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The negotiations commence

by Tim Collins, Managing Director

Let the bidding commence

In the space of two hours this afternoon Gordon Brown and David Cameron both made pitches for the support of Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats. This followed Mr Clegg's announcement this morning that "it seems this morning that it is the Conservative Party that has more votes and more seats... it is now for the Conservative Party to prove that it can govern in the national interest".

Mr Brown claimed that there was "common ground" between the two centre-Left parties. He said he was "willing to see any of the party leaders" – an offer unlikely to be taken up by Mr Cameron! He accepted Mr Clegg's announcement that he would negotiate with Mr Cameron first, but said that he would be ready to open talks anytime should the other discussions fail.

The Prime Minister explicitly made it clear that electoral reform – the Holy Grail for the Liberal Democrats – would be on his agenda.

Mr Cameron is in a stronger position but even so, his speech was a model of caution. First, he sought to reassure his own supporters that Euroscepticism, a tough line on immigration and strong defence (ie replacing the Trident system) were all non-negotiable.

But then he went on to outline in general terms what he called a "big open and comprehensive offer" to the Liberal Democrats. He



talked about areas of common policy ground, including the introduction of a pupil premium to benefit children from deprived backgrounds, buttressing civil liberties, advancing the green economy, and halting the introduction of Labour's planned rise in National Insurance Contributions.

He offered explicitly an inquiry into electoral reform, although several Liberal Democrats have said that this would not be enough given that the party believes it was misled when Tony Blair set up precisely such an inquiry under Lord (Roy) Jenkins and then promptly shelved its findings for years.

Interestingly, Mr Cameron explicitly stated that agreement with the Lib Dems could take one of two forms. The first option would be a "confidence and supply" arrangement, whereby the smaller party would stay outside the Government but would undertake not to vote to bring it down on issues of confidence (eg the Queen's Speech) or on tax (eg the Finance Bill to implement a Budget).

The second idea which Mr Cameron floated, perhaps to the surprise of some of his backbenchers and activists, was a formal coalition, with Liberal Democrats taking office in his Government. Mr Cameron knows he is treading a thin tight-rope here – today's survey of Conservative activists on the ConservativeHome.com shows that 92% oppose that idea.

The maths and what it shows

The mathematics do not favour Labour in these discussions. The current Government ended up two million votes and close to fifty seats behind the Conservatives, meaning both that they look like a Party which has been rejected by the electorate and also that even with the Liberal Democrats they would not constitute a majority.



The Conservatives on the other hand, having ended up with both most seats and most votes, could form a bloc with a very strong majority if agreement with the Liberal Democrats could be reached.

Has Mr Brown got the memo?

Senior former Liberal Democrat communications director Olly Grender, speaking earlier this afternoon, said that she thought that Mr Brown “had not got the memo “. She said that Mr Clegg’s comments this morning, stating that the Conservatives had the right to attempt to form a Government, meant that it was “game over” for the Prime Minister.

Even so Mr Brown shows no immediate willingness to depart. While his removal from office remains highly likely, it may now not come about until after the weekend.

A thought for the weekend

The Conservative Party told the BBC just after 3.30 pm today that discussions between their party and the Lib Dems will commence this evening, with a telephone conversation between David Cameron and Nick Clegg.

Accordingly, we should not expect new Ministerial appointments for a good while yet. Most politicians are going to spend the weekend catching up on their sleep.



What may keep some of them awake, however, is the fact that many observers now believe that the newly elected Parliament is not sustainable – and thus that a further General Election may be only months away.