

WHAT DO WE DO NOW?

The coalition is a product of strengths and weaknesses but the Lib Dems must learn which are which, says Simon Titley

“Go back to your constituencies and prepare for government.” How they laughed. But 29 years after David Steel’s famous declaration, the Liberal Democrats suddenly find themselves in government. Whether they prepared for it is another matter.

The party seems surprised to find itself in coalition but it was bound to happen sooner or later. The combined Conservative-plus-Labour share of the vote has been declining steadily, from a post-war peak of 97% in 1951 to a post-war low of 65% this year. Even with first-past-the-post, hung parliaments are increasingly likely. With proportional representation, they are inevitable.

Coalitions have been the norm in Scotland and Wales since devolution, while hung councils have been commonplace since the 1980s. As a result, during the past 25 years, hundreds if not thousands of Lib Dems have served in coalitions of one kind or another. The media don’t get this; they depicted the Lib Dems as ‘political virgins’ ill-prepared for coalition. None of them realised the significance of Andrew Stunell’s place in the Lib Dem negotiating team.

I have little sympathy with party members who regard coalition with the Tories as necessarily some sort of ‘sell out’. Such objections might have been valid if the parliamentary arithmetic were different, if a better alternative had been realistically available, or if the party’s negotiators had come away with a poor deal. But it isn’t, there wasn’t and they didn’t. You can’t object on principle to coalitions if you believe in PR. You can’t object on principle to compromises if you accept coalitions.

Likewise, I have little sympathy for any Lib Dem voters who feel cheated. As Armando Iannucci put it (Independent, 15 May), “I get frustrated when Liberal Democrat voters shout that they never voted for Cameron. No, they didn’t. But they knew there’d most probably be a hung parliament. What on earth were they expecting? A coalition with Esther Rantzen? Some would argue they were doing it expecting a pact with Labour, but alas, democracy doesn’t yet provide us with a system where we can vote for one party while influencing how many people vote for another.”

Most Lib Dem members are best described as ‘critical friends’ of the coalition, at least for now. They are naturally queasy about collaborating with the old enemy but nevertheless gratified to see many of their policies included in the coalition agreement and the Queen’s Speech.

The success of the Lib Dem negotiators demonstrates the robustness of the party’s democratic processes and demolishes several right-wing myths. The ‘triple lock’ (the policy governing deals with other parties, passed at the 1998 spring conference) came in for a lot of mockery from the media and disdain from party right-wingers. When this policy was rediscovered earlier this year, it was depicted as an unwarranted encumbrance

on the leader and evidence that the party wasn’t serious, since the ‘beards and sandals’ had the power to block the good governance of the country.

In the event, the triple lock proved a considerable asset. Throughout the negotiations, the Lib Dems’ MPs and Federal Executive were kept informed at regular meetings. This in turn enabled assurances to be fed down to party activists. Since both the parliamentary party and the FE voted by more than the required 75%, the special conference on 16 May was not strictly necessary but it ensured the buy-in of party members (the only pity is that the media were excluded from the event). In contrast, senior figures in both the Conservative and Labour parties complained of their exclusion from the process.

The success of the negotiations also demonstrated the robustness of the Lib Dems’ policy and policy-making machinery. These provided the party’s negotiators with a strong bargaining position and a need to hold a line on certain issues, whereas the Tory negotiators could pretty much give up anything they liked.

There have been suggestions from the Lib Dem right-wing that the coalition renders the party’s democratic policy-making redundant, because the conference cannot mandate the government and might embarrass it. But this is a coalition, not a merger, and the party is not the same thing as the government. The negotiations demonstrate the need for the Lib Dems to maintain democratic policy-making to ensure the party’s strength and independence at the next election.

But don’t assume the coalition is mainly the product of Lib Dem negotiating skills. Look at it from the Tories’ point of view. As the largest party, they could have formed a minority government, with or without a ‘confidence and supply’ agreement with the Lib Dems. Then, with the power to decide the timing of the next general election, they could have called a second election in the autumn. They have plenty of money left in their war chest and would probably have won an overall majority. What’s not to like?

The Tories paradoxically opted for a coalition rather than minority government because of David Cameron’s overriding desire to rebrand his party. A deal with the Lib Dems enabled him to pull off what he had been unable to achieve in over four years of leadership – the detoxifying of the Tory brand and the marginalisation of his party’s right-wing.

Cameron’s strategy is a mixed blessing for the Lib Dems. It has given them a role in government for the first time in 65 years. By rolling over and accepting more negotiating demands than the Lib Dems had any right to expect, Cameron made sure that the Lib Dems have a powerful incentive to make the coalition work. Yet this situation will make it harder for the Lib Dems to retain their distinctiveness and more likely that, by the time of the next election, voters will wonder what the Lib Dems are for.

That election is five years away, assuming the fixed-term parliament can be made to stick. A lot can change in that time. Speculation about how the coalition might come unstuck has focused on the main areas of policy difference such as fiscal policy, electoral reform and Europe. Yet these seem to be the flashpoints more for Tory dissent – there is far more disgruntlement in the Tory backwoods and backbenches than there is among the Lib Dems.

Lib Dem disillusionment is more likely to arise from experience on the doorsteps. In England (unlike Scotland and Wales), the Lib Dems have no experience of campaigning while in government. Local Focus teams who have relied on a vocabulary of opposition will find themselves bereft. The scale of the cuts means that Lib Dem activists are likely to experience popular anger, which could translate into poor results in next May's elections.

Recall what Mervyn King, Governor of the Bank of England, said before this year's election; that whoever won would be out of power for a whole generation because of how tough the fiscal austerity will have to be. This is obviously the crude calculation behind the Labour Party's embrace of opposition.

IDEOLOGICAL WEAKNESSES

The three greatest weaknesses of the coalition are not policy splits but ideological similarities. Each is the product of a stunted concept of empowering the individual, which typifies the economism shared by the Tories and the *Orange Book* tendency in the Liberal Democrats.

The first weakness is a refusal to accept that neoliberal economic ideology, which has dominated political thinking for the past thirty years, is now a busted flush (see my previous article in *Liberator* 338). An insistence on keeping the neoliberal show on the road will lead to a succession of worse and worse crises. But there is no appetite within the coalition for radically refashioning the economy along more socially just and sustainable lines, just a belief that a bit of regulatory tinkering will restore business as usual.

The second weakness is the constitutional reform agenda. It is the greatest Lib Dem achievement of the coalition negotiations and contains many things Liberals can cheer. But it appears more concerned with procedures than outcomes. It emphasises the value of legal, formal freedoms while overlooking real, felt freedom. There seems no linkage to an idea of social justice or a realisation that constitutional rights are more difficult to exploit for people lacking economic or social power.

The third weakness is the assumption that Lib Dem 'community politics' and the Tory 'Big Society' are the same thing. A quick comparison of *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics* with Phillip Blond's *Red Tory* would soon disabuse anyone of that notion. Blond (Cameron's guru and the brains behind the 'Big Society') is strongly anti-liberal. He believes liberalism is essentially anti-social, dislikes the idea of individual autonomy and concludes that "a vision of the good life cannot come from liberal principles."

Blond's 'Big Society' is rooted in nostalgia for an idealised, pre-industrial, rural community; but most British people live in cities. And just as the Lib Dems have tended to reduce 'community politics' to election techniques, so the Tories will soon reduce the 'Big

Society' to a means of saving money by dumping social services on the voluntary sector.

CAMPAIGN FAILURE

The coalition is so momentous that it has obscured the failure of the Lib Dem election campaign. The party is in government despite its campaign rather than because of it. The centrally-run campaign was fundamentally misconceived. There was no synergy between the centrally-run 'air war' and the 'ground war' being fought in target constituencies. Cowley Street instructed local parties to play down the local elections and had no concept of running integrated campaigns.

When the 'surge' came following the first TV leader's debate, the party failed to capitalise on it. Instead, Cowley Street decided to put all its eggs in the 'Cleggmania' basket. The level of stupidity can be gauged by the fact that, the day after the first TV debate, Vince Cable was unceremoniously dumped. All his joint appearances with Clegg were cancelled and his portrait was removed from the party's website homepage.

As Lib Dem opinion poll ratings soared, one cheerleader for the right-wing cabal running the campaign wrote on Facebook: "So... 26-34% in the polls, almost all the boost down to media skills and leadership not leaflets and target seats... I've got to ask... anyone missing Rennard...?" The complete collapse of the 'surge' to 23% on polling day, just 1% more than the party won in 2005, suggests there was no basis for such conceit.

Cowley Street assumed the second and third TV debates would automatically lead to further gains in support. It focused the 'air war' on Clegg's personality and did nothing to develop the party's messages. The 'ground war' was just as bad. Local parties were relying on cliché-laden leaflets with little to say beyond the usual bar charts and negative messages. And after the surge, the target seat strategy was effectively abandoned and a dozen seats were lost by fewer than 900 votes.

What the campaign revealed above all was the Lib Dems' long-standing failure to consolidate a core vote. The mantra "we can win everywhere" symbolises a reluctance to enthuse the party's natural base and an overriding fear of causing offence. No wonder Lib Dem support in this election was unusually soft. An eve-of-election opinion poll conducted by Ipsos MORI showed that, whereas 28% of Labour voters and 17% of Conservatives said they might change their mind, 40% of Lib Dems said they might. And they did.

What will be the fate of this coalition? It will end in tears – political projects always do. In the meantime, the Lib Dems should exploit the situation for all it's worth and not feel inhibited about maintaining or developing an independent identity. The party should shun any grandiose idea of a 'centre-right realignment' or, worse, a coupon election. Instead, they will need an exit strategy.

However the coalition ends, it will likely be due to the unpredictable force Harold Macmillan most feared: "Events, dear boy, events."

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