

The national government coalition assignment



' Given the temporary and emergency character of the arrangement' (N. Chamberlain), why did the National Government formed in 1931 last so long?

The nine year premiership of the National Government of 1931 was an unprecedented and unique phenomenon in twentieth century peacetime British politics.

Although it is now looked upon less than favourably by historians and political scientists alike, it was an enduring government which could well have continued into another term had World War Two and the rise of Churchill been avoided by the National Government; although whether another term in office would have been beneficial to Britain is another matter.

It is a common conception amongst historians that a coalition government with such a large majority as the National Government should be doomed to failure, as it is often cited that the only coalitions with any real hope of longevity are those who are placed in the circumstances of ' minimal winning'. Surely then, a National Government which was at its core a coalition with a majority of 550 could not prosper in Britain. On the contrary however, it would produce another election win, and incorporate the office three prime ministers.

The first aspect of the National Government which contributed to its nine year term in office would be the way in which it was portrayed, rather than as a coalition, as a party in its own right under one party name. The National Government was presented to the electorate as such, and not a result of a hung parliament, which immediately gave it credibility, in that it was elected

for outright by the people, and not the politicians themselves as in today's Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition. It is an idea sometimes presented that 'once it is clear a country is electorally fragmented' it makes sense to 'institutionalise this'.

It was clear at the time of the government's formation that opinion was divided, and it made sense for the party's at the time to incorporate this into their election campaign. In merging large segments of the main political parties, the National Government also significantly weakened its opposition in terms of the remaining Liberal and Labour parties, both of which were depleted and, with Labour being on the back of a 'disastrous exit from office' and 'in deep difficulty' following their short unsuccessful term in office, as the Liberal party 'disintegrated', as Lloyd George at one point even refused to sign a Liberal manifesto.

Mosley was probably the most substantial threat to the National Government, as dictatorships fascist and otherwise gripped mainland Europe, but his fascist party never really took off in Britain as suspicion and dislike towards communism and dictators grew. Mosley created the New Party, which whilst initially popular waned in popularity as it leaned further toward fascism. He later founded the British Union of Fascists in 1932, which whilst initially caused a stir, dropped massively in the run up to the 1935 election to the extent it would not even be able to stand for government in it.

Whilst here it appears Mosley was perhaps more successful in further splitting the remaining Liberal and Labour votes, and clearing the way further for the Conservative-dominated National government, it was his ideas

which threatened most sincerely. Perhaps had his ideas of fascism been displayed less militantly, such as in Cable Street in 1936, they would have appealed more to a desperate, economically crushed Britain. This weakening of the opposition also allowed them to avoid an early election, and therefore time to establish itself. An interesting point is brought to mind by Forsyth in terms of the shape of Westminster's benches.

Winston Churchill is quoted in reference to the House of Commons that 'we shape our buildings, and our buildings shape us'. By this he meant that the House of Commons layout (two opposing benches rather than the considered circular designs) commanded two-party-politics, with a possible third smaller party. Prior to this, this had always been the case in twentieth century British politics, but we were now left with one massive majority government which was 'unrivalled even by the 1906 election', with two relatively similar sized opposition parties, with Labour winning 52 seats and the Liberals 33.

This left the House of Commons in unfamiliar territory, and whilst Labour and Liberal parties would have to adjust to the new dynamic of what was essentially now one party politics, with two very minor and crumbling opposing parties, the National Government would be in a very stable position, and could reap the advantages of the massive majority government they found themselves within. The influence of the media cannot be underestimated when considering the reasons for the National Governments longevity either.

The general consensus amongst leading national newspapers at the time was of positivity towards the National Government, and also to portray the

Labour and Liberal Parties as divisive. Radio broadcasting also played into the hands of the National Government, who out of ten political broadcasts allocated by the BBC at the 1931 election, were given 6 out of the ten available, with the other four being distributed between the remaining fragmented opposition.

This bombardment of positivity towards the Macdonald's National Government would have weighed heavily on the decision of an electorate comparatively starved of information in comparison to that of today, and allowed the National Government to 'bask in media and public acclaim'. The fear of communism and dictatorship was a central component in the longevity achieved by the National Government. 1931 was witnessing the rise of dictators across Europe, and it was pinpointed as a direct threat to democracy in Britain and the world.

This led to extreme concessions being given on the part of all involved in politics to desperately try not to rock the boat and give rise to a fascism or Nazism. The National Government was heralded as a 'defence against dictatorships', as 'broad coalitionism might keep the socialist menace at bay'. It could also be said that this 'broad coalitionism' appeared to the euro-sceptic electorate the polar opposite to the dictatorships gripping central Europe at the time; a government formed of three parties, voted for as one by the people.

It could be convincingly argued that this clear disparity from the common enemy was a significant element to the prolonged existence of the National Government. This rallying behind of the government by such vast numbers

stood it in strong stead in terms of lasting through another election, however it also gave rise to a stagnancy in politics, as MPs fought not to conflict as much as possible, so as to maintain the unified facade of the 'hastily' put together National Government.

Policies such as the 'agreement to differ' did in effect kill much of the tension in government, but also served to simply delay confronting of issues until a later date. It has been insinuated that the premiership of the National Government was a time which saw 'politics at Westminster cease to exist', as the combination of lack of strong opposition and these compromising, submissive politics strangled any real reform.

In this instance, it could be said that whilst there was no real achievements made in the years of its reign there was at the time no real failures either, as the problems with the appeasement policies were largely supported and not seen as failures until the outbreak of World War Two. Most leading politicians bent over backwards to preserve the government, even Lloyd George is said to have made 'desperate efforts to prolong it'. This idea of preservation was equally prevalent within the National Government itself, as Baldwin ensured the safety of Macdonald's position as prime minister.

At the formation of the National Government, Baldwin demanded that his Conservative MPs agreed to support Macdonald not just at the 1931 election, but also for a second term in office. It appears that Baldwin intended to gain 'power without ultimate responsibility', which required Macdonald be in place as a permanent scapegoat. This instilled a sense of co-dependency

within the coalition, which again gave rise to stagnancy as the three sides of the coalition sought to appease one another.

This is perhaps evident in that despite holding so many seats in government, conservatives made up just 11 of the 20 positions in Macdonald's cabinet office; completely disproportionate to their vast MPs. This perhaps overly well balanced cabinet also contributed to stagnation as a relatively equal distribution of power across the parties sought more to utilise their new found 'agreement to differ' than make any real decisions. The parties would also withdraw and enter constituents in elections which would give them the best chance of gaining power.

If a conservative and liberal vote were split, one would withdraw to essentially force the electorate to vote for the one left. This is perhaps a powerful indicator to the irony of whilst opposing dictatorships, themselves removing the power of choice from the electorate they had set out to serve. It should also be noted that coalitions in British politics were not so uncommon or viewed with as much scrutiny as they are today. In fact, it was perhaps rarer to find a 'single party administration... which were in existence only ten years'.

This perhaps lack of cynicism on the part of not just the electorate but the governing bodies themselves would have prolonged the existence of the National Government coalition. The strength of Macdonald in office, and his own popularity amongst the electorate should also not be underestimated when discussing the preservation of the National Government. In taking on the responsibility of leading a conservative dominated government as a

National Labour Prime Minister. It portrayed him as an 'above party', 'self sacrificing' politician, who would do whatever it took to do best by his nation.

He was also confident in his own position, as the fact conservatives and Baldwin in particular had supported him so steadfastly, he could be secure in the knowledge they needed him, as well as he needing them. This allowed him to take the stance against anyone who opposed him within his own government of 'all right, go' if they did not wish to support him. This left most of his MPs with no means of rebellion other than resignation, which none of them desired anyway. Many of those in government also felt indebted to Macdonald, and ultimately owed their seats to him.

It was very much his involvement which saw the doubling of the cabinet size, and the dilution of conservative presence within it to just 11 of the 20. This ensured high levels of loyalty or more accurately low levels of rebellion within the National Government to its leaders. It was largely Macdonald's popularity which convinced leading conservatives to agree to the National Government's formation, and so without him, the National Labour and National Liberals would lose much influence they clung to in this ultimately conservative government.

Ironically, it was the incompetencies of the National Government which ensured its eight year term in office. Whilst the weakening of opposition, media support and clever representation as an umbrella party were indeed components of its longevity, the back bone of it lay with the fear and suspicion of communism and dictators at the core of British politics, which in turn served to stifle the much needed social and economic reform the

National Government should have sought to implement into arduous stagnation.

It was this poignant element which shuffled the National Government's priority league table and left preservation firmly on top, not to be moved by any political dilemma until Nazi Germany pushed the governments appeasement policy to its inevitable breaking point. Bibliography * Glover. J, Formed in Haste (The Guardian 2005) * Smart. N, The National Government 1931-40 (Macmillan 1999) * Williamson. P, National Crisis and National Government (Cambridge University Press 1992) Forsyth. J, Politics: Westminster just isn't built for coalitions (The Spectator, Jan 2011) * Andrew Marr's A History of Modern Britain Ep. 5 * Laver. M, Parliamentary Affairs: Coalitions in Britain (Oxford University Press 2010) * Pulzer. P, Parliamentary Affairs: Will England Love Coalitions? (Hazard Society 2011) * Ball. S. , The Conservative Party and the Formation of the National Government (Historical Journal 1986) ————— [1]. Laver.

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