Preface

One of the most significant phenomena in British political history since the 1970s has been the formation of minority governments by prime ministers, including Edward Heath, Harold Wilson, Jim Callaghan, John Major and, most recently, Theresa May in June 2017. Steeped in the majoritarian culture of the ‘Westminster system’, dominated by single-party adversarial majority governments, historians and commentators have not given the phenomenon of minority government the attention it has deserved, which has led to a number of pervasive ‘myths’. These myths may be, on the one hand, widely held beliefs explicitly articulated (such as there being a binary choice in election dates between 1978 and 1979). On the other hand, myths may arise through an implicit acceptance of, or a failure to question, the inevitability of certain events (such as the Government formed in April 1976 continuing as a minority without holding an election or forming a coalition).

Consequently, minority governance has been dismissed as an aberration, an interlude between ‘normal’ and ‘victorious’ administrations, which have commanded the interest of politicians, political analysts and the general public. This study seeks to challenge these myths and established perceptions of minority government in the 1970s through a reading of declassified internal government and party files, and to demonstrate that there is a distinctive ‘British tradition of minority government’ that provides a new perspective on the existing corpus of international theory regarding the subject.

To support the concept of this hitherto unrecognised tradition, the study incorporates comparisons with British minority administrations from the 1920s to the Conservative Minority Government elected in June 2017. Comparisons are also made with minority governments globally to distinguish the unique and distinctive contribution of Britain’s tradition. There is not the scope here to conduct detailed comparisons across the full range of British minority governments historically. A further study of other administrations will be needed to trace the impact and evolution of this tradition.