

Cameron changes the landscape

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Having played it safe during the [British election campaign](#), David Cameron has now revealed a truly audacious streak. The [coalition deal](#) the Conservative leader has finally struck with his Liberal Democrat opposite number, Nick Clegg, is more ambitious in scope than seemed possible even a few days ago. This really is an attempt to try a [new style of collaborative politics](#).

It is far from being some minimalist pact. The deal is intended to last for a full parliament, brings five Lib Dems into the [cabinet](#), and involves significant political reform – including a referendum on changing the voting system.

The political stakes are high for both leaders. Failure would wreck Mr Cameron's career, while Mr Clegg is gambling that a successful coalition could sell electoral reform to the British public.

The leaders have talked a lot about the national interest in recent days. But this is not some sort of starry-eyed union between Mr Cameron and Mr Clegg. The deal is the product of cold-eyed political calculation on both sides to gain power. That is all to the good. If it is to last, it must be built on realistic foundations.

On policy, understandably, there has been some give and take. This is on balance positive. The good bits of both parties' programmes have largely survived the process intact, while some more suspect ones have been jettisoned. The coalition's programme is strong on restoring civil liberties for instance. The Tories attractive plans to reform education remain in place, as do proposals to look at structural reform of the banking system.

Meanwhile, the Tories have neutralised some of the Lib Dems' woolier pledges. The nuclear deterrent will be maintained, and Britain will continue to look to nuclear power for its civil energy. For their part, the Lib Dems have toned down some of the more anti-European aspects of the Tory programme. Plans to confront Brussels with demands to repatriate powers have been shelved.

The biggest challenge for the new government is, of course, to tackle Britain's yawning deficit. The five-year term of the deal, and the majority the new administration enjoys in the House of Commons, certainly makes tough action possible.

The [coalition document](#) does not explain how the deficit is to be closed. That will be set out when the government announces its emergency budget in the summer. This newspaper endorsed the Conservatives principally because we felt that they were most likely to trim back the bloated state bequeathed by Labour. They would place the burden of deficit reduction on spending cuts rather than tax rises. While we hope that the coalition will continue with this course, it is disappointing that the two parties

did not take the opportunity to show more resolve to shrink the state. It would have been more encouraging had they not pledged to ring-fence NHS spending or pared back some of their proposed tax cuts.

Putting together a common programme is one thing. Actually enacting it in government is quite another. The coalition will be tested. The [chemistry between Mr Cameron and Mr Clegg](#), so apparent at Wednesday's Downing Street press conference, may wear thin as the administration is forced to make hard and unpopular choices.

It is encouraging that the two sides have assembled their team quickly. The combined talent pool has produced a stronger cabinet than would have been the case with the Conservatives on their own. The decision to put representatives of both parties in each department is good in that it cements co-responsibility as a principle. But how well the two sides will rub along when the going gets tough remains an open question.

Lastly, there are the back benchers and the grass-roots members of both parties. Many of them will be extremely suspicious of the deal that has been struck and the compromises required. Some will have had their hopes for office frustrated. The well-organised Tory grass-roots are already grumbling about the lacklustre campaign Mr Cameron fought. On both sides the activists remain a potent and combustible source of potential discord in the years ahead.

It will take real leadership to keep the coalition on track. Both sides will need to deal with the inevitable disagreements in the same mature spirit that they exhibited when constructing the deal. It will not be easy. British politics is traditionally majoritarian and adversarial. But the course is now set. Whether it succeeds or fails, this deal will change British politics.