

by Michael Meadowcroft

The voters put Liberal Democrat MPs into the toughest place possible after the General Election. It was clear that it was up to Nick Clegg to consult with the other party leaders as quickly as possible to ensure that the country's financial stability was maintained. Equally clearly, as announced beforehand, it was reasonable to meet first with the Conservatives as the largest party, both in seats and votes.

Following a number of tough sessions, the Liberal Democrats then met with the Labour team, only to find them even less inclined to accept items already agreed by the Conservatives. Even so, the Liberal Democrats agreed to meet them again the following morning. By then, senior Labour figures, such as David Blunkett and John Reid, had spoken out against any deal, and Douglas Alexander had said "no" to any approach to the Scottish Nationalists - whose support would have been needed - and it was clear that Labour simply could not deliver any coalition.

Clearly there has to be a government in place and we did not want an unstable minority Conservative administration without any commitment to electoral reform. The deal with the Conservatives will give us a referendum on the Alternative Vote - a very poor change to be sure, but at least a first step to real proportional representation. It also ensures important guarantees on many civil liberties eroded by Labour.

It is no secret that most Liberal Democrats would have preferred a deal with Labour, particularly without Gordon Brown, but it simply was not on offer. In these circumstances Nick Clegg and his parliamentary colleagues have embarked on the difficult, but principled, task of tackling Britain's deep economic problems in coalition with the Conservatives.

Liberal Democrat supporters understandably worried about this outcome need to ask themselves what other course of action was possible in the best interests of the country. It is crucial to remember that the Liberal Democrats are no less Liberal than they were before the election, and that the party is no less independent than it was. The coalition in Parliament does not affect the radicalism of the Liberal Democrats and we very much need your support and involvement to ensure that the country keeps up the momentum for proportional representation and for a progressive alternative to the two old parties. Join us!