

Myths, methods and minorities

New perspectives

[On 7 February 1978, Prime Minister James Callaghan] said that it was quite conceivable the outcome of the election would, as he had indicated to Mr Steel, be a close run thing with the Tories being the largest party without an overall majority [...] he would resign in those circumstances [...] in his judgement Mrs Thatcher would certainly try to remain as Prime Minister for as long as possible, even if only for a fortnight – he would do the same in her shoes.¹

This previously classified Labour Government minute from February 1978 records a candid discussion between Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan and his Principal Private Secretary Sir Kenneth Stowe. At a time when the Government had no overall majority, and a sudden election followed by another ‘hung parliament’ was considered to be a serious possibility, Callaghan was weighing up whether to resign immediately and allow Conservative Opposition leader Margaret Thatcher to form a minority government, or to attempt to stay in office himself by making further deals with other political parties. On 9 June 2017, the unexpected loss of the Conservative Government’s majority in a snap general election led senior Conservatives to weigh up in the early hours of the morning whether or not Prime Minister Theresa May should resign. As it became clearer that the Conservatives would be the largest party and not far short of a majority, the decision taken was that May should remain as leader for the immediate future, and the Government should attempt to remain in office by forming a minority government with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).²

Conservative plans for a coalition government, a snap general election, prime ministers considering whether to stay in office after an electoral or a referendum defeat, and the contemplation of both Labour and Conservative deals with parties including, among others, the Liberals, Scottish National Party (SNP) and Northern Ireland Unionist parties, are all aspects readily identifiable in British politics since 2010, particularly following the indecisive result in June 2017.³ However, plans for all these different scenarios, drawn up by political leaders and their advisers in the 1970s, were contained in previously classified files, released in the years up to and after 2015. These documents challenge the

mythology that dominates historical accounts, documentary films and television news programmes, in particular the contention that the minority governments of this era were weak, unthinking aberrations, alien to Britain's otherwise strong majoritarian political traditions.

Using these newly available sources, including Labour and Conservative strategy papers, this study provides fresh perspective on 1970s Britain and on the country's contemporary politics. The work examines different aspects that had to be confronted by political leaders, including, *inter alia*, forming governments, handling parliamentary defeats, electoral timing, negotiating with other parties and making post-electoral plans for a minority or coalition government. At one level, by bringing to light hidden narratives, it aims to demythologise the widespread academic and popular understanding of this era, showing that both main parties were far more strategically proactive than has previously been assumed. At another level, it demonstrates the British exceptionalism in minority government against an international backcloth, and provides a methodological foundation for examining contemporary challenges of new forms of government in democracies around the world.

The focus in this study is on events during the 1970s which have not been fully explored, but which were of great importance to contemporary actors in their day-to-day work in Parliament. While some of these events might seem comparatively trivial, they were of critical importance to the *modus operandi* of the Government and Opposition. This means that the study will not give as much attention to some of the issues which have been more widely debated, such as the postwar consensus (a more obvious manifestation of which was the aim of maintaining full employment through state intervention in the economy) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis in 1976.

Definitional issues: what is a minority government?

Minority government is a concept which has become more commonly articulated in response to the changing landscape of British politics in the twenty-first century. Indecisive opinion-polling led to significant talk of a 'hung parliament' and prospective minority government prior to the 2010 and 2015 general elections, and, following devolved elections in 2016, the administrations in both the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly were minority governments. The June 2017 Westminster election led to a Conservative Minority Government and has provoked much popular and scholarly commentary on the subject. However, the meaning of this term is often not clearly defined and has changed over time.

Minority government in its modern form occurs in a parliamentary democracy when a political party forms a government, but does not itself have a majority of the seats in the main legislative chamber. Such a government has to rely on

the cooperation or abstention of other parties for it successfully to enact or repeal legislation, and for its day-to-day survival in votes of confidence.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many, if not all, British administrations, could be regarded more loosely as 'minority' governments. Some did have 'majorities' of MPs in Parliament who aligned with them on particular issues, but such support was not automatically guaranteed. In cases where parliamentary approval was required for a Budget or for legislation, it often resulted in the assembly of ad hoc agreements with individuals or groups of MPs, or else relied on the absence of any unified opposition. A number of governments collapsed in cases when these arrangements failed and ministers were defeated in Parliament on a significant issue.⁴

A number of developments in the mid- to late nineteenth century increased the potential challenges for running governments based on these ad hoc groupings: extension of the voting franchise; the emergence of disciplined political parties; the increased responsibilities of administrations and their need to pass significant parliamentary legislation; and the fact that governments were decided by winning national elections rather than having their leaders selected by the monarch. The increasing 'norm' in Westminster since the Second World War (and even earlier) has been perceived to be that of a single-party majority governance, achieved by the victors at general elections.

The term 'minority government' has sometimes led to confusion when referring to British politics as a class-based conflict between the citizenry and a 'minority' elite in political institutions. Others have taken it as a reference to inequalities in the electoral system, and the ability of parties to win elections on a 'minority', for example, the Labour Government of 2005 and Conservative Government of 2015 winning a majority of parliamentary seats on less than 36.9 per cent of the total votes cast.⁵ The term 'minority government' has also been misapplied to presidential or semi-presidential systems, including that in France, in which a separately appointed executive, usually a president, does not hold a corresponding majority in the country's legislature. However, these executives are not totally dependent on their position in a parliament for the continuation of their office. While alternative terms such as 'minority Presidential Government' may serve as clarification, these are not currently widely used. For the purpose of this book, such a 'minority' state will be identified using the conventional label of 'cohabitation', in which a president and legislature are elected separately and controlled by opposing political parties.⁶

The term for describing the state of a parliament without a majority has been subject to some debate. The commonly accepted lexicon of 'hung parliament', first widely used in response to the 1970s experience of minority governments in Britain, has, particularly in advance of and following the 2010 election, been challenged by commentators because of its negative connotations; alternative terms advanced have included 'no overall control' and that of 'a balanced

parliament'.⁷ However, these labels are themselves indicative of a normative approach to politics, 'balanced' implying the absence of a single-party majority as more favourable. There is also potential confusion with the term 'balanced parliament' being used by commentators to describe constitutional concepts such as the 'balance of powers' between different parts of the legislature, referring to long-standing treatises on parliamentary democracy like Walter Bagehot's *The English Constitution*.⁸ The phrases 'minority government' or 'hung parliament', which have been common parlance since the 1970s, will primarily be used here as factual descriptors of the institution.

British tradition of minority government

What is this tradition?

It is our contention that these minority government experiences in the 1970s are indicative of a concept which we shall refer to hereafter as the 'British tradition of minority government'. This 'tradition' consists primarily of the following four aspects:

- 1) *Preference for minority government when there is no majority*: The main political parties in Britain have historically, when faced with no single-party parliamentary majority in the House of Commons, preferred to form minority governments rather than coalitions. The few exceptions to this are in wartime emergencies or, as in 1931 and 2010, when the country was faced with a perceived significant economic crisis. This is in contrast to the many minority administrations since the late nineteenth century. The Wilson and Callaghan Governments rejected potential plans for coalition or fresh elections, as we shall see in Chapters 3 and 8.
- 2) *Continued desire for majoritarian rule*: Minority governments in Britain, or main parties faced with the prospect of minority rule, will try, wherever possible, to return to single-party majority rule, rather than accepting political or institutional changes (such as electoral reform) which might lead to future minority or coalition governments. In the 1970s, governments and oppositions blocked a number of proposals that could have brought Britain more into line with minority or coalition-oriented European countries, discussed in greater detail in Chapters 4–6.
- 3) *Pragmatic adaptation*: Minority governments in Britain have been willing to innovate where necessary to ensure their own political survival and legislative success, while still endeavouring to fulfil their 'continued desire for majoritarian rule'. An example of this in the 1970s would be the negotiation of the limited interparty agreement in the form of the Lib–Lab Pact, often misidentified by commentators as 'confidence and supply'.

- 4) *Self-referencing*: Minority governments in Britain have adopted or justified strategies primarily through reference to British political history and the contemporary British political system, rather than by drawing inspiration from other countries with their own established traditions of minority government. Strategy papers from the 1970s provide strong indication of this self-referencing, even of administrations far removed from contemporary experience, such as Conservative Minority Governments from the nineteenth century.

Methodological issues: our model for rereading minority governments

Our work employs a new critical model for the study of minority governments, which, in the first instance, provides fresh scholarly insights into 1970s Britain, but which also may act as a foundation for the re-examination of other historic British minority administrations and those in other countries.

The first distinctive feature of this approach is that the study is structured around an interparty comparison of Minority Labour Governments with the Conservative Oppositions that they were facing. This framework goes beyond existing histories of minority governments, which are often non-comparative or else usually compare administrations from different time periods or from different countries. A parallel study of both parties in the same time period shows how the same historical national political situation conditioned the different responses through their different roles.

Arising from this comparison is the exploration of the Opposition's role in this process. There are as yet no studies concentrating on how opposition parties respond to minority government, the specific challenges faced by them often acting merely as a corollary to those faced by governments. Examination of this underappreciated area demonstrates how significant a problem minority government could be for an opposition party, in terms of parliamentary strategy and the need to avoid appearing irresponsible.

The third aspect of the model is that of combining a rereading of existing theoretical models with a comprehensive historical case study. Many works on minority government are primarily concerned either with revising theoretical models, illustrated through brief references to particular examples, or with non-theorised but nevertheless valuable discussion of the case history of those minority governments. By studying the life cycle of particular minority governments from their formation to dissolution, we are able to investigate areas that have been neglected in minority government theory, including electoral timing and planning for future minority or coalition administrations.

Although there have been a number of works on 1970s British history, these do not devote significant attention to several important areas that will be addressed here, including, amongst others, the 1974 Labour Government, the

parliamentary strategies of Callaghan and Thatcher, and Labour/Conservative pre-electoral plans for minority or coalition governments. Even detailed political histories that seek to address some of these areas, including seminal works such as David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh's consideration of the 1974 Government in *The British General Election of October 1974*, were written without access to classified sources.⁹ The few works that consider the history of the 1970s in the context of British minority government, including Butler's *Dilemmas of a Hung Parliament* and the relevant chapter of Peter Hennessy's *Distilling the Frenzy*, are necessarily constrained by their particular overarching focus, concentrating on constitutional rather than political aspects, and only able to devote limited space to detailed consideration of any one period.¹⁰

The essays contained in Anthony Seldon and Kevin Hickson's *New Labour, Old Labour*, published on the thirtieth anniversary of Wilson's return to office in 1974, offer a particularly thorough reappraisal of the Wilson and Callaghan Governments, from policies they enacted to their minority position in Parliament. However, this revisionist work, by the editors' own admission, was intended to provide a state of knowledge prior to release of the secret government and opposition documents that will form the basis of this study.¹¹

An important rereading of politics during the 1970s, which draws upon both declassified internal party sources and scholarship, may be found in Andrew Thorpe's *A History of the Labour Party*.¹² However, given the overarching nature of the work, which takes in the entire history of the Labour Party, there is, understandably, not scope within a single chapter to consider the Wilson and Callaghan Governments' parliamentary situation in any significant detail.

More popular histories similarly do not focus on the minority status of these governments. For example, Dominic Sandbrook's *Seasons in the Sun*, while providing some very interesting insights through declassified sources, and acting as a foundation for part of his BBC documentary series *The 1970s*, comments more on the broader socioeconomic and global background of life in Britain during the period.¹³

The international historical and political science corpus of works considering minority government lacks any serious examination of Britain. One of the best indications of this is Kaare Strøm's seminal work *Minority Government and Majority Rule*, in which Wilson's 1974 Minority Labour Government is cited as the principal introductory example, but is given no more consideration throughout the entire book. The only references to British politics in further chapters of the work consist of comments on the majoritarian political culture of Westminster, and the likelihood that this would produce minority as opposed to coalition governments.¹⁴ Thomas Bergman's 1993 work similarly emphasises that Britain and Canada are exceptions to these political science models, as both countries have had fewer minority administrations than other Western Hemisphere countries.¹⁵

In the run-up to the British general election of 2010, when a hung parliament seemed the most likely outcome, a number of publications sought to address the potential problems of minority government.¹⁶ These studies cited a range of different historical examples of hung parliaments, both from Britain and abroad, with notable contributions being the collaborative works of *No Overall Control*, edited by Alex Brazier and Susanna Kalitowski, on behalf of the Hansard Society, and *Making Minority Government Work*, edited by Roger Hazell and Akash Paun, who were, at the time, both serving at University College London's Constitution Unit.¹⁷ However, the major concern in these works was to inform and influence decision-makers in the event of no party gaining a majority in 2010 and subsequent elections, rather than to provide a more in-depth historical analysis of the experience, political approach or strategy of any past British minority government, which will be the focus in this book.

International minority government theory

As highlighted, the study of minority governments around the world has, comparatively speaking, received less attention from historians and political scientists as opposed to that afforded to coalitions or single-party majority governments. It is only since the beginning of the twenty-first century that this field has begun to provoke greater scholarly interest in countries facing fresh experiences with minority administrations, including pioneering studies on minority governments in Spain and Australia that seek to redefine our understanding of the field as a whole.¹⁸

Theoretical appraisals from the 1950s onwards, rather than studying minority government as a phenomenon in itself, examined such governments as 'deviant cases' of unfulfilled potential coalitions. Later works since the 1970s have sought to redress this imbalance, looking at minority administrations as the product of rational actors and not inherently weaker than other forms of democratic government. The most detailed studies of minority government have been produced in countries with relatively commonplace experiences of such administrations, including, amongst others, Denmark and Canada. While there are similarities between minority governments in different countries, there are also significant variations and distinct national political cultures and institutions. Increased occurrences of minority governments around the world after the 2008 financial crisis have promoted greater scholarly interest. However, as indicated, the UK has been curiously neglected. Minority governments in Britain have received even less consideration in their own right than their counterparts in other countries, whether by scholars of political history or those working in the political science aspects of minority government.¹⁹

By looking at some of the developments in minority government theory, it is possible to glimpse a particularly confusing picture. Orthodox theories have

never fully been discredited, while revisionist and other subsequent theoretical considerations often provide only unsteady foundations that continue to be much contested by scholars. While it would be impractical to consider all the different aspects of this theoretical development, a brief overview will chart something of the debates, as well as highlighting aspects that will be relevant for consideration of the Wilson and Callaghan Governments and their Conservative opponents in subsequent chapters.

Early theorised approaches used game-theory models to analyse political leaders as rational actors, including the pioneering work of William Riker in the 1950s, *The Theory of Political Coalitions*, which established important foundations for coalition theory and what would become the orthodox view of minority governments.²⁰ This orthodoxy, developed in subsequent studies, characterised minority governments in an almost completely negative light, in effect representing ‘failed’ coalitions. They are seen as rare deviations from the ‘norm’ of majority governments, arising from crises, fractionalisation of existing party systems, increased political polarisation or unresolvable conflicts between parties and as inherently weak and short-lived. Furthermore, such political actors, it is argued, are primarily driven to seek office rather than other goals such as enactment of policies, while, as with coalition formation more generally, any attempts to construct coalitions will always favour the smallest number of MPs/parties needed to get a majority (or ‘minimal-winning coalition’). While ‘minimal winning’ has been much criticised or modified, not least to include the general preference for coalitions of ideologically similar parties, it continues to act as a powerful starting point for explaining the political behaviour of what are still perceived to be ‘rational actors’.

Revisionist scholarship, led by Strøm’s articles in the 1980s and his seminal work *Minority Government and Majority Rule*, has largely accepted the game-theory approach, but challenged the cited causes and conclusions about minority governments, suggesting that: such governments are far more common across different European countries; they may be the product of rational behaviour by political actors; they are not necessarily weaker or more short-lived than majority or coalition governments; and parties may pursue alternative goals to seeking office – including maximising votes or enactment of certain policies.²¹

Following Strøm’s work, scholars have reinterpreted the previously listed causes of minority government, as well as looking to other factors that may influence the government-formation process, a particularly important debate being over the effect of institutions on constraining or facilitating particular types of government formation. Some of these ideas were widely accepted, including the notion that minority governments were more likely to form in cases where this is a ‘negative’ framing of parliamentary rules, supposedly the case in Britain; that is, a new government did not have to win a parliamentary vote to establish

itself, and could exist if tolerated by opposition parties. Even this idea has not gone unchallenged, however – an alternative suggestion by Lanny Martin and Randolph Stevenson in 2010 being that the probability of a minority government forming does not depend on the presence or absence of a formal investiture rule, based upon a new data sample of different governments.²² Furthermore, this study, with its focus on highlighting the importance of parties working together in the past as a guide to future cooperation, also serves to reflect the employment of other non-institutional factors, including decision-making by individual party leaders and local political history.

Uncertainty over what constitutes a minority government in practice has led to theorists debating the boundaries between minority and majority governments, and how these governments should be defined. Taylor and Laver, amongst others,²³ have argued that minority governments which ‘almost’ pass the majority threshold are more likely to be able to stay in power by relying on the votes of one or two parliamentarians from other parties, and even, in some cases, to function similarly to a majority government. There have been a number of developments since the 1980s aiming to understand the greater complexity of political actors that shape minority government and coalition formation. Thomas Bergman’s model of ‘multiple goals in multiple arenas’, for example, suggests that different branches of the same party may seek different outcomes at a local or national level in terms of forming a minority or coalition government.²⁴

Studies have also sought further to challenge well-established notions that would, on the face of it, appear to be long-held self-evident truths of minority government, such as their desirability. One such example may be seen in Yannick Dufresne and Neil Nevitte’s study of public perceptions of minority government in Canada, suggesting that, contrary to ‘conventional wisdom’, ‘substantial proportions of the Canadian public actually prefer minority rather than majority governments’. Undoubtedly this is an area of investigation which may well be much explored and debated by scholars in the years ahead.²⁵

Some theoretical observations of minority government behaviour also would initially appear rather paradoxical, such as those of Christoffer Green-Pedersen; he argues that particularly contentious legislation in 1980s Denmark, including significant welfare reform and tax changes, could only be passed as a result of a minority rather than majority government, given the need for elements in different parties to cooperate with one another against legislators within their own parties and external pressure groups who would have otherwise blocked the measures.²⁶ Regardless of which perspective is adopted, the absence of a guaranteed legislative majority undoubtedly presents the most significant set of strategic challenges which the leadership of a minority government has to overcome on a day-to-day basis.

Demythologising minority government

It is sometimes difficult to identify the distinct ‘myths’ that have been formed around the 1970s minority governments. Reflection on this period through the prism of subsequent events has dominated the popular discourse so much that these myths are not always clearly articulated.

Labour’s eighteen years in opposition after being defeated in 1979 reinforced notions of failure and also conditioned the extra-parliamentary focus of Wilson and Callaghan’s legacy. The Thatcher Governments, facing bitter conflicts against trade union power in the 1980s, sought to buttress their position through raising the spectre of their predecessors’ failures, particularly in the ‘Winter of Discontent’. Politicians and activists on the left wing of Labour, and those who later supported the modernising agenda of ‘New Labour’, also frequently criticised their political forebears, emphasising policy failures to add intellectual credence to their own political agendas to reshape the party, and to reposition it ideologically further to the left or right.²⁷

One of the best examples of how these perceptions have been shaped may be seen in the BBC news tribute to Callaghan after his death in 2005, prepared and narrated by Political Editor Andrew Marr, using archival footage.²⁸ The opening lines of the report immediately framed his time in office as part of these greater meta-narratives: ‘Jim Callaghan was Old Labour’s last Prime Minister, and the only man to have held all four Great Offices of State. He was also the man toppled after the “Winter of Discontent”, by the very trade unions he had courted all his life.’ Some of the most dominant and stark footage in the report consisted of picket lines and strikes, or of Callaghan being interviewed about being unable to recover from the adverse economic situation. The closing bucolic image of the former Prime Minister retiring to his farm, surrounded by sheep, was a poignant metaphor of the loss of political stature. While Callaghan was naturally the focus of such a report, Parliament was barely even mentioned, with no reference to Callaghan not having a majority or the loss of votes which eventually brought down the Government.

In part, the ‘myths’ of these news reports and documentaries, concentrating on extra-parliamentary events, have been conditioned by the availability of film material. Coverage of prime ministers from the 1990s onwards has often included clips of significant events from the House of Commons, such as Geoffrey Howe’s resignation speech which helped to bring down Thatcher, or David Cameron’s charge of ‘he was the future once’ to Tony Blair at Prime Minister’s Questions in 2005. This footage does not exist for the Wilson and Callaghan years. Television recording of the House of Commons did not begin until November 1989, and radio coverage had only begun sporadically from 1975. As such, the importance of events that were filmed outside Parliament during this earlier period are all the more magnified in television media coverage, and in the documentaries and programmes on the period.²⁹

Efforts to cover parliamentary events in greater detail have been limited and have relied on fresh interviews with contemporary participants.³⁰ However, even these interviews, along with the preponderance of biographies or personal reflections in the form of political diaries and memoirs, do not have an overall specific focus on minority government, principally aiming to put into the public domain the interviewee's/author's recollections of the events, with the view sometimes being to revise popular perceptions of the author or that of her or his biographical subject.³¹

One of the single greatest myths arising from these sources of coverage is that outside events superseded those in Parliament, the main parties in the 1970s concentrating more on policy and external socioeconomic pressures, and not thinking strategically about the state of minority government beyond merely reacting to events on a day-to-day basis. Chapter 2 will question this myth and will show that the strategy-making processes in the Labour and the Conservative Parties were geared towards minority government. While political 'strategies' pursued by parties, internal conflicts over strategy or approaches to individual pieces of legislation have received significant consideration, studies have not often examined the underlying strategy-making processes in detail, along with the relative importance of the particular bodies and individuals involved.³²

The first section will lay the foundation for subsequent chapters by analysing these strategy-making processes, demonstrating how groups that have been traditionally ignored were, in fact, both influenced by, and influential in, internal discussions. Papers from Conservative leader Edward Heath's 'Party Strategy Group', for example, indicate that its creation in 1974 was primarily a response to the then recently formed Wilson Minority Government. The remit of this group included the study of minority government and different strategies, including considering plans to establish a formal Conservative–Liberal electoral pact. Although significant work was done to promote this latter possibility, the disbanding of the group for largely political reasons in 1975 temporarily curtailed further planning in this area.³³

While no new separate units were created thereafter during the 1970s solely to deal with minority government, papers and correspondence from the existing government and opposition groups demonstrate that their procedures for strategy formation were often modified, and that some new institutions were created to consider different aspects relating to minority government, such as periodic meetings between Callaghan and all the Government whips.

The chapter will also highlight the role of individuals in the different parties who advised the party leadership on minority government, whether leaders of research departments for the Government and Opposition, such as Bernard Donoghue or Chris Patten, or those who served in other important roles, including, among others, Michael Foot, Tom McNally, David Lipsey, Keith Joseph and Lord Thorneycroft.

It has often been assumed that the formation of the Wilson and Callaghan Minority Governments were inevitable, histories mainly concentrating on changes in personnel and policy. Chapter 3 will challenge this long-standing myth by examining the prospect of alternative possibilities that were considered but not adopted, including early elections or interparty coalitions.

The effects of the 1975 European referendum will also be examined in this and subsequent chapters as part of the internal strategic dialogue. While conducted under a majority government, the referendum prompted further planning related to minority and coalition administrations, including the Conservatives' active consideration of forming a national unity government as a response to Labour's internal difficulties in the aftermath of the result.

A particular focus of existing studies and televised histories is that of extra-parliamentary events during this period, such as the IMF crisis.³⁴ Wilson's experience of taking office in 1974 without a majority is often largely ignored, being subsumed within discussion of his other administrations, or tied more into the defeat of the Heath Government and its failure to form a coalition. When considering Callaghan, his accession to the premiership is normally recorded in a few lines, noting the transition, emphasising his personal qualities, his choice of personnel and/or the tasks and limitations faced by his new administration.³⁵ While Peter Hennessy's *Distilling the Frenzy*, provides some interesting historico-political insights into changes in the processes of forming British minority governments since the 1970s, the constitutional scope of this work limits any detailed exploration of parliamentary strategy.³⁶

The chapter will begin by considering alternatives to Labour Minority Governments that were explored by contemporary policymakers from both parties. One such alternative, for example, may be seen in the prime ministerial minutes, which record the previously unrecognised complexity of the Heath Government's failed efforts to remain in office during March 1974, examining the possibility of forming a Conservative Minority Government through deals with other parties, including the SNP.³⁷ Another example includes internal correspondence and discussions between Callaghan and Cabinet ministers following his appointment as Prime Minister, showing that the Government was considering a formal interparty deal with the Northern Ireland Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in order to retain a parliamentary majority.³⁸

The final part of the chapter will consider the often overlooked role of the Conservative Opposition, and their internal debates on how to respond to the 'new' state of minority government. Different options were considered, including calls for the potential restructuring of parliamentary committees and how relations were conducted between the Government and Opposition. The internal dialogue shows that, in spite of changes in the leadership of the party, the opposition approach to Callaghan linked back to precedents and discussions initiated in response to Wilson's Government.

Parliamentary defeats are often cited as evidence of the weakness of governments, even more so those without a majority. Chapter 4 will question the myths of 1970s minority governments' inability to pass significant legislation without the cooperation of opposition parties. In addition, it will challenge the contrary myth, that of the powerlessness of the Opposition to engineer parliamentary defeats.³⁹ These reassessments will look at the evolution of Labour and Conservative political management of parliamentary defeats, including more radical options that were considered to pass parliamentary bills, such as pre-legislative referenda. There is no single work concentrating on either Wilson or Callaghan's relations with Parliament. Philip Norton's valuable examination of MP rebellions during the 1970s addresses parliamentary relations more from a statistical than strategic perspective.⁴⁰

The first part of this chapter will consider often overlooked early conflicts for both administrations. Internal party files show the importance of these events in establishing the legislative *modus operandi* for the new minority governments. Confrontations considered will include the Wilson Government's Queen's Speech in 1974 and the Callaghan Government's dispute over the Aircraft and Shipbuilding Bill in 1976. The internal strategic dialogues that will be explored here include some of the proposed methods for circumventing the state of minority government, such as assigning seats to committees considering legislation on the basis of a bill's majority, rather than on the political composition of Parliament. The Opposition's withdrawal from cooperation with the Government during a legislative dispute in 1976 led to internal Conservative debates which questioned how long this obstruction of parliamentary business could be maintained, and whether this reactive measure could be employed as a deliberate future tactic.

The second part of this chapter will consider in greater depth the Government's proposed but often unimplemented procedural and institutional reforms for dealing with minority government. Some of these potential innovations included reform of the House of Lords, the introduction of proxy or electronic voting in the Commons and the use of pre-legislative UK-wide referenda to enable passage of the Devolution Bill in 1976–77.

Thereafter, the chapter will look at other radical approaches which were considered, such as both governments actively contemplating or seeking their own defeat in Parliament on certain issues. The first defeat of the Wilson Minority Administration, for example, on the issue of tax and trade union funding, was actually celebrated by government MPs and seen by Labour's strategy-makers as an important step towards any future election campaign.

The Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition Government at Westminster in 2010–15 represented a historic first in postwar British politics, but its antecedents were a very different kind of interparty agreement – the Pact between the Liberals and Labour during the 1970s. Chapter 5 will explore the myths surrounding the inevitability and form of this 1977–78 Lib–Lab Pact, and how both

main parties actively considered other forms of formal interparty cooperation during this period.

As of 2017, only three books have been published which focus solely on the Pact, one of which was written prior to the 1979 election, while another was authored by the Liberal leader, David Steel, an architect of and major participant in the Pact.⁴¹ A long overdue and particularly scholarly contribution has been Jonathan Kirkup's 2016 book, although, given his specialism, the focus of the work is, understandably, on the Liberals, rather than on the Labour and Conservative strategies that we shall be examining.⁴² Mark Oaten's 2007 work *Coalition* revisits and rereads the Lib-Lab Pact using papers declassified in 2006–7, but, as an overarching study of the phenomenon of 'Coalition', it devotes limited space to the 1970s.⁴³

A particular focus of this chapter will be the often overlooked renegotiation of the Pact, showing the alternative options that were explored by the Government. Declassified records that were originally not supposed to be retained provide especially interesting insights into the internal debates, including a record of a special Strategy Cabinet at Chequers in the summer of 1977. Other papers provide a further basis for demythologising the operation and end of the Pact. Suggestions of any official record of Callaghan and Steel's meetings were firmly denied at the time. However, such records were, in fact, kept, providing a particularly useful source and containing sometimes very open and detailed discussions between the two leaders about aspects of minority government that do not appear in their autobiographical accounts or television interviews.

While it has often been assumed that the Opposition were staunchly against coalitions and pacts, the latter part of this chapter examines the Conservatives' response to the Pact and their exploration of potential interparty deals during the Callaghan Government.

The emphasis on the Pact has often been relegated to a few lines or soundbites about other interparty initiatives during this period. The only detailed considerations have been reserved for the most important instances, such as the no confidence vote in 1979, which will be examined in Chapter 9. Chapter 6 will explore the myths concerning the avoidance of informal interparty cooperation during the Pact, and the belief that any informal agreements were the exclusive purview of the Government. This chapter will include consideration of how the Government and Opposition responded to the prospect of informal cooperation with the Liberals, Scottish and Welsh Nationalist Parties, and Unionist and Republican Parties from Northern Ireland.⁴⁴

This chapter will focus particularly on hitherto unrecognised internal debates on interparty cooperation: how such interactions should be conducted; the extent to which the main parties were willing to compromise; and day-to-day legislative battles that were important but which are usually neglected in favour of headline-grabbing bills. These discussions included the Government's consideration of alternative ad hoc legislative deals with the Ulster Unionists and

SNP during the Pact, at times when Liberal cooperation was not considered to be forthcoming. These strategic dialogues also reveal the Government's active avoidance of approaches employed by minority governments overseas, such as the co-authoring of legislation by different parties and official sponsoring of bills by individual MPs.

The few works that consider these smaller parties in their own right during this period have not, by the nature of their holistic approach and source availability, been able to give as much consideration to such parties' strategies pertaining to minority government. While evidence of parliamentary strategies within these smaller parties is often limited or inaccessible, it has been possible to locate some of this material through alternative channels. One such example has been that of internal strategy papers contained in the archives of Enoch Powell, Ulster Unionist MP, not subject to the fifty-year rule of the Ulster Unionist Party's (UUP's) archives. This consideration of the parliamentary contribution of these newer parties to minority government, at a time when they first gained significant levels of representation in Westminster during the 1970s, is particularly relevant as a foundation for further studies of such parties in their own right through the optics of parliamentary affairs and minority government.⁴⁵

The latter section of this chapter will re-examine the Opposition's approach to informal interparty cooperation, including the greater complexity of their relations with the Liberals, and efforts to gain support from smaller parties including the UUP.

In addition to studying the meetings and correspondence involving the party leaders, this chapter will incorporate papers from the party organisations, including from Labour's National Executive Committee (NEC), which will highlight the existence, but also significant limitations, of wider cross-party cooperation during this period.

Prime Minister Theresa May's shock announcement in April 2017 of a general election provides a clear example of the continued, and often overlooked, importance of electoral timing. Electoral timing could be of even greater significance for minority governments. Chapter 7 will address several of the most persistent myths about 1970s elections: that there was a fixed binary choice in the electoral timing for the different governments; that the actual choice of an election date was inevitable; and that these dates were the product of political gambling, rather than serious and detailed strategic consideration. The myth that the Opposition was purely a reactive observer to this process of timing will also be looked at in detail. This chapter seeks, in addition, to address the lack of detailed consideration of electoral timing as a subject in its own right, as it is normally confined to brief discussions within overarching political histories or books on election campaigns. An exception to this omission is Alastair Smith's *Election Timing*, although this is primarily an overarching comparative political science work, rather than a detailed historical case study.⁴⁶

As a direct result of the state of minority government, both main parties in 1970s Britain actually conducted extensive planning for an election being called across a range of different dates. The 1974 Wilson Government considered whether to call a general election within weeks of taking office in March, alternative dates to the actual October 1974 poll ranging from June 1974 through to early 1975. Rather than the autumn 1978/spring 1979 dichotomy that is usually presented by historians and political analysts for the Callaghan Government, a general election was considered at various points during 1976, 1977, 1978 and 1979.⁴⁷

The chapter will go on to discuss the considerable efforts of government and opposition strategy-makers to forecast possible election dates, as well as prepare for contingencies that took into account a number of different factors. Internal papers, including briefings prepared for Wilson and Callaghan, records of meetings and correspondence between advisers, allow for a re-examination of the strategic motivations behind the Government's timing. Callaghan's consultations were far more wide-ranging than is evident in his autobiography, and the state of minority government was even more central to the decision over timing than has previously been recognised. These papers also reveal an evolving strategic dialogue, including Callaghan's order for the preparation of contingency plans in the event of an unexpected major legislative defeat and forced election.⁴⁸

The final section will discuss Conservative efforts to anticipate a possible election date, including such sources as calendars, minutes of meetings and hypothetical wargames. Forecasting sometimes compelled strategy-makers to question the very basis of their assumptions and rationality of their opponents. At one point, leading Conservative Research Department (CRD) members trying to understand the Government's decisions over electoral timing wondered if Callaghan was not seeking electoral victory, but rather another minority government or coalition.

The uncertainty of the result in the 2015 election, following the existing coalition government prompted much speculation and interest in what plans the different parties had for post-electoral government formation. Their 1970s counterparts were similarly engaged in such preparations, albeit in some cases more embryonic. Chapter 8 will deal with the myth that Labour and Conservative post-electoral plans were only geared towards outright victory. This section will examine Labour's, and especially the Conservatives', secret plans for future minority or coalition governments.

Even those studies which recognise contemporary fears of another hung parliament do not consider internal Labour and Conservative planning for future minority or coalition governments.⁴⁹ Those few works which have examined the history of coalition and national unity governments in Britain were either written prior to the release of the internal documents, or else do not use them to

discuss this pre-electoral planning.⁵⁰ Some of these sources include the record of Callaghan's personal reflections on post-electoral strategy following one of his meetings with Steel in 1978, and papers from his political advisers setting out starting points for how to approach prospective post-electoral coalition negotiations.

The Conservatives' campaign for a government of national unity in October 1974 has often been regarded as merely an electoral tactic. However, internal debates over the shape of any such prospective coalition show that great attention was given to this proposal. Papers detailing the Opposition's approach to an indecisive 1978–79 election show even more evidence than the Government of plans for coalition. Members of the CRD were tasked to produce at least three different plans in 1977–78 concerning the possibilities of minority and coalition government following a general election. Although Thatcher disliked public admission of anything other than outright victory, she facilitated internal discussion of these papers by a special committee that she had established, chaired by her close ally Keith Joseph, to examine plans for a future Conservative Government. These blueprints, with titles such as 'The Hung Parliament Contingency', were part of an internal opposition strategic dialogue, containing such insights as an exploration of the conditions under which the Conservatives would seek to form a minority government or coalition following an election. These papers also examined more radical possibilities, including the unthinkable prospect of the Conservatives making a coalition deal with the SNP, or even a grand coalition with Labour.

Many governments in Britain and abroad, both minority and majority, have been brought down by votes of no confidence, although the absence of a majority increases this possibility significantly. The penultimate chapter will re-examine three myths regarding the demise of the Callaghan Government, following defeat in a no confidence vote on 28 March 1979: that the calling of the no confidence vote was a forgone conclusion; that the result of this no confidence vote was inevitable; and that the Government's defeat in a no confidence vote was detrimental to its subsequent electoral performance. The chapter will also particularly consider the effect of a minority government on both major parties, in terms of learning from their experience over the previous five years, in relation to the situation that they were facing in March 1979 itself and their concerns regarding the prospect of future minority/coalition administrations.

When considering the end of the 1970s governments, the focus has often been on the major extra-parliamentary events faced by Heath, Wilson and Callaghan, from the 'Three-Day Week' and European referendum, to the IMF crisis and the 'Winter of Discontent', rather than on the parliamentary strategies and struggles of minority government.⁵¹ Even works challenging some of the myths surrounding the 'Winter of Discontent' understandably focus less on the parliamentary and minority government optic.⁵²

The first part of this chapter considers the Government's approach to the failure of the referenda on devolution, often regarded as the trigger for the no confidence vote. Cabinet discussions and internal correspondence show that there was a more strategic dimension. This discussion will also include analysis of Callaghan's meeting with all the Government whips in March 1979, prior to the SNP issuing a no confidence vote. The meeting included a particularly extensive discussion, giving greater insight not only into Callaghan's mindset regarding efforts to avoid a prospective confidence vote, but also the different possible strategies that were being considered by the whips and the assumptions or justifications underpinning their reasoning.

The second part of the chapter, which considers the inevitability of government defeat in the confidence vote after it was issued, re-examines some of the notable efforts to make deals with smaller parties. While studies have concentrated on the Government, this analysis will look at how both main parties approached the no confidence vote, the internal strategic dialogues revealing some assumptions and views that we might find surprising. One example may be seen in the Cabinet's concern to avoid a quick repeal of the Wales Act on devolution 'as this would drive Plaid Cymru into supporting the Conservative Party'.⁵³

Planning for interparty deals, even where these were not implemented, such as building a Northern Ireland gas pipeline to ensure Ulster Unionist support, also provides new perspectives on strategic approaches to the no confidence vote. While both Labour and the Conservatives publicly refuted the gas pipeline plan, the Conservatives did examine the political and financial implications of this measure, as well as their possible responses if the Government ended up supporting it.

The third part of the chapter will look at the effects of the no confidence defeat, arguing that, contrary to the experience of some minority governments elsewhere, while the defeat may have been discouraging for Labour MPs, in practice, its effect on the Government's poll rating and the party's electoral campaign was not significant.

The final chapter will consider how these different myths of 1970s Britain, which we have deconstructed in the preceding chapters, continue to resonate with contemporary politics, including, in particular, the June 2017 Conservative Minority Government. Longer-term implications of this study for future political decision-making regarding minority governments and coalition will be assessed, as well as the potential impact on future scholarship.

There have been few works over the last thirty years which have specifically addressed the context and comparative history of British minority governments on a national level. One of the most notable and often overlooked, David Butler's 1983 book on *Governing without a Majority*, does not deal with the historical experiences of any one minority government in significant detail.⁵⁴

Our examination of the legacy of the 1970s will include a brief re-evaluation of the impact of this era on the short periods of Major's Minority Governments in 1993–94 and 1996–97, a development often ignored in both scholarly and popular commentary. The impact on the 2010–15 Westminster coalition will similarly be considered, as will the fears of a minority government in the run-up to the 2010 and 2015 general elections, with a particular focus on the use of history by commentators and political participants.

The chapter will analyse the aftermath of the June 2017 election, comparing the formation of and potential challenges for the Conservative Minority Government and Labour Opposition to those faced by their 1970s counterparts, and exploring how the work of the previous chapters may provide insights into understanding current and future developments. For all these comparisons, the documentation used will include additional material for the later periods, derived from a combination of files released after 2008, and from publicly available sources, including Hansard, newspapers, interviews and television news coverage.

The final part of the chapter will consider how the June 2017 minority government at Westminster may affect planning for future indecisive election results at a UK and devolved level, taking into account as far as possible the significant ongoing political changes. The section will, in addition, consider the subsequent application of the method established in this book to future studies which might further our understanding of the 'British tradition of minority government', gain new insights into minority governments domestically and internationally, and challenge historical myths in other areas.

Notes

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