

# Friend or foe? Government partnership tested

Conservative and Lib Dem politicians go head-to-head in an election this week while working as partners in the national coalition government.



POLITICS  
CITIZENSHIP

**T**his week voters in the North West of England will be able to choose a new Member of Parliament for their local area in a by-election.

The constituency of Oldham East and Saddleworth is being bombarded with visits from high-profile politicians from all three main political parties - Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats - asking the public to support their own candidate.

A by-election is usually seen as a verdict on how the government of the day is performing, although local issues and candidates always make a difference to the result.

But this is a contest with a difference: two parties working together in a coalition government are fighting it out for votes.

Last May's general election gave no single party a majority of MPs so the

Conservative leader David Cameron, who had the highest number of MPs, decided to work with the Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg and his smaller grouping.

This coalition deal resulted in the first two-party government since the Second World War.

It could be a close-run thing. Surveys of public opinion show Liberal Democrat popularity has fallen, and Labour more popular than the Conservatives.

Labour is campaigning in Oldham against both Government parties' policies to cut public spending and increase sales tax. Ed Miliband, Labour leader said it was "the first opportunity to send a message to the government about what they are doing."

But Labour has problems: the party only won the seat in last year's general election by 103 votes and then had to give up the seat and compete in this

by-election because their MP was found guilty in court of lying about his Liberal Democrat runner-up.

## BROTHERS IN ARMS?

Political gossips claim the Conservatives are not fighting very hard in Oldham East and Saddleworth because they want to let their Lib Dem coalition partners win and give them a boost. Labour, meanwhile, are telling voters the Lib Dems are no longer an independent party because they are helping the Conservatives govern the UK.

Can political parties compete for votes and co-operate at the same time? Could fighting in elections damage that partnership? We will discover what the voters think on Thursday.



Q & A

## Q Why is there an election this week?

**A** The MP for one area, Oldham East and Saddleworth, was told to stand down after the courts found him guilty of lying about his opponent in a leaflet that helped him win during last year's general election.

On Thursday local voters will choose a new MP.

## Q Why does it matter?

**A** The by-election will be seen as a verdict on the success of the two parties in the coalition government, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. The result is also the first time voters can show what they think of the new Labour leader, Ed Miliband.

## Q Who is fighting against whom?

**A** All three main political parties, Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrats, are fighting to win the seat. But because the

other two parties are working together nationally as partners in the coalition government, Labour is the only opposition party able to take advantage of any anti-government feeling.

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

**Now they've joined the government, the Lib-Dems are pointless.**

WHAT DO YOU THINK?