Should we get rid of political parties?

The 2010 election was most revealing. In the run-up it appeared that there was a strong contingent in favour of a hung parliament: a vote of no-confidence in any particular party. If there was a constructive message wrapped up in that cynicism, it was one of encouraging the political leaders to set aside their ideologies and cooperate in dealing with the political challenges facing this country. But the aftermath showed that such hopes were in vain. Our democratic system delivered power into the hands of an oligarchy of political kingmakers who promptly demonstrated that in a hung parliament, ideology counts more than ever. The Conservatives were deeply divided on a deal with the Liberal Democrats. Labour was split on a deal with the Liberal Democrats and on the possibility of proportional representation. The Liberal Democrats were divided on whether to do a deal with the Conservatives or Labour.

Most of all, the 2010 election showed us in high definition that our political system is a mass of ambiguities. Do we vote for personalities, parties or policies? Do we take into consideration manifesto commitments, un-costed aspirations and past disappointments? Do we vote for a prime minister or a local representative?

That last ambiguity is fundamental. Technically we vote for a local representative. But a leader who has not led his party to an election victory is seen as having a weak mandate –and, politically speaking, a weak mandate is no mandate at all. Thus, while we vote for a person to represent our constituency, a vote for a winning candidate is taken as an endorsement of a political leader's candidature to be PM. If you want to argue that the British system is 'broken', as Nick Clegg repeatedly argued in his campaign, you need look no further than this: one vote cannot serve two purposes. A vote for the best local representative will not necessarily correlate with the best PM. A vote for the best PM might result in a half-witted local candidate. Ironically, if you want to argue that the British system is *not* broken but highly sophisticated and the best we

are likely to get, you have to use the same argument. Our system requires voters to balance local and national issues, weighting each according to his or her own priorities.

The problem with this 'balance' argument is the party system. When voting for a party you are voting for an ideology and a series of policy commitments, and these tend to take priority over everything else – obscuring national interests, local issues and individuals (whether local representatives or national leaders). In voting for a party you are voting for divisiveness. You are voting against policies and personalities you might believe in and approve just as steadfastly as those of your chosen party. For example, you might think that Nick Clegg, Vince Cable, David Cameron, William Hague, Gordon Brown and Jack Straw are all committed statesmen and would all make good cabinet ministers. But they are in different parties. You cannot vote for a Ministry of the All the Talents in principle, let alone in practice. The system demands that they criticise one another publicly – even when they might be in agreement. In our 'democracy' the party system prevents you from voting for the most capable people to fill their most suitable roles, and encourages good candidates to put their efforts into criticising rivals for the sake of party point scoring.

In this respect our modern system is demonstrably inferior to that of past centuries. Today we might have universal suffrage instead of a hugely restrictive franchise but we vote for ministers who are weakened by the party system and local representatives who are disempowered by the whips. Your local representatives are supposed to 'work for you' – but how can they when they are checked at every step by the party system? Your elected local representatives will not necessarily put your choice of leader before their party interests, and may even put party ideology before local concerns.

So why not get rid of the party system? After all, there was a time when we had no political parties – when residents of boroughs and counties elected their own representatives and expected them to hold the king to account. Often they were successful, even with a powerful and

warlike king such as Edward III. The main shortcoming in that system was that relatively few men and no women could vote. That issue no longer applies.

Imagine it: if politicians campaigned in their constituencies on the strength of their personal credentials and beliefs, they could put forward their own manifestos and be expected to abide by them. Donations to political parties from corporations and unions would become unnecessary. The business of choosing a prime minister could be by direct election – thereby clarifying the national/local ambiguity – and he or she would be forced to work with the ministers elected from within parliament itself. Ministerial energies could be channelled into governing, as opposed to party sniping. Party allegiances would be seen as corrupting of good judgement. We might even get some honest answers to questions which at present are answered with party interests in mind.

Another positive spin-off of this would be the greater responsibility of the electorate. Look at the reasons for the anger over the expenses row. We resented supposedly responsible individuals unlocking large amounts of public money for their personal benefit. But the context to that distrust and resentment was that we had elected these individuals. We had only ourselves to blame. This felt unfair; most of us had voted for a party, not the nest-lining individuals; and so it was shocking to realise that these MPs had not just pocketed our money but our votes too. We had been doubly hoodwinked, and felt doubly betrayed. While getting rid of political party labels would not guarantee that our representative actually voted the way we wanted him or her to, it would at least remind the electorate of their responsibility to vote for a responsible local member, and not just a TV-friendly ego on the make.

Yes, of course it is idealistic. There are far too many vested interests that benefit from the party system – from unions, businesses and corporations to locally organised coffee mornings and social gatherings in favour of a party. But when we talk about political reform, and especially when we talk about reform for the purposes of improving the relationship between

politicians and the electorate, it is worth considering the shortcomings of the system. The solution to our present disenchantment with politicians is not a scheme which creates a greater distance between the electorate and its representatives. This will only increase our distrust of the system and those who take advantage of it – the 'double betrayal' – and strengthen our refusal to take responsibility for the actions of our politicians.

So, idealistic it may be. But people with ideas *should* be idealistic – especially politicians. And any politician who rules out a non-party system in favour of his party is doing us a disservice. It is, after all, what voters at the moment seem to be looking for. Perhaps it could be considered stage by stage –at the next reform of the House of Lords, for example. That would be a serious vote of confidence in the British people.

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