

# Preparing for another hung Parliament: Coalition or Minority Government?

**Professor Robert Hazell**  
**Rt Hon Peter Riddell**

The Constitution Unit  
School of Public Policy, UCL  
15 April 2015

# Preparing for another hung Parliament: Outline of this Talk

- Hung Parliament leads to negotiations between the political parties.
- How will 2015 differ from 2010.
- Conduct of negotiations.
- Who governs in the meantime?
- Will there be a second election?

## What is the international experience?

- In most democracies, single party majority government is the exception because of the electoral systems used.
- Fewer than a tenth of EU countries have a single party government.
- In Canada, which uses the same ‘first past the post’ system as Westminster, there were 10 minority governments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and three since 2000.
- New Zealand has seen 7 hung parliaments since introducing MMP 20 years ago: 4 with coalitions, and 3 with minority governments
- The House of Lords also shows how a parliamentary chamber under ‘no overall control’ can operate.

## In a hung parliament, does the leader of the largest party automatically become prime minister?

- No – this is a common misconception.
- The party leader who can command the ‘confidence’ of the House of Commons becomes Prime Minister.
- This could be the leader of the second largest party, if he is able to secure the support of smaller parties.

## Does the Queen play a role in determining who will form the new government?

- No. The political parties in the Commons must establish between themselves who can command confidence.
- Party negotiations will be supported by the civil service, in providing a location such as the Cabinet Office, if required; in answering factual questions, though not offering advice; and in note taking ( not taken up in 2010).
- The Queen will be kept informed of progress via contact between her Private Secretary, the Cabinet Secretary and the PM's Principal Private Secretary.
- The expectation is that the incumbent PM will remain in office until it is clear which party leader can command the confidence of the Commons and the PM will then advise the Queen whom to ask to form a government.

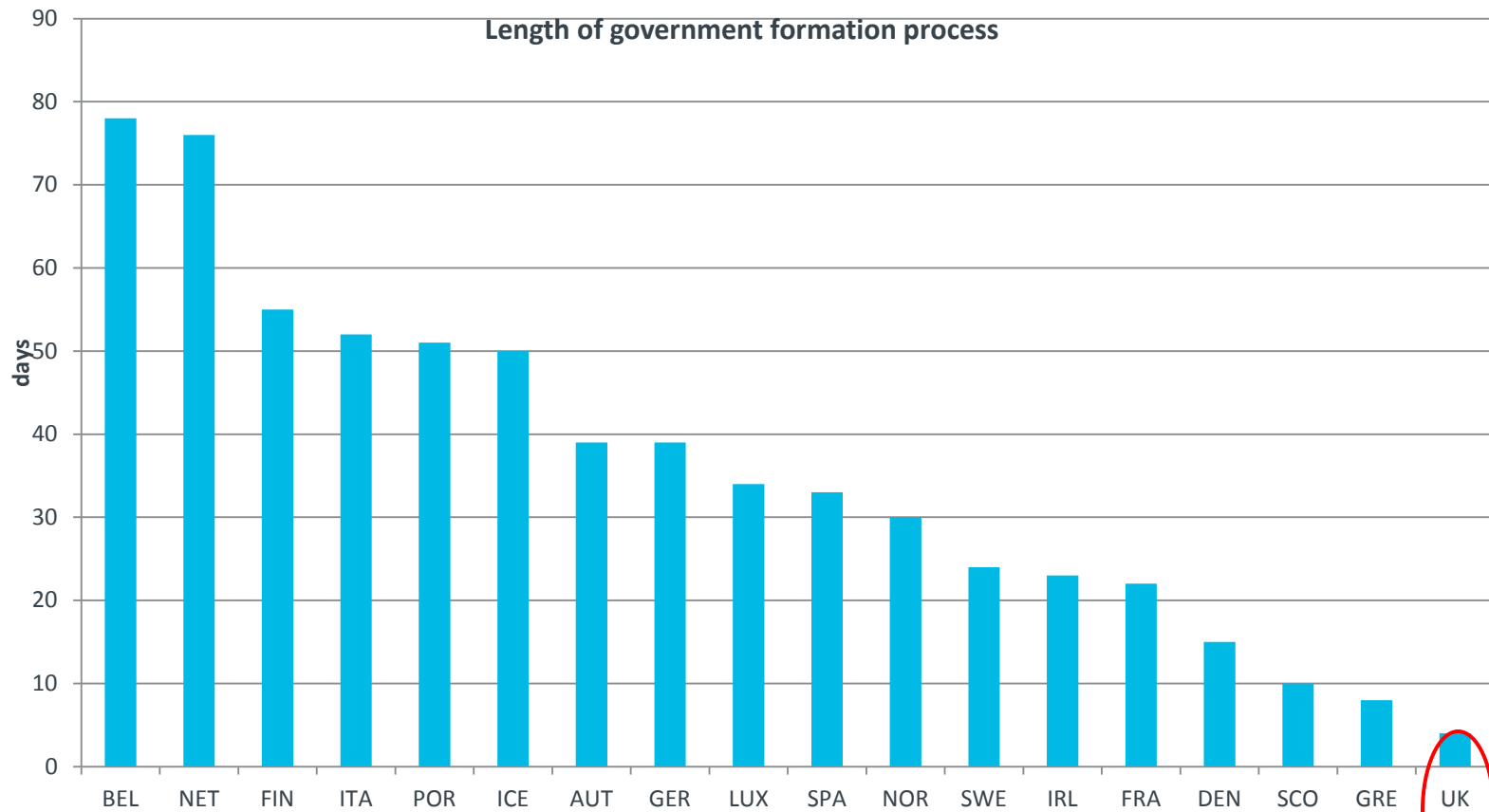
## How 2015 is likely to differ from 2010 (1/2).

- The outcome could be more complicated than 2010 with the possibility that no two parties can produce a majority in the Commons, and the possibility of a sizeable impact in terms of votes of UKIP, and in terms of MPs of the SNP.
- While novelty and momentum drove talks to an outcome within five days in 2010, now there will be more caution and closer media and political scrutiny. Experience of coalition will lead to demands for more detailed agreements on how any coalition or other arrangement would work.

## How 2015 is likely to differ from 2010 (2/2).

- Party leaderships will be under pressure from their own MPs to spell out the terms of any deal or understanding more explicitly.
- Conservative backbenchers have already insisted upon formal endorsement of any agreement, like the Liberal Democrats did in 2010.
- All these factors mean that negotiations may last longer than five days this May.

# The talks may take longer than five days



Source: de Winter, L. (1995), 'The role of parliament in government formation and resignation', in Doring, H. (ed), *Parliaments and Majority Rule in Western Europe*, p.118.

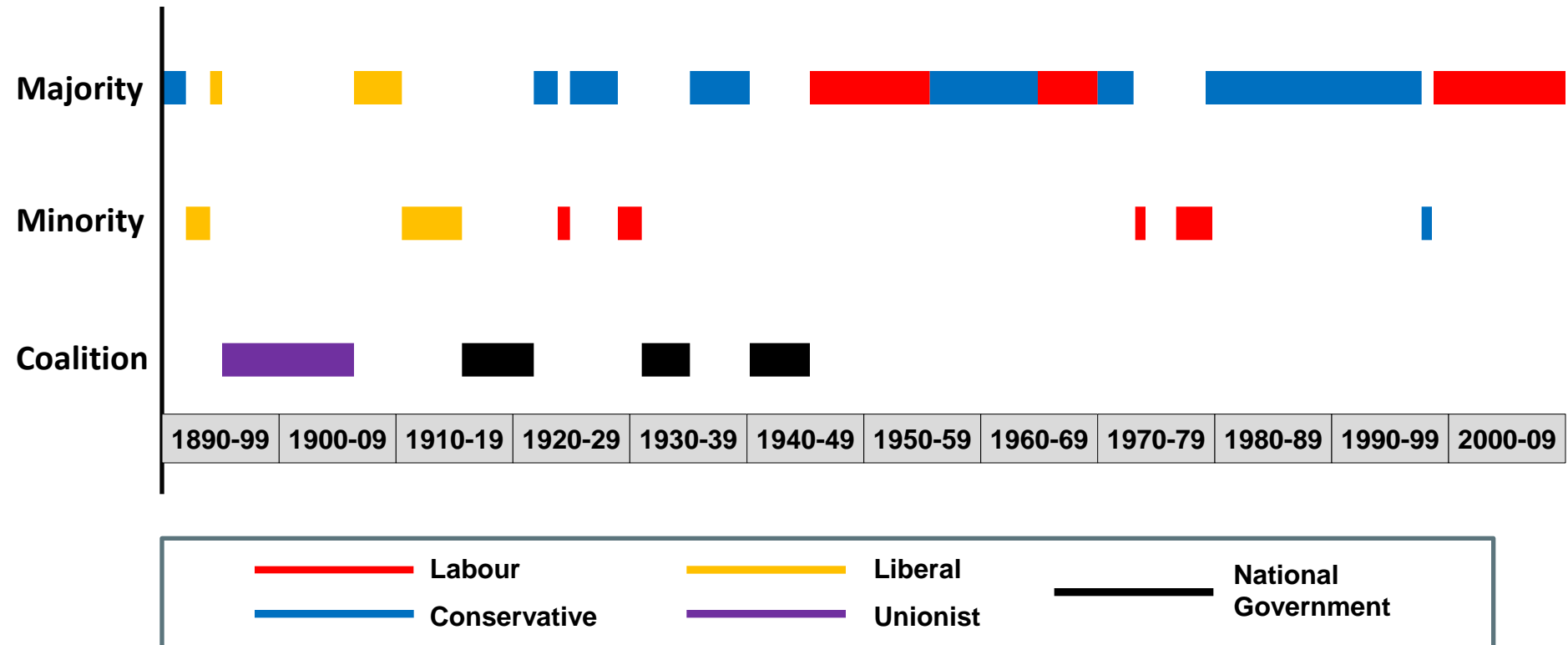
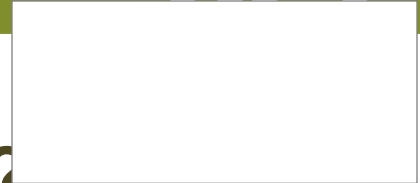
# Who governs in the meantime?

- Incumbent government and Prime Minister remains in office.
- Subject to the caretaker convention.
- No new policies, contracts, public appointments.
- If necessary, consult opposition parties (as Darling did over ECOFIN meeting in May 2010).

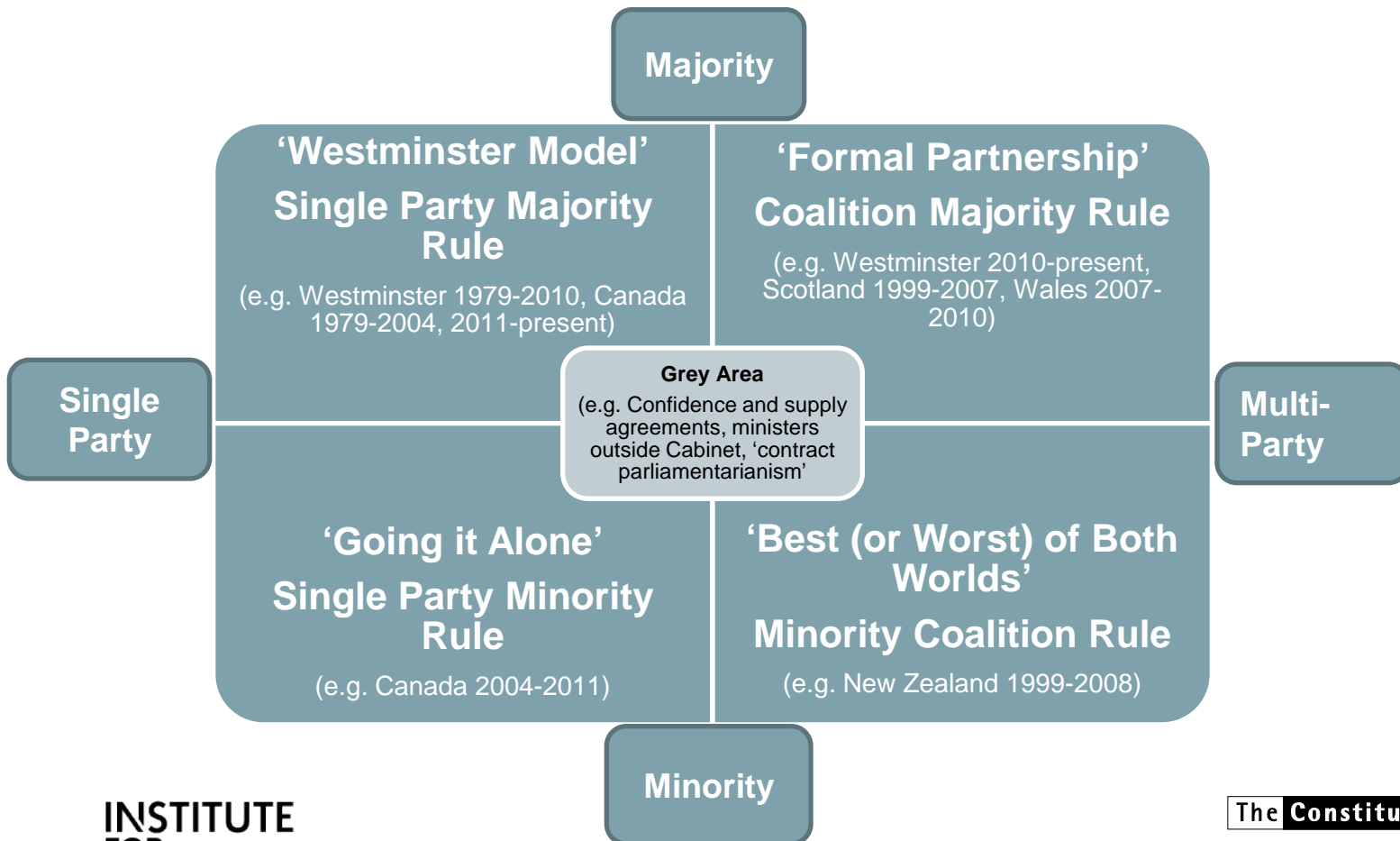
## UK experience of minority and coalition government

- 20 governments in 20<sup>th</sup> century at Westminster.
- 5 were coalitions, 5 were minority governments.
- 2010 coalition government first since 1945.
- Last experience of minority government Callaghan 1976-79, Major 1997.
- Differing experiences of minority government. Often seen as unstable, ineffective and undesirable
- But SNP minority government from 2007 until 2011 was stable, effective and retained the political initiative, winning an overall majority in 2011.

# A norm of single party majority rule?



# What different types of government can emerge from a hung parliament?



# Coalition or minority government: the range of options

- Full coalition, high degree of unity
- Coalition with agreements to disagree
- Coalition with weak collective responsibility
- Minority government with confidence and supply
- Minority government with less formal support
- Minority government with no support agreements

# Minority and coalition government: Key tradeoffs

- “Coalition (majority) rule makes life difficult within government but simple in parliament. Minority government is the other way around.”
- “Minority government is a challenge for the opposition as much as a challenge for government.”
- “The absence of a government majority does not imply the existence of an opposition majority.”
- “A hung parliament will lead to multi-party *governance*, even if single party *government* continues.”

## Is there likely to be a second election?

- An early election is less straightforward and harder to call because of the Fixed Term Parliaments Act.
- Parliament can only be dissolved by a two thirds majority in the Commons, or, following a vote of no confidence, if no alternative government is formed in 14 days.
- Very difficult for minority government to engineer successful no confidence motion.
- Growing political pressure to repeal FTPA, and belief amongst MPs that act could be overridden if there was a political stalemate.

# What if the government is defeated on the Queen's Speech?

- Conventional wisdom is that PM should resign
- But no hard constitutional rule says he must
- If PM does not resign, should Opposition table a formal FTPA no confidence motion?
- No party will want to trigger a second election
- PM or Opposition could table confidence motions in softer, non FTPA statutory form