

SCREW OR BE SCREWED

There is a risk that Liberal Democrat members unhappy with the coalition will drift away one by one. They must play a longer game, says Simon Titley

Three months into the coalition government and how are the Liberal Democrats feeling? ‘Mixed’ is the short answer. Indeed, the demeanour of party members resembles that of first-time clients in a high-class brothel; feeling gratified but somewhat soiled, and unsure who’s been screwing whom.

As the weeks pass, coalition government is becoming a more concrete and less abstract proposition but the political question remains the same. Are the benefits of coalition outweighing the drawbacks?

Everyone knew that coalition would involve swallowing some bitter pills but each party member has a different tolerance threshold. The danger is that critics of the coalition will peel off one by one in response to different issues.

The Liberal Democrats are in a coalition whether you like it or not. The party’s strategy must therefore be to extract maximum benefit from it *and be seen to be doing so* – with the goal of emerging intact and in a fit state to fight the next election as an independent and credible force.

Walking out in a huff because your local renal unit has just been shut down or the library no longer opens on a Wednesday won’t achieve that. It would be a gesture that fragments the party and does nothing to articulate a better alternative.

HOW TO RESPOND?

How should Liberal Democrat sceptics and critics of the coalition respond? To begin with, they must accept that there is no logical basis for criticising coalitions per se or coalition with the Tories per se.

Anyone who believes in proportional representation must accept that coalition is an inevitable outcome. And once you accept coalition in principle, then coalition with the Tories is also inevitable sooner or later, unless you believe the Liberal Democrats should only ever form coalitions with Labour, in which case the party would have no bargaining power.

Nonetheless, there are coalitions and then there are coalitions. Coalition is a creature of circumstance and, at best, merely expedient. It is not a good thing in itself and no-one should entertain all the cant about “the new politics” or “grown-up politics”.

For the coalition to work to the party’s advantage, it is not enough to strike a good initial deal. It is a continuous job of negotiation. And the party must communicate its genuine gains to members and the public at large.

But it seems that something somehow has gone horribly wrong. YouGov’s opinion poll of 21 July, which showed only 13% for the Liberal Democrats, was dismissed as an outlier by apologists for the party. Technically they are correct but only just. By late July, poll ratings of 14 or 15% had become the norm.

There are two important things to understand about such low polls. First, the popularity of the Liberal Democrats was likely to suffer once cuts in public expenditure began to bite. But these low poll results are happening before any cuts have been implemented, before even the conclusions of the government’s spending review are announced in October, when people will find out where the cuts will actually fall.

Second, if Liberal Democrat support has fallen to this low level, it means that almost all of the party’s soft support has deserted. The party’s support has been reduced to the irreducible, the hard core of faithful voters who will back the party through thick and thin. This suggests that the party is failing to persuade the electorate that there are any compelling reasons to vote Liberal Democrat. That is not to say there are no compelling reasons to vote Liberal Democrat; rather that no-one outside the core perceives any.

This is hardly surprising. The Liberal Democrats’ key message appears to be, “Government policy would be even worse if it wasn’t for us”. This may be an honest message but it is not a compelling one. After all, it is not the party’s job to detoxify the Tory brand.

BASIC PROBLEM

The basic problem is that the Liberal Democrats have adopted a strategy of “selling the coalition” when they should be selling the Liberal Democrats. This is a fundamental error familiar to many in local government. The party’s councillors are good at opposition but, when they first take control of a council, a common mistake is to represent the council to the people instead of the people to the council. They retreat into their role as administrators. They feel obliged to defend everything the local authority does regardless of whether it is good or indeed liberal.

Likewise, we now see Liberal Democrat ministers publicly defending policies that either weren’t in the coalition agreement or that they don’t really believe in. For example, Vince Cable’s attempt to defend Michael Gove’s ‘free schools’ policy on BBC1’s *Question Time* recently was painful to watch.

And we have the absurd decision by the Liberal Democrats’ Federal Conference Committee to exclude a debate about Trident at this September’s conference, even though the coalition agreement explicitly allows the party to “make the case for alternatives”.

The Liberal Democrats’ misguided strategy was summed up in a ‘briefing note’ issued on 21 July headlined “10 weeks on the Lib Dems have had huge influence in Government”. It was presented as a catalogue of achievements but all it did was reiterate party policies that were included in the coalition agreement. Most of the policies listed weren’t included in the Queen’s Speech or Budget and haven’t even begun to be implemented.

Instead, the coalition government appears to be following a Tory strategy with a few Lib Dem bolt-ons. The big things – the emergency budget on 22 June, the white paper on the NHS and the Academies Bill – are pure Tory policy. The latter two weren't even included in the coalition agreement, yet Liberal Democrat MPs are being whipped through the lobbies to support them.

The biggest claim the Liberal Democrats make to influencing policy is the proposed referendum on the alternative vote. Yet ironically, at the general election the only manifesto containing this policy was Labour's. The Liberal Democrats will be campaigning in a referendum for an electoral system they've never really believed in.

The main policy area where the Liberal Democrats seem to have rolled over completely is economics. Like the Labour and Conservative parties, the Liberal Democrats fought the election on the basis that there would have to be cuts in public expenditure to pay off the huge deficit. But unlike the Conservatives, they argued against making cuts too soon, in case this jeopardised the economic recovery by causing a double-dip recession.

VOLTE-FACE

Once the coalition was formed, however, Liberal Democrat ministers began arguing for the Tory policy of early cuts. They justified this complete volte-face on the grounds that both the deficit and the Greek crisis were worse than they thought. This excuse stretched credulity. It was certainly no basis for a fundamental ideological shift from Keynesian economics to supply-side dogma.

It is now emerging that the volte-face happened earlier or may not have been a volte-face at all. In an interview published in the Observer on 6 June, Nick Clegg gave two reasons for changing his mind. One was "the complete belly-up implosion in Greece," which he says made it imperative to demonstrate to the markets that the coalition would make an early start on deficit reduction. The other influence he claimed was a long conversation with Bank of England governor Mervyn King, a day or two after the coalition government was formed: "He couldn't have been more emphatic. He said: 'If you don't do this, then because of the deterioration of market conditions it will be even more painful to do it later'."

But the Guardian later reported (28 July): "The Bank of England governor, Mervyn King, disclosed today that he gave no fresh information to Nick Clegg that could have led the Liberal Democrat leader to call for a faster deficit reduction programme than the one outlined by his party during the election campaign."

Then in an interview broadcast in a BBC2 documentary (29 July), Clegg said that he did not change his mind during the coalition negotiations with the Tories. "I changed my mind earlier than that... between March and the actual general election, a financial earthquake occurred in on our European doorstep." Asked why he did not announce his change of heart, he said: "Ah, to be fair, we were all I think reacting to very very fast-moving economic events."

As the original version of events unravels, it looks increasingly like Clegg's intention all along was a neoliberal mission to shrink the state. As I argued in my previous two articles (Liberator 338 and 339),

Clegg seems wedded to outmoded neoliberal ideology. If so, he would have had little problem agreeing with Tory economic policy.

So where does that leave us? Some social liberals, such as Richard Grayson, have argued that the coalition represents the triumph of the Liberal Democrats' 'Orange Bookers'. It is actually more of a pyrrhic victory. The party's right wing cannot win in the long run. For a start, its neoliberal ideology is doomed as a prevailing orthodoxy and this government will be the last one ever to promote it. Also, the right is committed to a gung-ho defence of the coalition whatever it does. This leads right-wingers to resist the development of an independent platform for the Liberal Democrats at the next general election and thus limits their ability to shape that platform.

ALL TO PLAY FOR

It's all to play for and this is the approach that social liberals should adopt:

- ☛ Focus on the big picture – The coalition's basic problems are macro not micro; fundamental ideology not cuts to this or that local service. Cuts would have happened whoever was in office.
- ☛ Don't celebrate failure – It is in every Liberal Democrat's interest for the party to maximise its gains from the coalition. If there's one thing worse than a successful coalition with the Tories, it's an unsuccessful one.
- ☛ You are not the government – Unless you happen to be one of the few ministers reading this. Your job is to campaign, cajole and make demands, not defend everything the government does willy-nilly.
- ☛ Play a long game – The party cannot mandate the government but it can determine its own fate. In particular, it should think fundamentally about the distinct, post-neoliberal vision of society it wants to promote in 2015.
- ☛ Read and think – Assuming the election is five years off, it's time you read the books everyone talks about but few have actually read. Discover what the argument is actually about. Read the three key books: *The Orange Book*, *Reinventing the State* and the IPPR's *Beyond Liberty*. Add to that the two ALDC booklets, *The Theory and Practice of Community Economics* and *Community Politics Today*, and the booklet Graham Watson and I edited, *Liberalism – something to shout about* (available from Liberator).

The Liberal Democrats must justify their *raison d'être* and not lose their identity or distinctiveness. A vision for 2015 is the way to go. Otherwise if the party's image merges into that of a Tory-led government, why should anyone vote for it?

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