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The impact of multi-party government on parliament-executive relations — examples from Britain and Germany*

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This paper deals with common concerns about multi-party and minority-governments, in particular, that they are unstable, that there is no clear string of delegation, that they may facilitate a dictatorship of the smaller party, and that they limit the parliament's scope to take the executive to account. It addresses the effect multi-party government has on parliament-executive relations by looking at empirical data from the United Kingdom and Germany, and takes account of the mechanisms used and experiences obtained in these countries when setting up and maintaining multi-party government.

In Britain, with its Westminster influence, parliamentarians in the devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales have grown slowly accustomed to coalition and minority government. Facilitated by a proportional representation system, coalition governments are the norm for Germany, both on a federal and at state level. These coalitions are established and maintained through a range of measures that secure the continuing support from the party, the party group, and the executive. These have provided stable and accountable governments over long periods of time.

Background and context

Following the 2010 federal election in Australia that did not produce a clear majority, Julia Gillard chose to govern with a minority of seats. Her minority government — the first one on a federal level for almost 70 years — was to be supported by confidence and supply agreements with the Green's only delegate in the House of Representatives and three independent MPs. Media comments and the public debate precluding and following this decision mirror the response to Britain's current coalition government. They show the electorate's uneasiness with

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this model of government. Despite the fact that all of Australia's states and territories have had a hung parliament in the last 25 years (Horne 2010, Griffith 2010), and anticipations that Australia's two-party hegemony is in slow decline (Bowe 2010), ruling without a clear majority of seats in many ways is felt to be inadequate for Westminster-style parliaments. The public discomfort in the UK and Australia with this model of government, which is much more common in continental Europe, was particularly palpable with regards to three issues. First, there seemed to be very limited knowledge of how governments requiring multi-party cooperation could work effectively. This was evident by the various newspaper articles following the recent general elections in the UK and Australia with headlines such as 'How the coalition government will work',¹ 'Minority government: how it works'² or 'Labor's minority government explained'.³ Secondly, was a fear that the smaller partner or partners would exert almost dictatorship-like influence without being adequately informed or resourced,⁴ that they were unable to make a right choice (Costar 2011a, 5f.) and that, by doing so, voters' preferences would not be adequately represented (Curtin & Miller 2011, 4ff). Thirdly, the recent British experience with multi-party government raised concerns that there are no clear lines of responsibility and action — one year after its promising start in May 2010, Britain's coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats reignited public concerns about the unsuitability of multi-party government for Westminster systems. According to an Institute for Government poll, more than two-thirds of people believed the government was 'weaker, less decisive and 'confused' about what it stands for'.⁵

What follows will address these three aspects by examining how multi-party government has been managed by other assemblies that have in the past been exposed more frequently to this particular way of governing. In so doing, it draws on interview material from the British devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales that, from May 1999 to May 2011, were governed through minority or coalition arrangements. Looking at experiences gained by the devolved assemblies can be useful in the Australian context as they highlight the cultural changes politicians have to face when transferring expectations made against the backdrop of majority governments to newly created multi-party arrangements. Adding to this are examples from German state and federal governments where multi-party arrangements have been the norm throughout the post-war era. The vast experience German parties have had with multi-party government has led to the development of an extensive set of formal and informal measures to ensure a balance of power of all stakeholders involved. As a result, the example of Germany is widely referred to in the context of multi-party arrangements, even in countries that — like the UK — follow a clear majoritarian approach (for example Seyd 2002, Bell & Murray 2007, Boucek 2010). Prior to looking at these examples from abroad this contribution will briefly analyse how multi-party coalitions in Australia have been typically managed in the past. By working out the particular idiosyncrasies of the country-specific models, this article aims to draw some conclusions as to how multi-party government 'Australian style' could further develop in order to take account of

societal developments that — despite the public uneasiness with multi-party arrangements — seem unable to back one majority party.

With regards to terminology, broad definitions are used, defining multi-party government as any government that is supported by more than one stakeholder (either a party or individual independents). The term coalition-government will be reserved for multi-party governments that are set up between two or more parliamentary parties that — in contrast to independent MPs — each aim to pursue policy changes that will affect society as a whole.

There is a plethora of literature on how coalitions are negotiated and formed (for example Laver & Schepsle 1996), with more recent research focusing on effective measures to control the cabinet personnel (Müller & Meyer 2010). However, the question how coalition-management affects the relationship between executive and the parliament, has only recently obtained more attention from parliamentary scholars, with Strøm, Müller & Smith (2010) conceding that knowledge in this field remains patchy and typically limited to single-country studies.

Australian experiences with multi-party government

The Australian public's uneasiness with multi-party governing arrangements is surprising, as being governed by more than one party is not a new concept. Even if one does not follow Brian Costar's example of interpreting government through the permanent alliance of National and Liberal party (Costar 2011b) as multi-party government, there have been multiple occasions of minority and coalition governments at state level (Griffith 2010) that precluded the example at a national level. Prominent instances are the selection of two Green ministers to the Tasmanian Government in 2010 and the appointment of two non-Labor members to cabinet in South Australia in 2002. Many of the minority parliaments in power since 1989 were based on simple written 'confidence and supply' arrangements with independent MPs who in return managed to secure benefits for their constituencies. In cases where MPs from outside the majority party were appointed to cabinet (ACT, South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania) further agreements were drawn to both secure commitments with regard to the legislative program and to allow dissent from cabinet decisions on particular issues (Griffith 2010, 6ff.). However, even when deals on such *Ersatz Coalitions* (Moon 1995) covered policy areas, this was generally limited to a few topics and did not embrace any of the cooperating party's legislative agenda as a whole. Apart from South Australia, where the then Premier honoured his agreement with the two independents by re-appointing them to office in 2006 despite Labor winning a comfortable majority in the Lower House (Abjorensen 2006, 4), all of these arrangements were strictly limited to the ongoing election period. In each of the cases the cooperating stakeholders from outside the governing party also retained their liberty to withdraw their support for projects that contradicted their political aims and beliefs. In addition, while the verdict on the current coalition between Labor and the Greens in Tasmania is still outstanding, the Greens' previous experiences in supporting the

government while sitting on the cross-benches (in 1989–92 and 1996–98) were unsatisfying as their coalition partners failed to fully honour their arrangements (Herr 2005).

When drawing agreements with the Green MP Adam Bandt and three of his independent colleagues, the Gillard government could build on the experiences gained with differing arrangements in the states. The deals Ms Gillard struck with the individual players reflect the width of agreements tried and tested in the state assemblies but do not exceed them. The arrangement with the Greens took account of the party's specific aims with regard to climate change and a range of further policy issues and installed regular consultations between the Prime Minister, Greens Leader Bob Brown and Mr Bandt (Greens 2010). In contrast, the detailed agreements drawn with independent MPs Tony Windsor and Rob Oakeshott focused on parliamentary reform and policy initiatives to be implemented in their electorates (Windsor 2010). The understanding signed by Andrew Wilkie finally bound the government both to infrastructural improvements in Wilkie's electorate and policy changes for the gambling industry.⁶

If one draws a brief synopsis of multi-party government in Australia based on the experiences to date, the following aspects emerge as typical:

- arrangements for multi-party government may require negotiations and written agreements with various independent stakeholders, each of whom may run a different agenda;
- depending on the co-operating parties' individual aims these confidence and supply agreements may trigger financial support for very specific constituency relevant aspects or particular policy areas, though they will run across a party's manifesto as a whole;
- even if in cabinet, stakeholders are at liberty to withdraw their support for the government's legislative agenda if this conflicts with their own aims and beliefs, thus contradicting the idea of a cabinet's joint responsibility.

Based on these features, multi-party government Australia style has obtained a footprint that makes it distinctive from its European counterparts.

Examples from abroad

What follows focusses on long-standing multi-party arrangements for German state and federal governments and on the practical experiences with multi-party government in the devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales. Legislatures in both contexts have been set up to counter existing models. In the case of Germany, the pre-war Weimar model gloriously failed when a rising numbers of left- and right-wing splinter-parties in the parliament had made it increasingly difficult to form solid democratic majorities. The powerful position of the Reich's president, who frequently was referred to as substitute emperor and could not be reined in by parliament, enabled Hitler, once elected into office, to further undermine the state's democratic structures by issuing decrees without the parliament's support. In

response to these issues, the post-war Federal Republic of Germany was set up within a framework of a clear separation of powers (reducing the now indirectly elected president to a primarily representational role), and an extensive system of checks and balances (for example by the distribution of legislative powers between parliament and the Federal Council and by setting up a powerful Constitutional Court). While a system of proportional representation has been maintained, parties have to overcome a 5 per cent threshold to enter the Bundestag or any of the 16 *Länder* assemblies. As a consequence of these measures, multi-party governments are the norm and German politics is characterised by an intertwined and overlapping system of decision-making which in the past has been tellingly labelled as ‘Grand Coalition state’ (Schmidt 2002) and ‘Joint Decision Trap’ (Scharpf 1988). While Germany’s overall political culture differs from that of Australia in regard to the party landscape, the election system and the relationship between parliament and the executive, the two countries share similarities as both have influential second chambers that — in times of divided control — may impact severely on the government’s legislative agenda (Steinack 2012).

While the historic backdrop for institutional arrangements in Scotland and Wales has been less dramatic, it equally reflects attempts to improve arrangements that were deemed to be unsatisfying. Set up in 1999 as part of the newly elected Labour government’s program of institutional reform, the assemblies were explicitly constructed as modern and efficient counter-drafts to the traditional Westminster model. A framework for this was set out in the government’s White Papers ‘Scotland’s Parliament’ (The Scottish Office, 1997) and ‘A Voice for Wales’ (Welsh Office 1997). The consecutively established Consultative Steering Group (1998) for Scotland and the National Assembly Advisory Group (1998) for Wales stressed the new institutions’ participative approach to legislation and policy making as a key principle and distinguishing feature that should lead to a different style of politics. The mixed member proportional (MMP) system used for the elections to both assemblies is similar to the one used for the Bundestag and most of the German *Länder* parliaments. Following the first elections to the devolved assemblies in May 1999, MMP has frequently produced assemblies with no clear majority and several smaller opposition parties that — in contrast to the classic Westminster model — require multi-party governing arrangements. However, politicians in these two regions were socialised in a Westminster-environment, similar to the one present in Australian assemblies, and consequently initially approached multi-party government against this backdrop.

In what follows, I will examine in more detail the formal and informal mechanisms used by the German, Welsh and Scottish assemblies and parliamentary parties for setting up and maintaining multi-party government, before discussing how these arrangements impact on the parliament-government relations. In addition to taking account of readily available literature, documents and newspaper articles published on the parliaments in question, parts of this research are based on interviews conducted in early 2009 with members of the devolved assemblies, conducted as part of recent research on party group interaction.⁷

Experiences in the UK

While parliamentary scholars dispute, whether devolution actually has delivered by leading to a different style of politics (Mitchell 2000, Bromley et al. 2006, Megaughin & Jeffery 2009, Larkin 2011), the MMP system has doubtless facilitated a stronger influence of smaller parties on Scottish and Welsh politics. In the past 12 years, both Scotland and Wales have gained significant experience with multi-party and minority governments,⁸ though in May 2011 both assemblies returned to single-party government. The growing impact of the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the Welsh national party Plaid Cymru has ‘confirmed the reality of multi-party politics away from Westminster’ (Lynch 2007, p. 323). As a consequence, the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales quickly developed mechanisms for setting up and dealing with multi-party arrangements (Seyd 2004). These include the support of civil servants in the process of negotiating a coalition, the development of coalition agreements, information sharing between coalescing parties, and informal ministerial meetings, with the two party leaders being at the centre of each of these steps (Seyd 2004, p.6).

While the first 12 years of managing multi-party arrangements in the devolved assemblies have contributed to further developing these initial arrangements, recent research (Steinack 2009, 2010) shows, that — after being socialised in a Westminster system — dealing with multi-party government clearly required a change of mindset of all stakeholders involved. The idea of entering a coalition per se initially had been quite foreign to many politicians, as the following quote illustrates:

It’s been a hard road in understanding, understanding coalitions because all of the UK parties, in fact all of us come with a tradition in the first past the post elections, you come with the tradition of being, you know, the party gets a majority and it’s been a very unusual circumstance when you have a coalition so for parties it’s been a learning process’. (AM6_Lib, para2).⁹

In contrast with the Liberal Democrats, who governed with Labour until 2007, Plaid Cymru was an unlikely partner for ideological as well as strategic reasons (Osmond, 2007). Consequently, its members were worried about entering the coalition with Labour as they feared a loss of political identity, as one spokesperson highlighted:

...a number of people felt and thought well we can’t do this for pragmatic reasons because Plaid Cymru, it will lose its status as the main opposition and therefore we will suffer immediately, now there, there is no reason for believing that that has happened in fact I would probably say the opposite. If anything I think we are doing better in term of getting our message across the media than we did before. (AM5_PC, para 32).

Indeed, MPs from the smaller parties — the Conservatives, the Liberals, and Plaid Cymru — highlighted the benefits multi-party government had brought them. In particular, the promotion of a more subject-oriented debate with frequent consensus on policy issues amongst all parties and the somewhat surprising fact that many of

the other party's political ideas could be accommodated without giving up any of one's own integral standpoints. For Wales, a 'One Wales' coalition agreement identified core policy areas to be addressed over the next four years (One Wales, 2007) and was ratified by special conferences of both parties prior to taking up government. A 'One Wales delivery plan' provided more detailed information on how and by when policy milestones would be reached; of which more than 90% had been implemented by the end of April 2011. To limit the potential of conflict amongst the coalition partners in their collective decision making, the 'One Wales' agreement (2007, pp. 39) set up various measures. Amongst these were:

- Collective responsibilities of the government as a whole for all decisions, announcements while at the same time guaranteeing confidentiality of all government-internal discussions.
- Autonomy of both coalition partners in nominating their personnel for previously agreed portfolios.
- Joint responsibility of the First Minister and the smaller coalition partner's Deputy First Minister for the presentation of policies.
- The establishment of a Cabinet Committee, comprising of First Minister, Deputy First Minister, Business Minister and the Business Manager of the other party to manage the day to day business of the coalition, to monitor the implementation of the delivery plan and to resolve any disagreements which may arise.
- The establishment of a joint Cabinet Committee on Finance to discuss strategic spending priorities and to control government spending.
- More detailed agreements on inter-party support from the backbenches that included frequent consultations of ministers with spokespersons of both parties.
- The acknowledgement that both parties need to maintain distinctive political identities and may express different views publicly.

Despite the fact that Labour and Plaid Cymru initially were seen as very unlikely partners to enter a coalition (Osmond 2007), their partnership endured over the full four year period. In Scotland, the SNP minority government depended on cooperation with the two Green MPs. In the agreement set up between the partners, the Greens committed to electing SNP's leader, Alex Salmond, as Scottish First Minister. In return, the SNP nominated a Green MP to convene one of the parliament's subject committees. Both parties also agreed to work constructively together on policy areas where there was common ground.¹⁰ In addition, and in order to limit the potential damage of government defeats, the SNP leader publicly announced that, while his government might be defeated from time to time, this would not necessarily be considered a matter of confidence (Paun & Hazel 2010, p. 218). Using this tactic, he safeguarded a potential deadly blow to the government in early 2009 when it did not get its budget through: Potentially, this could have brought the government down,¹¹ however, none of the parties were keen on new elections, and with the joint effort of all parties the decision was swiftly rectified, as one of the parliament's clerks recalled:

The way our Parliamentary procedures are set out, decisions are always taken at five o'clock (...) so when this budget was going through, at ten to five it still wasn't clear if the Government had enough support and the Green Party members were still discussing between themselves, whether they were supporting or not, as late as five minutes to go, and when the vote came through it was tied and, with a tied vote, the presenting officer has a casting vote but he's obliged to cast on the status quo. So he cast his vote against the budget and the budget fell, so that was a big blow for the Government, but overall the parties ... it could have become a matter of confidence in the Government. The opposition parties weren't opposed to the budget for the sole reason of bringing the Government down. They could have pursued that but they weren't. They were all trying to secure their own priorities and get more out of the Government and, in the minute the bill fell, they all were very quick to state that they wanted to work with the Government and get a budget through as soon as possible, so from what could have been an absolute disaster at 5 o'clock on the Wednesday, by the Thursday morning it was clear that they were all going to sort it out and we were able to put the budget through the next week, so it wasn't a case of attacking the Government just for the sake of attacking the Government, and they did all manage to get something out of the process which allowed them to vote for the budget and we all moved forward on that one. (MSP6_clerk, para 4).

Interviews conducted with Scottish MPs show that minority government overall strengthened parliament's role towards the executive as the SNP government had to open up to the other parties in order to gain support for its policies. At the same time, the SNP's minority role increased the other parties' responsibilities to be more realistic in their policy demands, as a conservative MP explained:

[Minority government] obviously made life an awful lot more exciting for us because (...) we have an input which we formerly did not have. For the Labour Party's perspective, clearly this has resulted in devastation because they operated the basis of the divine right to rule Scotland and this doesn't happen anymore and they simply have not adapted — even some of them have realised that they have not adapted to the role of opposition. And particularly to the challenging role that opposition now provides in that you cannot just go into that chamber now and part out the party line and go on a frolic of your own (...) As a result, I think, this is now making for better governance of Scotland and I think it is making for a better democratic set up. (MSP2_Con, para 2)

The experiences gained with multi-party government in Scotland and Wales reflect how a previously Westminster-oriented party system and electorate slowly become accustomed to multi-party government. However, the fact that both states returned to single party government after the last elections in May 2011 (Labour in power in Wales; a clear SNP majority in Scotland) indicates, that societal adaptation to multi-party opportunities may be a long process.

Experiences in Germany

Facilitated by a proportional representation system, multi-party governments are the norm for Germany, both at a federal and at a *Länder* level, though there have been significant periods of minority government in some of Germany's 16 states.¹² The

establishment and maintenance of these coalitions is facilitated by various measures securing the continuing support from the party, the party group, and the executive. They have provided stable and accountable governments over long periods of time. Lodge and Wegrich (2007, p.32), have described the way coalition government is managed in Germany as ‘marriage evaluation conducted by the wider public in the presence of potential new mating partners’. This situation of constant public scrutiny requires both a sound preparation for multi-party government from everyone involved and good maintenance agreements throughout the course of government. Incentives are each party’s willingness to share power, and the fear that — if the government of the day does not perform well — the coalescing parties may lose votes in the next elections.

The most important tool used by German parties to facilitate multi-party government is a detailed *coalition agreement* that sets the agenda across all departments over the period in office. With the thought in mind that conflict can be best prevented by putting as much as possible in writing, these agreements have become more and more detailed over the past 30 years. Recent coalition agreements in Germany reached from a little over 42,000 words for the conservative-liberal coalition federal level (CDU & CSU & FDP, 2009) to an epic length of almost 58,000 words for the Green lead coalition government (with the Labor equivalent SPD as the junior partner) in Baden-Württemberg (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen & SPD, 2011). Apart from providing specific guidelines on the policies that the coalition wants to achieve over the course of its life, coalition agreements normally conclude with a brief overview of how portfolios are distributed and some general guidelines on coalition behaviour. As a minimum, these request that no coalition member votes with changing majorities and that none of the governing parties may introduce legislation without seeking the partner’s prior consent to do so. For each party involved, the agreements are approved by a special party conference to ensure the party base’s backup for the plans. In addition, they require the consent of the party group within the assembly. With these steps, the parties formally acknowledge the need to compromise if they want to govern together. To be accepted by party base and parliamentary party, the compromise needs to be a balanced one that will not allow one party to dictate over the other.

While the policies the partners want to achieve normally try to reconcile differing points of view are implemented as the coalition’s policies, the management of ministries is down to the individual parties — i.e. it is the party’s responsibility to name their minister for a particular portfolio. The independence of ministers is also highlighted in the constitution as concept of ‘departmental principle’ (*Ressortprinzip*). The minister’s ‘power to propose, to negotiate and to formulate’ (Manow 1996, p. 100) makes it very clear who is to blame if particular policies aren’t implemented very well. This is all the more important as coalitions in Germany rarely resort to appointing ‘watchdog’ junior ministers (Thies 2001). Instead, the minister’s actions would be scrutinised through a corresponding subject specific committee chaired by either an opposition MP or an MP from the other coalition party (Kim & Loewenberg 2005).

In addition to the detailed coalition agreements, coalition governments in Germany have developed a dense system of informal structures that help keep all parties involved (Schreckenberger 1994, Kranenpohl 1999). At the top normally stands a *coalition (steering) group* with the head of government, the informal vice-chancellor¹³ the party leaders, the parliamentary groups' chairpersons and whips as main participants. Consisting of an equal number of representatives of each of the coalition partners involved (Rudzio 2008, p. 12), the group meets on a monthly or even weekly basis. In those meetings it sets the agenda for forthcoming weeks and reaches consensus on contested issues. The daily business of government is managed by the whips who remain in constant contact with all stakeholders. At committee level, the network is complemented by *coalition working groups* that help the coalescing parliamentary parties to find common grounds at an early stage. Often the experts pride themselves on solving a complex issue without escalating it to the top level, forcing them to find an early compromise, as the following example by a member of the smaller coalition party, FDP, shows:

Everyone who believes to be an expert in their area is normally so full of distrust with regards to the accidental results of the 'meetings of the elephants' — just by looking at how they work! So they try to keep them out. This is their joint interest. And it is also something that you can't use as a threat toward others because everyone knows that the other one does not want to escalate it to the coalition group. (Kranenpohl 1999, p. 290; own translation).

At the same time dealing with topics at this level ensures that only very few issues boil to the top and reach the potential to actually damage the coalition. As a result, past coalitions have managed to implement well above 70% of policies promised in their coalition agreement, thus allowing both partners to claim success.¹⁴ In cases where disputes can't be resolved, issues may be postponed — if necessary into the next legislative period. Smaller coalitions with a minimum of seats are generally thought to offer backbenchers of the governing parties more opportunities in making their voice heard, as in tight decisions every vote counts. However, research on Germany's two grand coalitions at a federal level (1966–68, 2005–09) indicates that having an overly large majority does not necessarily reduce the parliamentary party's influence. In the case of the more recent grand coalition, led by chancellor Merkel, various factions within the SPD forced the government to make substantial changes to its planned federalism reform. Though the influence of individuals (as opposed to factions) may be slightly smaller, this is compensated by the grand coalition's convenient majority which can more easily deal with abstentions from its own members than a tight-cut minimal coalition (Gast & Krahenpohl 2008, p. 23).

A further important element of multi-party government in Germany is a public awareness and tolerance of conflict between coalescing parties. It is, for example, not uncommon, for ministers to publicly criticise colleagues if they believe their particular policies do not meet the coalition's expectations. One recent example is the critique German's foreign minister, Westerwelle, was forced to endure following his abstention in the UN Security Council's decision for a mandate

against Libya. Apart from triggering calls for his resignation both from the opposition and senior high-ranking FDP members, Westerwelle was severely criticised by his cabinet colleague, defence minister DeMaiziere, who publicly declared that the government had made at least three wrong decisions in dealing with Libya.¹⁵ The public's principal openness for critique and compromise goes along with the understanding that the chancellor's role is more to facilitate political decisions than to enforce her party's particular agenda. In the German constitution, this has been adequately labelled as *chancellor's 'guidelines competence'* — i.e. the chancellor makes sure that her ship sails in the right direction, but she does not micro-manage the minister's portfolios.¹⁶

Multi-party government's effect on the executive-parliament relations

Looking at Germany and the devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales, multi-party government and the management of coalitions has various effects on the way parliament and the executive government interact. By nature, having more than one party determining a government's fate makes politics more complex. This applies at an *institutional level* as it adds more bodies where decisions are prepared and taken, and it affects *communication structures* (within a party, cross-party and towards the public) as achieving the stakeholders' support may require more complex, time-consuming negotiations. For minority government this means an opening in principle toward policy influence and input from MPs of other parties as they are needed by the government to forge compromises and support its legislative agenda. The case of the Scottish Parliament shows, that this does not imply that the government is taken hostage by one particular party. In contrast, each of the parties involved got some benefit out of the budget negotiations. In addition, engaging with a minority government forced the opposition parties to be more specific and realistic with regards to their own planned policies as there was an increased likelihood to achieve a package deal with the government. In contrast, coalition governments lead to more formal structures of communication and decision-making.

Coalition government per se leads to a more permanent interlocking of the executive and parliament as coalition agreements are normally sketched out over the full period of government. During this time, each party needs to find understanding and support in its own ranks for the compromises the joint policies with the partner may require. This is achieved by a fluid multi-level network of informal contacts amongst coalition partners that reach wide into the parliamentary parties. In the case of Germany this network reaches far beyond a core group of high-ranking members of the executive. Both coalition working groups and subject experts amongst the MPs are essential in reaching consensus amongst coalition partners when preparing committee decisions on coalition policies. While the more complex decision making process does not always allow for quick and easy fixes and policy u-turns, it does provide parliament with ample opportunities to exert influence on how policy agreements are actually implemented. In this context,

subject committees play an important role for developing joint solutions between MPs of different parties. Both German and Scottish committees have the power to re-draft government bills; the Scottish committees may even initiate legislation, though they rarely use this privilege (Arter 2004, Carman & Shepard 2009). The extensive discussion of legislation in the committees gives both coalition and opposition MPs the opportunity to amend and alter ministerial policy drafts and to leave parliament's mark.

Most importantly, however, multi-party government requires a *different approach to decision making* from all stakeholders involved as compromises need to be reached that are both mutually agreeable and sustainable. Along with this comes the opportunity to learn from each other and to take ownership of policies that might initially stand somewhat in contrast to one's own political ideals. Finally, managing such a complex system of reaching consensus requires a *different role of the head of government* who, by moderating competing interests, takes up the position of a 'strolling arbitration panel' as Merkel's predecessor in managing a Grand Coalition, chancellor Kiesinger, once has famously been dubbed (Niclaß 1988, 90).La

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of Australian experiences with multi-party government, this paper has looked at how multi-party arrangements are managed by coalition and minority governments in Germany and the devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales. While detailed coalition agreements provide a policy agenda over the whole period of government, a multi-level network of informal steering and working groups ensures the ongoing support of all members of the coalition's parliamentary parties for the implementation of the coalition agreement. The example of Germany shows that multi-party governments have successfully managed societal problems over a long period of time. A precondition of this are well established measures of managing the different expectations of all partners involved — both within government and within parliament — and the general acknowledgement that democracy more often than not is about compromising. The Scottish example of minority government shows how this can be achieved on a much simpler, less complex level, by actively involving all parties when taking decisions on particular policies.

What, if anything, can Australia learn from the examples above? From a (biased) European view it is certainly the insight that — while governing in multi-party arrangements may not be as straight forward as with a 'proper' Westminster majority — it is able to deliver sustainable policy changes, albeit often less radical ones and at a slower pace. In particular in cases where multi-party arrangements were focused on a broader set on policies (such as in Germany's coalition governments and in Welsh coalition between Labour and Plaid Cymru), merging the two coalescing party's political aims in one coherent legislative program empowered individual MPs and as a consequence parliament as a whole. As their support was vital to pass the government's legislative agenda, party leaders had to

ensure that the MP's voices were heard and taken into account. The interviews with MPs in the devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales show, that — approaching it from a Westminster-angle — governing in multi-party arrangements is a learning process for politicians, the media and the public, but that it can be enjoyable and beneficial for parliament if it is approached in a consensual manner and with the adequate structures to manage it. At the same time the fact that both Scotland and Wales returned to single-party government after 12 years of multi-party experience highlights that multi-party government is not a panacea and that adjusting to this particular style of politics may take time. ▲

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Endnotes

- ¹ *The Guardian*, 12 May 2010.
- ² *The Australian*, 22 August 2010.
- ³ ABC News, 8 September 2010.
- ⁴ See, for example, Niki Savva's opinion piece 'Shackled with a few rogue fence jumpers', *The Australian*, 7 September 2010.
- ⁵ *The Guardian*, 12 May 2011.
- ⁶ ABC News: 'Wilkie backs Gillard government', 2 September 2010, URL: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2010-09-02/wilkie-backs-gillard-government/2245782> (retrieved 26.01.2012). The arrangement was withdrawn by Wilkie in January 2012, arguing that the executive had not honoured the agreement. ABC News: 'Wilkie withdraws support over broken pokies deal', 21.01.2012, URL <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-01-21/wilkie-withdraws-support-over-broken-pokies-deal/3786040> (retrieved 26.01.2012)
- ⁷ ESRC postdoctoral fellowship 'The influence of party identities on opposition strategies in parliament. Policy making on a territorial level' (ESRC Grant Number PTA-026-27-1803). As part of her fellowship program the author conducted a total of 17 semi-structured interviews with MPs and clerks in the National Assembly for Wales (8) and the Scottish Parliament (9). All interviews were transcribed and coded, using Maxqda, a program developed for managing unstructured qualitative data. Codes were developed along the overarching themes of Party Identity, Party Group Behaviour, Governing Arrangements etc.
- ⁸ From 1999–2007 Scotland was governed by a Labour led coalition government with the Liberal Democrats. From 2007–2011 this was replaced by a minority government of the SNP. At the last assembly elections in May 2011 the SNP won the absolute majority of seats. Apart from short spells of Labour-minority government, Wales has been governed by a Labour led coalition government with the Liberal Democrats from 1999–2007. In 2007 this was replaced coalition between Labour and the nationalist Plaid Cymru before Labour managed to regain sole power in May 2011, relying on exactly 50% of seats.

- ⁹ This is echoed by the comment of a Labour college: ‘I think it took time for an understanding of coalition politics to engrain itself in the minds of the Welsh political parties because historically we weren’t use to it. But, I think now, that you know people understand what coalition is all about and can work within a coalition, which is essential, given the electoral system that we have’ (AM4_Lab, para3).
- ¹⁰ SNP and Greens Publish Cooperation Agreement. *SNP News*, 11.05.2007, <http://www.snp.org/node/7169>.
- ¹¹ ‘Alex Salmond threatens to call election after Scottish parliament rejects SNP’s budget. SNP’s minority government suffers serious setback after MSPs reject the 2009–10 budget bill’, *The Guardian*. 28.01.2009, URL: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/jan/28/scotland-snp> retrieved on 26.09.2011.
- ¹² The most dramatic example for this is Bavaria, which from 1962–2008 has been governed by an absolute majority of the conservative CSU, thus forcing the opposition parties to explore alternative avenues of influence outside parliament (Steinack 2011).
- ¹³ It is custom that the leader amongst the junior coalition partner’s ministers will act in lieu of the chancellor if she is not available.
- ¹⁴ According to Miller & Müller (2010, 337 with further references) 73% of the policies discussed in the agreements for Germany’s red-green coalition on a federal level (1998–2002) have been implemented. Henssler (2011, 105) confirms an implementation rate of 71,2 % for North-Rhine Westphalia’s red-green coalition (2000–2005). This success rate slightly exceeds the 70% found by Rallings (1987) for parliaments in Canada and the UK between 1945 and 1979 and is not extensively far of the 88% Bara (2005) found for the majority led British House of Common in the period 1987–2005.
- ¹⁵ ‘De Maizière räumt Fehler in deutscher Lybien-Politik ein’, *Financial Times Deutschland*, 26.08.2011.
- ¹⁶ Anecdotal evidence for this is the appearance of ministers in public. In comparison to their Australian colleagues, German ministers seem to have much more autonomy and independence in presenting their department’s policies, plans and achievements on television, and they normally do so without the chancellor’s support. In contrast, in the Australian television it seems to be regularly the prime minister doing the talking while the ministers in charge of their portfolio play a supporting act only.