

Until May 7 2015 do us part

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Downing Street has a notorious micro-climate: a shaft of sunlight hits the pavement first thing in the morning and then vanishes, leaving the place prey to every breath of chill wind. It's a metaphor for the normal course of a British government.

The pay-back is that the garden of Number 10 is a suntrap, and yesterday the new prime minister and his deputy stood alongside each other in the springtime air in a setting they would have rarely even visited before. To repeat, in case anyone may have missed recent episodes of this increasingly far-fetched soap opera, their names are David Cameron and Nick Clegg.

To all appearances, they might have been brothers - twins, indeed. Same age, same build, same eyes, same fresh face, same slightly supercilious facial expression, same hair conditioner probably. They still wore their team-colour ties: blue for Mr Cameron and yellow for Mr Clegg. But they seemed far more fraternal than the Miliband brothers, evidently about to fight each other for the Labour leadership.

Yet this had to be more like a wedding. Oh, the innocence of young love. Something like one British marriage in eight ends in divorce before five years are up. And in most of those cases the couple at least like each other a bit a week before the wedding. They throw the crockery later.

Yet here they were, swearing to love, honour and cherish each other, if not until death do them part, then at least until May 7 2015 which - they insist - is to be the date of the next election. 262 weeks is a hell of a long time in politics.

Five years? Some doubt it can last five months, when the activists hit the party conferences, where they will not be whispering sweet nothings. You can hear doubts in the tones of some newly appointed Tory ministers, saying through gritted teeth how much they are looking forward to working with the "Liberals". The postponed vote in Thirsk and Malton takes place in two weeks. What are Lib Dem supporters there meant to think?

The honour of the leaders' intentions does not seem in doubt. "For five years we can act for the long term and make the big decisions," said Mr Cameron. There will, he promised, be "compromise, give and take, reasonable civilised grown-up behaviour".

"It's a new government, a new kind of government," said Mr Clegg, "clean, open, plural politics . . . the change we need . . . a government that will take power away from politicians".

It looked and smelled like springtime, too, with the magnolia in bloom and the scent of the wallflowers wafting across the lawn. Here it is then, not the false dawn of 1997, but the real thing.

"In short, there's simply not/ a more congenial spot/ for happy-ever-aftering/ than here in . . . Camelot."

But in this latitude, spring and summer tend to be brief and fickle, and are followed by dank autumns. Good luck, lads.