

The Washington Post

Queen's role more important during a hung Parliament in Britain

By Karla Adam
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, May 6, 2010; 8:45 PM

LONDON -- In the movie "The Queen," Helen Mirren invites Tony Blair's character, who is kneeling at her feet, to become prime minister and form a government in her name. The year was 1997, and the real Tony Blair had just won a landslide victory.

Today, things are different. As Britons went to the polls Thursday in one of the closest races in a generation, the outcome was far from conclusive. The [U.K.](#) has no written constitution, but by convention, if one party wins more than half the seats in the House of Commons, the queen summons the leader of that party and formally anoints that person prime minister.

But if no party clinches a majority win, as many polls say is likely, Queen Elizabeth II could potentially play a more central role than in recent elections.

What's the queen's role in British politics?

The queen is the head of state of the United Kingdom. But as stated on the British monarchy's web site, she must "remain strictly neutral with respect to political matters" and is "unable to vote or stand for election."

Still, she has various official roles. For example, she formally dissolves government and appoints new prime ministers. These are formalities and in practice, "she has no discretion" and acts on the advice of her prime minister, said Robert Hazell, a constitutional expert at University College London.

The British monarch also meets regularly with the prime minister, usually for about an hour a week on Tuesdays, said Vernon Bogdanor, a constitutional expert at Oxford University. "You could say the queen is the most experienced person on the political scene. She's met with 11 prime ministers, one more than Queen Victoria, starting with Churchill. She's seen it all. Their conversations are private. Her role is not to make decisions but to endorse decisions," he said.

If no one wins a majority, who does the queen summon to form a government?

In the event of a hung Parliament, either a minority government will attempt to govern alone, or a coalition or pact will be formed between two or more parties. The queen steers clear of this wrangling; it's up to the parties to decide who will command the support of the House of Commons. Prime Minister Gordon Brown, "as a constitutional adviser, would have to forgo party political interests and advise her on where the balance of power lies," said Hazell, adding "there's a convention that the queen should not be brought into political controversy."

But what if the parties can't agree on who has the best chance of forming a government?

This is one scenario in which the queen could use her "reserve powers" to intervene, Bogdanor said. The queen could call a fresh election if a workable government can't be formed (likewise, she can prevent an election from being called if she thinks there are other viable options).

"Suppose Brown is defeated in Parliament and then Cameron is defeated in Parliament -- this is very unlikely -- then the queen could call a new election," said Bogdanor, adding that the monarch's "reserve powers," have "not been used in the 20th century."

If David Cameron's Conservatives win the most number of seats, as predicted, will the queen automatically "invite" Cameron to form a government?

Not necessarily. "Until Brown resigns, there is no vacancy," said Bogdanor, who noted that even if the British prime minister's party wins the second- or third-most seats, as predicted, Brown can hang on "as a kind of caretaker prime minister with limited powers" until he fails a vote of confidence. However, it is likely that Brown will resign if Cameron's Conservatives win close to a majority of the seats or if Labor cannot form a workable coalition with another party.

The next big day for whoever is prime minister is May 25, the date for the Queen's Speech, the legislative program written by the government. If this is defeated in Parliament, the prime minister must resign.

How important is the queen's role in general elections?

"The queen is the backstop if people don't play by the constitutional rules," Bogdanor said. "She's like a kind of constitutional umpire."