**Learning how to share**

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**Personalities no less than procedure help to make coalitions work elsewhere**

THERE was high-flown talk this week of a “seismic shift” in British politics. Perhaps so. But the sight of parties negotiating to share office (or not) after an inconclusive election is common enough in much of Europe: Norwegians and Germans, for example, have been chortling at excitable Brits over the past few days. Increasingly that is also true farther afield, even in corners which had long shared Britain’s system of government.

Canadian voters, who have repeatedly delivered hung parliaments since 2004, have now accepted minority rule. Stephen Harper’s Conservatives have governed for four and a bit years and are likely to stay on for a while yet. Mr Harper is abrasive and presides over a rancorous parliament, but his government is stable and the economy chugs happily along. The country has seen 11 minority administrations in the past century, yet those with strong leaders have managed both to endure and to deliver big legislative changes.

Other bits of the former empire offer lessons, too. Post-apartheid South Africa uses a list system of proportional representation (PR) and it has had various coalitions since 1994. Care is taken, for example with ministerial appointments, to protect the interests of ethnic minorities (such as whites) who are otherwise easily outvoted. Australia uses a mix of voting systems but keeps constituency links for Mps. New Zealand dropped British-style first-past-the-post voting in 1996 and has seen only hung parliaments and coalition rule since. That has not always been smooth, but politicians have learned that it pays to be flexible, for example by finding ways for ministers from small parties to be excused from collective responsibility on certain sensitive issues. Voters in New Zealand are unlikely to scrap their voting system in a referendum on it next year.

The intriguing question is whether more consensual rule ends up producing a different kind of government policy. Some economists and political scientists are convinced that coalition typically leads to bigger states. Guido Tabellini, an Italian expert, says that where parliaments are formed under PR, governments have historically run slightly bigger budget deficits than those under single-party rule. And in countries where PR is the electoral system, central governments spend on average a “whopping” 5% more of GDP than countries with single-party governments.

Arend Lijphart, a Dutch academic who has looked at the performance of 36 democracies in recent decades, also says that coalition rule usually means more state spending. He points as well, however, to higher voter turnout, greater voter satisfaction, less income inequality and a “kinder, gentler and more generous” state all around.

Why might this be? Perhaps none of this is causal: richer countries with bigger welfare states may just plump for voting systems that produce coalition governments. Or perhaps parties in coalition see little to gain individually from fiscal prudence and, in a more representative government, have a wider range of supporters who need rewards.