A coalition government consists of two or more parties who must compromise on principles and share a mandate. This mostly occurs due to a single party unable to gain a majority of seats in Parliament\(^1\). Coalitions are mostly formed through elections but coalition governments can also occur in times of national difficulty, such as in WWII from 1931-1940. Coalition governments arguably divide opinion, but those in favour of proportional representation believe it can lead to consensus politics, and it is also seen by many as the more favourable option in times of national crisis, moreover, coalitions can also be better than having a minority government. However, many believe that they are undemocratic and can lead to drastic policies being put through, upon a mandate that was not agreed on, with problems also on proportionality. To determine a conclusion to this issue, it is important to explore the advantages and disadvantages of such a government.

**The Conservative and Liberal Democrats Coalition 2010**

The first coalition government in the UK was in 1978, before and since this coalition the idea of a coalition government has been relatively unheard of in the UK due to the First Past the Post system nearly always ensuring a majority government. However, as predicted by many polls upcoming to the elections, a coalition government was established in 2010\(^2\). After a series of negotiations took place between all three main parties, it was decided that the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives would join a coalition on the 19\(^{th}\) May - the first Conservative and Liberal Democrats coalition in British political history.

The chosen alignment with the Conservatives created division with many Liberal Democrat voters – who felt the natural alignment would have been with Labour, with whom they have fairly similar ideologies.

Whilst the Conservative party gained the largest proportion of votes (306 seats) they failed to reach the minimum 326 seats required in Parliament to attain a majority government, even though they had the majority of votes – 36.2%, posing the question on proportionality and how fair a system First Past the Post actually is.

**Advantages**

One of the main advantages of a coalition government is that due to having to share a mandate, this leads to broader representation, as the two parties have to compromise on their opposing ideologies in order to create policies that result in legislation\(^3\). Greater policy scrutiny is also prominent in coalition governments which could prove beneficial for the electorate as this should in theory benefit a larger proportion of individuals than a single party government as, the two opposing parties reflect a broader spectrum of voters.

A second party in power can add weigh to a particular issue which could have been otherwise dismissed (for example, the AV referendum) and can greatly diminish the chance of controversial or undemocratic laws being passed.

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3. Lynch, P. & P. Fairclough (2010) UK Government and Politics, UK; Hachette p.g. 76
Whilst many oppose the option of this coalition government in the UK, the remaining options could be considered worse – if a coalition government had not been agreed upon, this would have lead to a minority Conservative government, which many (over 67%) did not vote for, letting the Conservatives be able to impose their manifesto – including radical ideas such as changing the infrastructure of the NHS\(^4\). In this sense, coalition governments have much more legitimacy and are more democratic.

**Disadvantages**

Conflict within governance due to conflicting ideologies of the two parties, can make a government fractious whilst also weakening government. If parties are at a standstill on certain topics and cannot come to quick conclusions, not being able to work together will effect how powerful a government will be as continual disagreements will slow down the government.

In a coalition government, individual parties have to compromise on ideologies, however what can also happen is that one party has to abandon their argument entirely, which could be severely damaging to their reputation, and cause fractures within the party (i.e. backbenchers) and can damage their chances of re-election. An example of this would be Nick Clegg’s total abandonment of the manifesto pledge of scrapping tuition fees, instead siding entirely with the Conservatives, who have now increased the tuition fees by two thirds. This has been particularly damaging for the Liberal Democrats, having canvassed so heavily its tuition fees pledge pre-election, and also having canvassed mostly at University campuses, seeking student votes. This broken promise has made Nick Clegg highly unpopular, with over 58% believing that the Liberal Democrats have abandoned their principles since entering a coalition with the Conservatives\(^5\).

In a recent poll by IMG as part of the report on One Year On- The First Year of The Coalition, results showed that there is increasingly little public confidence in the coalition, over 63% of people questioned said that they thought it was a bad thing that no party won a majority in the election – an increase from 55% a year ago, 68% believed the coalition had created a weaker government, 73% believed the government is less decisive and over 80% think the government is “more confused” with a coalition\(^6\). These results seem to indicate the coalition has failed to convince the electorate of their efficacy, which could make it more difficult for the coalition to exert serious political authority with the electorate having little faith in the coalition.

Whilst the Liberal Democrats are one of the three major parties and are fairly powerful, they only got into power due to, some would say, the Conservatives lack of options available to them and their reluctance to possibly relinquish power over a vote of no confidence. It is well known that in the UK the two most prominent parties are Labour and the Conservatives, and it is often seen in general elections as a “Two horse race” between the two political parties. Whilst less prominent in the current coalition “minority power” can be a problem in coalitions, due to the lack of funding and experience smaller parties can be ill equipped to deal with the demands of government and due to their unlikelihood of election their elections pledges are often unrealistic once put into practice.

Being able to impose policies upon a mandate that was not agreed upon is another disadvantage that has caused increased resentment within the electorate, leading many to believe the coalition is undemocratic. Resentment was reflected recently when, on the 30\(^{th}\) November 2011, over two

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\(^4\) [http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/may/09/general-election-2010-labour](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/may/09/general-election-2010-labour)

\(^5\) [http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/may/12/coalition-government-weaker-less-decisive-confused](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/may/12/coalition-government-weaker-less-decisive-confused)

\(^6\) [http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/may/12/coalition-government-weaker-less-decisive-confused](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/may/12/coalition-government-weaker-less-decisive-confused)
million public sector workers went on strike due to the impending change in public sector pensions\(^7\).

**Evaluation**

Whilst there are advantages to a coalition government such as greater public scrutiny and broader levels of representation, there is a huge problem with the coalition being undemocratic and the weakness of the government, as well as the two parties being very dissimilar in interests makes this coalition government disadvantageous.

**Coalition Governments in Australia**

Coalition governments are commonplace in Australia, and are preferred over single party governments, in fact coalition governments have taken place (on and off) since 1922, and currently there is a coalition between the Conservative Liberal, National, Country Liberal and Liberal National parties, known simply as the Coalition\(^8\). Most people refer to the coalition as a single party government. Coalitions in Australia have been successful on the whole and have remained stable at a federal level, with the lower House of Parliament becoming a two party house. So popular are coalitions in Australia citizens have the option of ticking a two party preferred vote (TPP) box in General Elections. The coalition is also present in states such as New South Wales and Victoria.

**Evaluation**

Australia's coalition demonstrates that coalitions can run efficiently in the long term, and if parties co operate effectively with each other, can be seen as as a preferred choice to majority governments. However being a multi party system gives the coalition an advantage over the current British coalition as it has power and influence that the current British coalition would find very difficult to attain

**Coalition Governments in Finland**

The most stable of coalition governments have taken place in Finland, with multi parties becoming the norm, since no outright party has attained a majority since independence\(^9\). The most successful coalition government has been Lipponen and II, a so called “rainbow government” consisting of five contrasting parties from all sides of the political spectrum, for example the extreme left wing party Left Alliance worked in cooperation alongside the National Coalition, a right wing party\(^10\).

**Evaluation**

Lipponen and II shows possible promise to the Coalition in Britain as it shows that coalition governments can be successful and efficient even if they differ dramatically on political stances.

**Conclusion**

Whilst the overall view of the coalition government present in the UK might suggest that is has been overwhelmingly negative some may say that it has been a success as it has lead to broader...
representation. Furthermore, Australian and Finland coalitions show that coalitions can work and be successful, with the overriding factor of their success suggesting it just depends on how much parties are willing to cooperate on in order to create a successful coalition.

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**Plan**

**Introduction**

Define what a coalition is

Outline main advantages and disadvantages of coalitions governments

**Coalition Government in UK**

Explain how coalition was formed

Explain public opinion on unusual alignment

Mention question of proportionality

**Advantages**

Broader representation

Less chance of radical laws being passed – more policy scrutiny

Best option in terms of crisis – i.e. better than a minority governments

**Disadvantages**

Weakens governments

Undemocratic

IMG Poll- results

Smaller parties – inexperienced in having governmental power
Evaluation

Overall – UK coalition is disadvantageous.

**Australian Coalition Government**

Explain coalition

Evaluate

**Finland Coalition Government**

Explain coalition

Evaluate

**Conclusion**

Conclude on key points outlining advantages and disadvantages.