has decreased. (11) **Ideologically**, the Lib Dems have usually been regarded as standing somewhere near the middle of the political (12) **spectrum**, probably slightly closer to Labour than to the Conservatives, but with (13) **distinctive** positions of their own on some issues.

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(17) **Observant** readers might already be (18) **wondering** why the Lib Dems, with almost a quarter of the votes, got fewer than 10% of the seats. This is because, unlike many other (19) **democracies**, Britain does not have a system of proportional representation (PR) in which the percentage of seats a party holds in parliament is equal, or at least very similar, to its share of the national vote.

In the British system the country is (20) **divided** into 650 districts (called constituencies), each of which has one representative in parliament (Member of Parliament, or MP). A general election consists (21) **of** 650 separate local elections, most of which are won by Conservative or Labour candidates. In many constituencies the Lib Dems (22) **come** second, but that counts (23) **for** nothing – only the winning party is represented in parliament.

(24) **Understandably**, the Lib Dems argue that the (25) **electoral** system is unfair. Many British people (not only Lib Dem supporters) agree. In the negotiations following the hung parliament, the Lib Dems demanded a change to a much more proportional system as a (26) **condition** for entering a coalition. In the end they had to (27) **settle** for a (28) **compromise**: the Conservatives have agreed to a national (29) **referendum** on a change to an ‘alternative vote’ system for future general elections, which would be more proportional than the present system but still a long way from full (30) **PR**.