

# WHAT IS A HUNG PARLIAMENT?

## a Pre-School Learning Alliance guide



The aim of general elections is to win an absolute majority. An absolute majority is when one political party has more MPs than all the other parties put together. Because there are 650 seats in Parliament, technically this requires 326 seats, but as Sinn Féin MPs do not take their seats and the Speaker does not count, in practice, a party could win an absolute majority with, say, 323 votes.

As no party has won an overall majority in the 2017 general election, we now have what is called a hung parliament. This means that political parties will begin negotiations to determine the next government. There are two main types of government that could be formed:

- **Formal coalition:** Two or more political parties, whose combined number of seats produce a majority, enter a government made up of ministers from the participating parties. The coalition produces joint policies and votes together on them. This is what happened in 2010 between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats.
- **Minority government:** A party without a majority relies on cutting ad hoc deals with other parties to win the votes required to pass new laws.
  - This could be in the form of an **informal coalition** i.e a pact between parties to co-operate on a range of issues. These are sometimes called '**confidence and supply**' agreements: where one or more smaller parties guarantee support for a minority government's budget and in no-confidence votes in return for some of their own policies being given the green light.

Unlike in a formal coalition, the smaller parties in a confidence and supply deal do not have to agree to support other laws proposed by the government.

Additionally, politicians from the smaller parties do not form part of the government and are not ministers.

### What happens in the event of a hung parliament?

If there is a hung parliament, the existing prime minister is expected to remain in place until a new government is formed (as 'caretaker prime minister'). It is the party in power (*not* the party who won the most seats) who has the first opportunity to form a new government.

To form a government, this party has to have the support of the majority of the House of Commons. This is tested at the Queen's Speech, a speech at the start of a parliament which sets out their legislative agenda and is read out by the Queen. After the speech, there is a debate (which can take several days) and ultimately a vote on the prospective government's proposed programme.

If the prospective prime minister fails to win support for their Queen's Speech, they would be expected to resign. In those circumstances, the opposition party would then have a chance form a government and to put together their own programme.

If no agreement can be reached between parties and no prospective government is unable to command enough support to get their Queen's Speech through Parliament, a second election would need to be held.

#### *Practical implications of a minority government:*

Minority governments are often seen as undesirable because government is unable automatically to win votes in Parliament and may face delays in passing legislation. Some also argue that small opposition parties might seek to hold the government to ransom, threatening to bring it down unless it offered policy concessions.

However, others believe that, under our current system, the ruling party is able to pass legislation too easily and without sufficient scrutiny. From this perspective, the fact that government has to negotiate and compromise, and that opposition parties have a greater ability to influence the policy-making process, can be seen as a positive.