

LSE Government Department

The HotSeat Videocast

Professor Patrick Dunleavy

Professor Patrick Dunleavy discussing the possibility of a hung parliament in the forthcoming UK elections.

Dr Justin Gest: Well, it hasn't happened in 36 years and now all of Westminster seems to be dreading its return. No, not bellbottoms but a hung parliament. Hi, I'm Justin Gest. Welcome to the Government Department HotSeat. With us to discuss this very historic possibility is Professor Patrick Dunleavy. Thanks very much for being here, professor.

Professor Patrick Dunleavy: Thanks for inviting me.

Dr Justin Gest: Alright, let's get started. How exactly would a hung parliament affect the day-to-day politics of Westminster?

Professor Patrick Dunleavy: Well, Britain is in a kind of long-running, protracted transition from the old 2 and ½ party system, labour, tory plus the liberals, to essentially a multi-party system. In every region of the country now there are 5 or 6 parties that are really, strongly in contention. We're like a modern, standard European liberal democracy in terms of votes. But when you come to parliament itself, we're not like that at all. Most of these parties are not represented; BNP, UKIP, Greens. They've got representation elsewhere but not in Westminster. So the elites here are in a kind of denial, particularly the conservative and labour elites; they keep trying to pretend that there's a two body contest and that's what is creating the prospect of a hung parliament. Whereas I think we should see this instead as a very key transition moment in which we perhaps shift over decisively, and we all recognize that we've shifted over, to a kind of more standard, European coalition government model. And I'm hopeful that there will be a hung parliament because it reflects what the public really wants and that, in this hung parliament, we would see the first peacetime coalition, formal peacetime coalition for a real four-year period and that would be a big step forward.

Dr Justin Gest: Now, that said, the rhetoric coming from the parties and the candidates themselves has certainly been anti-hung parliament, certainly for obvious reasons, it wouldn't be in their interest. Do you think that resonates with the British people?

Professor Patrick Dunleavy: No. There was a recent poll just the other day which showed 44% of people think a hung parliament is a good idea and the remainder are divided; slightly less want a conservative government, slightly less want a labour government. So there is no reason to suppose that British voters don't know exactly what they're doing and I think the old rhetoric which says you've got to choose me and if you don't choose me you'll get him; people are rejecting that.

Dr Justin Gest: Now as it has been since 1974, since the last time there was a hung parliament, maybe you can remind everyone. How do you think this will affect the everyday lives of the British people in their civic life?

Professor Patrick Dunleavy: Well, I think the old thing that people used to worry about a lot was you have a hung parliament which affects the financial markets and the pound and you can't go abroad because your holidays have gotten vastly too expensive or if you're paying a mortgage

overseas and your bills change. I'm hoping that the markets have had enough time to account for these effects and I'm hoping also that the markets will have better political intelligence and recognize that coalition governments and hung parliaments are the pervasive European governments and this isn't something unusual. But we could expect, if the conservative and labour elites behave in ways that aren't very public interested and the conservatives for example, Nick Clegg was denouncing over the weekend, were going around stirring up anxiety about a hung parliament. And I agree with him, it is flatly against national interest to pretend that this is going to be some dreadful and difficult conjecture. It just means that political elites who don't want to negotiate with someone else will have to negotiate with someone else.

Dr Justin Gest: So now certainly there are some contingency planning amongst the parties. What do you think that entails; what is their perspective on how to deal with this and actually make laws and run the country?

Professor Patrick Dunleavy: Well, I think we've got to think about what the election result is. There are two possibilities. One is that David Cameron falls just short of an overall majority so it's a very shallow hung parliament and he's got various other people like Northern Ireland Unionists and he can perhaps rely on the fragmented inability of the other parties to cooperate in that situation. So we could have a minority government but it is hard to see such a government lasting for very long unless they have some sort of agreement with the Liberal Democrats. David Cameron has set up a strategy unit recently to just focus on the hung parliament thing but only very recently, only in the past few weeks when the tory poll lead has drifted away has he done that. The second possibility is we could have a deep hung parliament. Now, here, this means that no government, really, has enough to get by. They couldn't survive even a basic vote without some support or agreement of other parties to go along with them being in government. First thing here is does Gordon Brown stay in office or does he try to do a deal with the Liberal Democrats. He is not very well placed to do a deal because he has a poor reputation as a reasonable, fun-loving guy who you'd like to run a coalition government with and the Liberal Democrats have said they wouldn't do a deal if he stayed. And I think it would be unlikely in that situation so he might resign in that situation and then David Cameron would try to do a deal. His problem is he is close to the Liberal Democrats on some things like scrapping ID cards, they're probably not a million miles away in terms like running the budget. But they are a million miles away on things like House of Lords reform and changing the commons electoral system whereas Labour are not; they're very close to the Liberal Democrats on things like that and similarly, they're not very far apart on budget. In particular, the Liberal Democrats will be looking, if indeed it is a deep hung-parliament, will be looking for some cabinet posts. They've got three very well-known, very talented people; Nick Clegg, Chris Hoon and Vincent Cable, all of whom are much more competent than most of the existing cabinet so there is no problem about them joining a coalition in that sense but whether the conservatives will be able to do that or not is tricky and David Cameron is in a weak position vis-à-vis his right wing. So that would be a difficult thing and he may prefer to run a minority government for a few months and then call another general election and hope that by then the winds of change were with him. If you look at systems very similar to the British, at Canada for example. They have had a conservative government with a minority and they had a first general election and it was a hung parliament and the prime minister has twice tried to have another general election and get a majority and not got a majority so I think there's a very real chance that the strategy wont work for David Cameron. And it wont be like 1974 which was 35 years ago, times have changed enormously since then.

Dr Justin Gest: So what do you think it will require for Westminster to have this realization, this epiphany, that the two-party system is effectively obsolete in this country?

Professor Patrick Dunleavy: Well, one really great opportunity, one scenario that might work runs like this. It is a deep hung parliament, maybe David Cameron has got more seats than Labour, which seems quite likely, so Gordon Brown resigns and everybody in the Labour Party who doesn't like Gordon Brown, and there are plenty of candidates for that job, stabs him in the back, he then resigns as party leader. Labour gets it's act together on choosing a new leader, someone cuddly like Alan Johnson or David Miliband, someone who can negotiate very well and who would be a pleasant prime minister to work for and someone Liberal Democrats might trust. Meanwhile David Cameron goes away, starts his government and comes back with his budget at the Queen's speech, presents to parliament. By that time, there is a Lib-Lab coalition in place, they say no and he has to resign. He might go to the Queen and say give me another general election but if there were a Lib-Lab coalition in place the queen wouldn't need to say yes. And then you could have a four-year Lib-Lab government. Any scenario like that would very decisively herald this change that I think is going to happen in British politics sometime. If it doesn't happen in 2010 it will happen in 2015 or 2014. But that's the kind of change that you need to see.

Dr Justin Gest: Alright, that will do it. Professor Patrick Dunleavy you are off the HotSeat. Thanks for being with us. And thank you for tuning in to this month's edition of the HotSeat. Please do tune in to our website in the next few months as we examine other topics in the upcoming British campaign.