

Engineering the national interest

So, with a new coalition government at the helm, what do our political masters (or is that now servants) have in store for the UK's future? And how exactly is that likely to stack up against the country's requirements, as identified pre-election by the engineering institutions, in terms of carbon emissions cutting, support for technology and innovation, and delivering a competent engineering skills pool, capable of regenerating our ailing economy?

On the face of it, Messers Cameron and Clegg have delivered a promising start. We've witnessed a surprise Tory and Liberal Democrat coalition, apparently forged in a spirit of co-operation 'in the national interest'. Moreover, there is a refreshingly collaborative and apparently candid approach to the issues of the day, wholly at odds with the adversarial government to which we have all long been accustomed.

Will the love-in last? Who knows? More importantly, will this new administration offer an agenda that we, as engineers, can believe in as adequate and sustainable? Early answers, we might hope, should lie in the coalition's 'Our Programme for Government, issued within days of coming to power, and purporting to deliver a framework for serious change, both economic and green.

Understandably, it's thin on detail. However, there is cause for some optimism. In the section on business, for example, the document reads: "We will consider the implementation of the Dyson Review to make the UK the leading hi-tech exporter in Europe..." That implies signing up to a charter for: raising the esteem in which engineers are held; offering engineering scholarships and vocational degrees; funding knowledge transfer and exploitation; and designing tax and investment incentives.

Beyond that, new business secretary Vince Cable will be presiding over a "full programme of measures to fulfil our joint ambitions for a low carbon and eco-friendly economy". Central to this aspiration are: increasing the targets for energy from renewables; continuing with the feed-in tariffs and renewables obligation certificates (page 20); measures to promote "a huge increase" in energy from waste; and encouraging marine energy (and note, not just offshore wind farms).

The list goes on in a similarly encouraging and harmonious vein, with the exception of progress on new nuclear plants, where the Lib Dems' and Tories' differences do surface. But even this isn't ducked, with the document making the partners' carefully constructed compromise process clear, and leaving the door open for development.

Looks like a busy five years ahead for the new government – and for engineers.

Brian Tinham BSc CEng MInstMC FSOE FIPlantE, Editor

