

Cameron seeks deal with Lib Dems

BBC ONLINE

David Cameron has reached out to the Liberal Democrats in an effort to form a government - after the UK general election resulted in a hung parliament.

The Tory leader, whose party won most seats but was short of a majority, said he wanted to make a "big open and comprehensive offer" to the Lib Dems.

BBC political editor Nick Robinson said it could include Lib Dems in cabinet.

Labour leader Gordon Brown has already stressed his party's "common ground" with the third biggest party.

With results from all 649 constituencies contested on 6 May now declared, the Tories have got 306 seats - or 307 including the previously Tory held Thirsk and Malton where the election was postponed after the death of a candidate. It leaves the party just short of the 326 needed for an outright majority.

Labour have finished with 258 MPs, down 91, the Lib Dems 57, down 5, and other parties 28. The Conservatives got 36.1% of votes (up 3.8%), Labour 29.1% (down 6.2%) and the Lib Dems 23% (up 1%).

Past practice under Britain's unwritten constitution sees the sitting



Conservative Party leader David Cameron waves as he prepares to address the media in London yesterday. He said he wants to forge a "comprehensive" power-sharing deal with Liberal Democrats.

prime minister in a hung parliament having the right to make the first attempt at forming a ruling coalition.

'MEASURE OF AGREEMENT'
But Mr Cameron said Mr Brown had "lost his mandate to govern"

after the Conservatives won the most votes and the most seats.
And Nick Clegg, leader of the third

biggest party, the Lib Dems, said he believed the result gave the Tories the right to seek to govern first.

Mr Cameron referred to the "outgoing Labour government" in his speech. But Mr Brown said he was making his statement "as prime minister with a constitutional duty to seek to resolve the situation for the good of the country".

The Conservative leader said talks would begin with other parties. He said one option was to offer them reassurances about certain policy areas - then try to govern as a minority Conservative government.

But he said it might be possible "to have stronger, more stable, more collaborative government than that".

"I want to make a big, open and comprehensive offer to the Liberal Democrats. I want us to work together in tackling our country's big and urgent problems - the debt crisis, our deep social problems and our broken political system," he said.

While there were policy disagreements between the Tories and Lib Dems - including on the European Union and defence - there were also "many areas of common ground".

The Conservatives agreed with the Lib Dem on ideas such as a "pupil premium" in schools, a low-carbon economy, tax reform and shared opposition to Labour's ID cards scheme.

Polling day chaos as people lose chance to vote

AFP, London

The election watchdog launched an investigation yesterday after queues of angry voters were blocked from casting their ballots before polls closed in cliff-hanger elections.

There were chaotic scenes at polling stations across the country Thursday as people waited for hours but were still not in time to cast their ballots before the 10:00 pm voting deadline.

Election officials appeared ill-prepared for large numbers of people - early figures pointed to a higher turnout than normal - and were caught off guard by a surge of voters in the final hours of polling.

Police were called in to control an unruly crowd who missed out on voting at one polling station in Sheffield where a group of irate students protested by attempting to stop ballot boxes being taken away.

Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg, a member of parliament from the city, said he shared the "bitter dismay" of many of his constituents who could not vote.

"I visited the busiest polling station this afternoon, and in mid-afternoon there were hundreds - particularly of young voters - who were queuing for an hour and a half to vote, and I think it is just not right that hundreds later found themselves unable to exercise their right when the polls closed."

"That should never, ever happen again in our democracy," he said in his acceptance speech after being voted back into his Sheffield Hallam constituency.

Would-be voters in London staged a sit-in after they queued up but were too late to cast their ballots, while some polling stations had to close briefly after running out of ballot papers.

UK's uncertain future slams pound

AFP, London

The pound slumped to a 13-month low yesterday on fears that Britain's election outcome would hamper the nation's ability to slash sky-high public debt, analysts said.

London's benchmark FTSE 100 index also sank but experts said this was mainly owing to fears that the Greek debt crisis risked spreading.

Britain's election has sparked the country's first official hung parliament since 1974, with the main opposition Conservatives garnering the most seats but with no chance of winning an overall majority, results showed.

"We are in no-man's land at the moment and the markets do not like uncertainty -- this is leading to a sell-off in the pound," said Currencies Direct dealer Phil McHugh.

Stormy times ahead for Britain

AFP, London

Britain faces a turbulent few months after the general election produced a parliament without one party holding an absolute majority -- and the answer may be another election, commentators said yesterday.

The opposition Conservatives finished as the biggest party in the House of Commons, but fell short of their 326-seat target, which would have allowed them to govern as a single party.

The horse-trading started immediately, with Nick Clegg, the leader of the third-biggest party, the Liberal Democrats, indicating that the Conservatives had earned the "first right to seek to govern".

Whether the Conservatives can bridge their deep differences and do a deal with the Lib Dems, or Prime Minister Gordon Brown's Labour can cling onto power by persuading the Lib Dems over to their side, both solutions would be unusual for Britain.

They carry the risk of instability at

a time when a British government will have to deal with a record deficit and weak economic growth, as commentators were quick to point out.

"The more we hear of the different permutations of who might work with whom after tonight, the more I feel there is only one certainty: we'll be having another general election before too long," said Jackie Ashley in The Guardian.

The Daily Mail said a hung parliament was a "nightmare scenario".

In an editorial, it said a Conservative-Lib Dem coalition would be fraught with problems for Cameron.

"Cameron would have only a tenuous grip on power -- with the Lib Dems in a position to defeat any policy they remotely disagree with -- such as stricter immigration controls, or abolition of the Human Rights Act," it said.

Another potential route for Cameron could be a deal with unionist members of parliament in Northern Ireland in return for their support, but that would carry a

heavy burden for the British taxpayer, the paper said.

"The DUP (Democratic Unionist Party) would demand Northern Ireland is spared 200 million pounds (290 million dollars, 230 million euros) of cuts in state spending from an economy over-reliant on state jobs," it said.

The Conservative-supporting Daily Telegraph admitted that the task facing Cameron was "daunting".

"It is highly unlikely that Mr Cameron will seek a coalition with other parties and he would be wise to avoid doing so," it said in an editorial.

"Without a healthy majority, the task facing him is even more daunting. Rarely, in peacetime, will a new government have taken power in less propitious circumstances," it added.

"An economic catastrophe has saddled the nation with a crippling burden of debt, while the impact of the MPs' expenses scandal still sullies the relationship between politician and voter."



Gordon Brown 'proud of Labour's record'
In The Times, Rachel Sylvester said Cameron had secured nothing more than a "half-hearted endorsement".
"The voters have turned their

Cameron says Labour have 'lost mandate'
backs on Gordon Brown but they have not rushed into the arms of the Tories, in the way they did with new Labour 13 years ago," she wrote.

Clegg 'disappointed' at Lib Dem results

British PM lets opposition parties talk power deal first

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said yesterday he would let the opposition Conservatives and Liberal Democrats hold power sharing talks first, but offered to talk to the Lib Dems if they failed.

Brown said he respected the decision of Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg to meet Conservative leader David Cameron after Thursday's indecisive election and they should "be entitled to take as much time as they feel necessary".

"Clearly should the discussions between Cameron and Clegg come to nothing then I would of course be prepared to discuss with Clegg the areas where there may be some measure of agreement between our two parties," he said.

China opens first office in Taiwan

AFP, Taipei

China yesterday opened its first office in Taiwan, hoping to boost tourism and calling it a "milestone" signalling improved relations between the two former rivals.

China's quasi-official Cross-Strait Tourism Exchange Association formally launched its Taipei office -- reportedly its largest outside the mainland -- at a gala dinner at the capital's Grand Hotel.

"This is a key development and milestone in exchanges across the Taiwan Strait," Shao Qiwei, the head of the China National Tourism Administration, said at the opening ceremony.

Chinese from most of the mainland are allowed to travel to Taiwan, and Shao said Beijing would soon allow six more provinces to open up for visits to the island.

Japan PM rebuffed in US base row

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's premier, under fire over a row about an unpopular US airbase, suffered another setback yesterday when three mayors from a remote southern island told him they do not want to host any American forces.

Yukio Hatoyama pleaded with the visiting mayors from remote Tokunoshima to allow in US Marines and asked if he could visit the island for further talks, only to be told: "We cannot meet you."

Hatoyama has faced heavy criticism since he backtracked Tuesday on an election pledge made last year to move the US Marine Corps Air Station Futenma entirely off the larger far-southern island of Okinawa.

Instead, the centre-left leader conceded this week that most of the American base operations will have to be moved within Okinawa, as originally agreed by previous conservative governments in Washington and Tokyo in 2006.

Iran hosts UNSC envoys

AFP, United Nations

In a surprise move, Iran invited all 15 UN Security Council members to dinner in New York, leading to one of the highest-level US-Iran contacts since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

The contact was with Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki, who hosted an evening that was unexpected as it came in the midst of an escalating diplomatic crisis.

The five permanent Security Council members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- are considering whether to impose a fourth round of sanctions on Iran over its nuclear ambitions.

They are trying to get Iran to stop enriching uranium, which can be used as fuel either for civilian power reactors or atomic weapons.

Washington and Tehran have had no diplomatic relations since April 1980, and face-to-face encounters between the countries' senior officials are rare.

In a recent breakthrough in contacts between Washington and Tehran, the number three from the US State Department William Burns met last October in Geneva with the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Saeed Jalili.

China storm death toll rises to 58

AFP, Beijing

The death toll from fierce storms and torrential rains that ravaged southern China this week has risen to at least 58 people with tens of thousands left homeless, state media reported yesterday.

The extreme weather hit southern parts of China overnight from Wednesday to Thursday, leaving at least 190 injured and a further 11 missing, the official Xinhua news agency said.

The southwestern municipality of Chongqing was the worst hit after a tornado and gale-force winds killed 29 people, destroyed homes, uprooted trees, flooded roads and caused landslides.

More than 70,000 people were displaced in Chongqing, according to the civil affairs ministry.

German parliamentary vote backs Greece aid

BBC ONLINE

Germany's lower house of parliament has voted to approve a 22.4bn euro (£19bn) bail-out plan for debt-ridden Greece, despite widespread public opposition.

The Bundestag passed the bill after a fiery debate in which Chancellor Angela Merkel was savaged by her critics.

The bill was passed by 390 votes to 72, with 139 abstentions.

The upper house, the Bundesrat, will now vote on the bill. If approved, it will be signed into law by President Horst Koehler.

Merkel has defended her plan, saying the EU was at stake. She had warned that if the 27 member states did not work together on such crises, "the markets will think we're unable to act".

Merkel's critics used the emotional Bundestag debate to criticise her handling of the crisis, saying she had been slow to act, says the BBC's Steve Rosenberg in Berlin.

The opposition Social Democrats abstained, saying the burden of the country's contribution fell too heavily on ordinary tax payers rather than the financial markets.

But the bill was passed as Merkel's Christian Democratic Union and coalition partner, the Free Democratic Party, have a comfortable majority in parliament.

Finance Minister Wolfgang Schaueble earlier asked the opposition for support for the legislation, saying the markets would "pay attention to how the help is being backed on a national level".

The German press has labelled the country's contribution as "the fattest cheque in history".

Even if the legislation is approved, one group of Euroscientists may challenge the decision in Germany's highest court, our correspondent says.

Under the bail-out, Greece's 15 partners in the eurozone will lend it 80bn euros spread over three years and the International Monetary Fund will lend 30bn euros.

Iraq vote winner asserts right to form govt

AP, Baghdad

The leader of the top vote-getting coalition in Iraq's inconclusive March 7 elections insisted his bloc still has the right to form the next government despite an alliance forged this week between two rival Shia groups.

The alliance makes the Shias the largest political bloc in parliament, setting the stage for outmanoeuvring the election win of Ayad Allawi's cross-sectarian Iraqiya party. Strong Sunni support helped his bloc eke out a slim lead in the balloting in which no group won an outright majority in the 325 seat parliament.

Allawi received a blow when the Kurdish coalition indicated they would be happy to ally with the Shites as they have done in the past.



Thai pro-government demonstrators shout slogans during a small rally at the Victory Monument in Bangkok yesterday. Thailand's premier was fighting to keep his floundering peace process alive, seeking the support of his coalition partners for a plan that has so far failed to win over rival protest movements

Thai PM battles to keep peace roadmap on track

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's beleaguered premier was fighting to keep his peace process alive in the face of growing opposition among rival protest movements to his "roadmap" to early elections.

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva's proposal, which envisages dissolving parliament in the second half of September for polls in mid-November, aims to end a crippling weeks-long political crisis.

"We have to seek cooperation from everybody to return Thailand to peace," one of his deputies Suthep Thaugsuban told reporters. "Everybody must avoid violence and help solve the problem."

But the anti-government "Red Shirts" are demanding a firmer timeline before ending eight weeks of protests that have paralysed parts of Bangkok and erupted into bouts of violence that left 27 people dead and injured almost 1,000.

"The Red Shirts will stop our demonstrations when our people have a clear answer to what we demand and when our people are safe," protest leader Jatuporn Prompan told a news conference.

The rival pro-establishment "Yellow Shirts" -- who blockaded Bangkok's airports in their own protests -- have rejected the roadmap and election plan and called on the prime minister to resign.

And in another setback, a moderate pro-government group known as the "Multicoloureds", whose rallies in the capital have also drawn thousands of supporters, called for the election date to be pushed back.

"We are shocked and disagree with house dissolution so soon and want the election to be delayed until early next year," one of the multicoloured leaders, Tul Sithisomwong, said after talks with the premier.

In a colour-coded crisis, Thailand is largely split between the mainly rural poor and urban working class Reds -- who broadly support fugitive former premier Thaksin Shinawatra -- and the elite-backed Yellows.

PHOTO: AFP