

RIDING T

THE LIBERAL EXPERIENCE O

‘There was a young lady
of Riga
Who smiled as she rode
on a tiger;
They returned from the
ride
With the lady inside,
And the smile on the
face of the tiger.’

Coalitions between unequal partners can end up like the relationship between the tiger and the young lady of Riga. In March 2011 the Liberal Democrat History Group and British Liberal Political Studies Group organised two seminars to learn from the Liberal experience of coalition governments. **Vernon Bogdanor** introduces this special issue, containing papers from the seminars.



THE STORY begins with Disraeli’s famous comment in the House of Commons on 16 December 1852, in the midst of a thunderstorm, in which he said this:

The combination may be successful, a coalition has before this been successful, but coalitions, though successful, have always found this – that their triumph has been brief.

‘This, too, I know,’ he concluded, ‘that England [he meant, I suppose,

Britain] does not love coalitions.’ But whether England or Britain does or does not love coalitions, we have had three peacetime coalitions in the last 120 years: the 1895 coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberal Unionists; the Lloyd George coalition between the Conservatives and one wing of the Liberal Party; and the National Government of 1931. All have been coalitions between Conservatives and Liberals, or between Conservatives and one wing of the Liberal Party. In the case of the Lloyd George coalition

THE TIGER OF COALITION GOVERNMENT

and the National Government, there were also other small parties involved. But there have been no coalitions between the Liberals and the Labour Party, although the Liberals have supported Labour governments from the outside – in what would now be called a confidence and supply agreement – in the 1929 Labour government and, with the Lib–Lab pact of 1977–78, the Callaghan government.

There is, however, a fundamental difference between the three previous peacetime coalitions and the present one. It is that the past three coalitions were formed before general elections and endorsed by the electorate in those general elections – by landslide majorities, in fact. They were not, as the current coalition has been, formed *after* a general election. In 1895, 1918 and 1931, governments went to the country as coalitions and electors knew that they were voting for a coalition. In 2010, the voters did not vote for a coalition and had to guess what coalition might ensue in the event of a hung parliament. Many guessed wrong, including *The Guardian*, which advocated a vote for the Liberal Democrats to create a progressive coalition of the left. This is important since it means that the 2010 coalition lacks the legitimacy of the past three peacetime coalitions.

There is a further interesting difference between this coalition

and the past three: the 2010 coalition is the only one that occurred after a hung parliament. After the 1895, 1918 and 1931 elections, the Conservatives, had they wished to do so, could have governed without the support of any other party. Clearly, after 2010, that could not have been the case. But, after previous hung parliaments, including the next most recent, in February 1974, the outcome was not coalition but minority government. The fact that the 2010 coalition was, as it were, a coalition of necessity, alters its dynamics very considerably. In previous coalitions the non-Conservative elements were expendable. In 1918, Bonar Law, the Conservative leader, told his followers:

by our own action we have made Mr Lloyd George the flag-bearer of the very principles on which we should appeal to the country. It is not his Liberal friends, it is the Unionist Party which has made him prime minister and made it possible for him to do the great work that has been done by this government.¹

But, if the Conservatives could make Mr Lloyd George, they could also break him, as in fact they did in 1922. Similarly, after 1932, the Conservatives could have got rid of Ramsay MacDonald, but decided to keep him as a fig leaf to cover up what might otherwise appear as a nakedly Conservative government.

Left: David Cameron and Nick Clegg at the formation of the coalition government, May 2010

In the current, coalition, if the Liberal Democrats were to decide to leave the government, there does not, admittedly, in consequence of the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act, have to be a general election. But there would be a different sort of government – either a Conservative minority government or, possibly, a coalition of the left. That, of course, makes it easier for the Liberal Democrats to leave the coalition.

If the three previous coalitions did not owe their existence to a hung parliament, to what did they owe their existence? If one had to grossly oversimplify and answer in one word, that word would be ‘fear’. In 1895, the fear was of Irish home rule, which many otherwise intelligent people felt would mean the disintegration of the United Kingdom, and a surrender to terrorism and violence. The 1895 coalition was founded on a negative proposition concerning home rule; as soon as the coalition had to consider a positive policy, tariff reform, it began to disintegrate.

In 1918, there was a positive element as well as a negative – to create a new world after the First World War, with a new alignment of parties in a society in which the old issues – church disestablishment, free trade, home rule, etc. – had disappeared. But there was also a negative element – fear of the trade unions, fear of a general strike, and, above all, fear of

'Bolshevism', sometimes equated, odd though it may seem today, with the Labour Party. But, following the Russian revolution in 1917, and Communist uprisings in many of the countries of central and eastern Europe, there was a feeling, however, misplaced, amongst members of the governing class, few of whom had any close understanding or knowledge of the labour movement, that Britain too might be on the brink of revolution, and that the forces of order should combine together to defeat this threat. In February 1920, the Deputy Cabinet Secretary, Thomas Jones, recorded a meeting of Lloyd George with his advisers at which the Home Secretary 'outlined his proposals to raise a special temporary force of 10,000 soldiers for the national emergency', the existing police force being inadequate. 'There are', the Food Controller insisted, 'large groups preparing for Soviet government'. Walter Long, the First Lord of the Admiralty, was worried that 'The peaceable manpower of the country is without arms. I have not a pistol less than 200 years old'. Bonar Law, the Conservative leader, summed up the discussion saying that 'All weapons ought to be available for distribution to the friends of the Government'. Sir Auckland Geddes, the President of the Board of Trade, 'pointed to the universities as full of trained men who could co-operate with clerks and stockbrokers. (During the discussion Bonar Law so often referred to the stockbrokers as a loyal and fighting class until one felt that potential battalions of stockbrokers were to be found in every town.)'² Perhaps the bankers are an equivalent 'loyal and fighting class' today.

With regard to the coalition of 1931, it is easy to underestimate the element of panic at the possibility of financial collapse amongst those who remembered the German inflation of 1923. When, in the previous Labour Cabinet, Philip Snowden, the Chancellor, was asked what would happen if we were pushed off the gold standard, he threw his arms up in despair and replied, 'The deluge.' During the 1931 election campaign, Ramsay MacDonald held up worthless German marks and said that Britain would face the same fate if the National Government were not returned.

It was this element of fear that helped the Conservatives in 1895, 1918 and 1931, because, of course, when people are frightened, they tend to vote Conservative. Indeed, the Conservatives have benefited more than Liberals from coalitions. The Conservatives might well have won the elections of 1895, 1918 and 1931 even without their coalition partners, but their partners strengthened them, enabling them to win seats in areas that were not naturally Conservative.

As late as 1965, John Nott, who was to become a minister in the governments of Edward Heath and Margaret Thatcher, came to be:

selected as the National Liberal and Conservative candidate for St Ives – not the Conservative candidate. I was told by the local association that St Ives could not be won by a Conservative – but that as the National Liberals had supported the Conservatives and had done so since 1931, I should not fret about the label.

Nott did not drop the National Liberal label until the general election of 1974, even though the party wound itself up in 1968. The accumulated funds of the party, amounting to £50,000 were then given to the Conservatives 'who, of course, blew it in an afternoon on some futile advertising campaign'.³

It was useful for the Conservatives to have the support of Liberals and other groupings because it gave them a national appeal over and above their purely party appeal. And the landslide victories of 1918 and 1931 were assisted by the fact that the coalitions were led by non-Conservatives with the implication that their previous parties – the Liberals in 1918 and Labour in 1931 – were irresponsible and could not be trusted with power. The 1895 coalition was, of course, led by a Conservative, Lord Salisbury, but the dominant figure in it was a non-Conservative – Joseph Chamberlain. Many things have been said about Chamberlain, Lloyd George and MacDonald – some of them not particularly complimentary – but one thing never said about them was that they were Conservatives. They nevertheless helped to provide the Conservatives with landslide majorities.

Chamberlain and Lloyd George were, however, disruptive

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personalities, and were in large part responsible for breaking up the coalitions in which they were dominant. In Baldwin's famous words, used at the Carlton Club meeting in 1922, Lloyd George was a 'dynamic force' and a dynamic force was 'a very terrible thing'. There is a striking contrast with Baldwin himself, who, as leader of the National Government in the 1930s proved an emollient figure capable of holding the disparate elements of a coalition together. A coalition does better with an emollient head of government rather than a dynamic one.

The Liberal Democrats hope that the 2010 coalition will institutionalise recognition of a multi-party politics in which they can play a hinge role, as the Free Democrats used to do in Germany. But previous coalitions proved to be a prelude, not to multi-party politics, but to realignment and the restoration of a new two-party system of a different sort, helping primarily the Conservative Party. In 1975, Harold Macmillan declared, perhaps with tongue in cheek:

The last purely Conservative government was formed by Mr Disraeli in 1874. It is the fact that we have attracted moderate people of a liberal disposition and thought into our ranks which makes it possible to maintain a Conservative government today.⁴

Coalitions have been of much less benefit to the Liberals. Indeed, the Liberals entered each of the three peacetime coalitions as a disunited party. The coalition of 1895 was a *product* of Liberal disunion; the coalition of 1918 *caused* Liberal disunion; while the coalition of 1931 *widened* Liberal disunion. And after two of those coalitions, one wing of the Liberal Party came to merge with the Conservatives: the Liberal Unionists in 1912, and the Liberal Nationals in 1968. The Lloyd George Liberals nearly merged with the Conservatives, and the Conservatives wanted them to, but, in the end the Lloyd George Liberals decided against it. The Liberal Nationals, who remained in the National Government throughout the 1930s, were, after the war, called 'Vichy Liberals' – traitors to Liberalism – by Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, Asquith's daughter.⁵ And when Lord Samuel retired as leader of the Liberals in the

House of Lords in 1955, Lady Violet wrote to him the following encomium, Samuel having preserved Liberal independence by leaving the National Government in 1932:

Joe Chamberlain became the mainspring of protection and imperialism. Lloyd George sold the Liberal Party to the Tories in 1918. Such things are possible for so-called radicals; impossible for any Liberal – you, my father, Edward Grey.⁶

The coalitions of 1918 and 1931 helped to ruin the Liberal Party. Kenneth Morgan has argued that the coalition of 1918 destroyed the Liberals as a party of government, while the coalition of 1931 destroyed them as a party of opposition. Will the coalition of 2010 destroy the Liberal Democrats as a third party?

Both in 1918 and 1931, fears of socialism and Bolshevism drove the Liberals into the arms of the Conservatives. Coalitions between two unequal parties, as David Butler has argued, can turn out to be like the relationship between the tiger and the young lady of Riga.⁷ Both coalitions confirmed the fragmentation of the Liberals and proved to be stages on the way to the development of a two-party system in which the Liberals were to have no place. And on each occasion the Liberals found it impossible to maintain a secure identity, and found themselves the victims of the binary assumptions which lay behind British politics. Left-leaning Liberals thought that the Conservatives were the main enemy; right-leaning Liberals – such as Winston Churchill in the 1920s and the Simonites in the 1930s – regarded Labour as the enemy. Proportional representation would have helped the Liberals, but the Liberals did not support that until 1922. The first time that proportional representation appeared in a Liberal manifesto was in the manifesto of the Asquithian Liberals in 1922. But by then it was too late.

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At the next general election, the Liberal Democrats may face a problem which has also faced previous coalitions. How can they maintain at the hustings the cooperation they had enjoyed in government? Can a coalition in government be replicated at the grass roots? In 1920, Bonar Law told Balfour, his predecessor as Conservative leader, 'We cannot go on as we are, that is with a united party in the House of Commons, but with no such union in the constituencies.'⁸ As is well known, in 1918 a Coupon was arranged which proved to be, as it were, a complimentary ticket to Westminster: of 322 couponed Conservatives, 294 were elected, and of 159 couponed Liberals, 133 were elected; but of the Asquithians, only twenty-eight were elected. In 1931, there was no centrally directed coupon, but great efforts at local and regional level were made to ensure, as far as possible, that there was only one National Government candidate in each constituency. The main consequence was to ensure that Labour did not win seats through a split in the vote of the parties supporting the National Government. In 1931, the Labour vote did not fall by very much from its 1929 level – from roughly 33 per cent in 1929 to 30 per cent in 1931 – but, whereas in 1929, Labour had won 123 of its 288 seats on a minority vote, in 1931 the Conservative national agents declared that there was only one constituency where a split in the National vote had prevented the Conservatives from winning a seat.

This question of local cooperation has always been a fundamental problem for a coalition, and the reason is that under the first-past-the-post system, party headquarters cannot impose an electoral pact, because this requires that one of the candidates of the two coalition parties stands down, and that requires agreement at constituency level. The current Conservative Party constitution requires every Conservative Association to put up a candidate – although the Conservatives are currently trying to alter these arrangements. At the next general election, every constituency will be a new constituency, since the number of seats is being reduced from 650 to 600, and there is to be a boundary review to be completed by 2013. If every constituency is to reselect its

candidate, this creates a problem for coalitionists. If a Conservative constituency association has to choose between two candidates, one of whom believes that the coalition ought to be continued, and another who believes that the party should choose a candidate prepared to support 'real' Conservative policies on Europe, immigration and crime, it is possible that the constituency association will choose the latter candidate. This is roughly what happened in Conservative constituency associations between 1918 and 1922. Liberal Democrat constituency associations may be faced with a similar dilemma, of choosing between a candidate who favours continuation of the coalition and another who declares that coalition with the Conservatives is a betrayal of the Liberal tradition.

Local constituency bodies are autonomous bodies, and the more that the parties have developed as membership-based organisations, the more constituency parties have come to prize their autonomy and to resent interference by their party leaders. Selecting a candidate is the only reward that many constituency activists have for the hours of hard work they put in canvassing, addressing envelopes, and conducting voluntary activity for their party.

An electoral pact involving the reciprocal withdrawal of candidates cannot be imposed by party leaders alone, but must be agreed by local constituency parties. The *cri de coeur*, in the case of the attempt by the Liberals and SDP to form an electoral pact in 1982, of a Liberal candidate who was asked to stand down, was this:

Seven years ago, when I became prospective parliamentary candidate for this constituency, we sold a home that we all dearly loved to move into this constituency. Our youngest left her school and all three children eventually went to school locally. My wife changed her job to teach in the local comprehensive school. And we accepted this upheaval because we both believed that for me the only way to nurse the constituency was to live in it and become part of it.⁹

It is therefore not easy for central headquarters to dictate to a constituency party. When it tries to do so, the constituency party may

simply ignore headquarters. That is what happened in 1918 in Asquith's constituency of East Fife. Although Asquith was not, of course, a supporter of the Lloyd George coalition, Lloyd George and Bonar Law decided, out of respect, not to put up an official Conservative against him. But the Conservative constituency association decided to ignore this edict from the centre and put up a baronet with a distinguished war record, Captain Sir Alexander Sprout, who defeated Asquith in the seat which he had held since 1886. Indeed, in 1918, of forty-five uncoupled Conservatives, twenty-three were returned.

Even if an electoral pact can be agreed and there are no unofficial candidates, it does not follow that the electors will necessarily follow the dictates of party headquarters. Would Liberal Democrats necessarily vote Conservative if their candidate had stood down, or would they vote Labour or Green? Would the Conservatives vote Liberal Democrat if their candidate stood down, or would they vote UKIP or some other party? Lord Hailsham, chairman of the Conservatives from 1957 to 1959, summed up the difficulties of electoral pacts, having been frequently enjoined to seek such a pact with the Liberals:

I can think of no more certain way for a party in office to ensure its own defeat than to be seen to make an arrangement of this kind before holding an election. It must be remembered that on withdrawal of either a Liberal or Conservative candidate the votes he would otherwise have won are not automatically transferred. A number of voters would abstain in disgust; a number of Liberals would almost certainly vote socialist in the absence of a Liberal candidate. Reciprocal withdrawal would be impossible unless there was already a feeling of cordiality sufficient to make the association lined up for sacrifice willing to withdraw its candidate. Such feelings of self-sacrifice cannot normally be imposed from above, and on a level of constituency organisations nothing can be more disheartening or destructive for years afterwards with morale than such a request coming from national headquarters. Finally, and most ludicrous of all, if it went through

up to this point, in a number of cases at least, no sooner would the official candidate be withdrawn, when out of the undergrowth an unkempt figure would emerge calling himself, as the case might be, an Independent Liberal or Conservative, or, in the case of some Welsh or Scottish constituencies, a Nationalist, and carry off all the votes which had been bargained and sold as a result of this arrangement. The supporters of a political party, therefore, are not like members of an army whose votes can be transferred at their party leader's wish. They will only transfer their votes if there is some overriding cause there.¹⁰

That overriding cause was found in 1895 in the desire to defeat Irish home rule; in 1918 in the desire to defeat candidates who had supposedly shown themselves to be unpatriotic during the war; and in 1931 to ensure that the pound was not destroyed by the financial crisis. On each occasion, the nation had to be 'saved'. That is what gave the dynamic to pacts which, if they are to be successful, must go with the grain both of constituency opinion and also of public opinion.

The fundamental point is that coalitions depend, not so much on those at the top but on the grass roots; and coalitions come to an end, not because those at the top necessarily want to break them up, but because of opposition at the grass roots. That grass roots support in turn depends on some overriding purpose which seems to transcend everyday party battles – the defeat of home rule, the defeat of Bolshevism or saving the pound. As soon as that overriding purpose is lost, the coalition comes to be unstable.

What is remarkable about the Lloyd George coalition is how quickly it collapsed after its landslide victory in 1918, when Bonar Law had said of Lloyd George, 'He can be prime minister for life, if he likes.'¹¹ But, after just four years, the coalition collapsed, and Lloyd George was never to hold office again. The National Government won a large landslide in 1931. But the only really independent element in it other than the Conservatives – the Liberals led by Sir Herbert Samuel – left the coalition just one year later. The National Liberals,

who remained in the government, were, for all practical purposes, dependent on the Conservatives for their survival. In both cases the fundamental purpose animating the coalition had disappeared. The Lloyd George coalition, indeed, had always been widely distrusted because of the whiff of corruption surrounding it, and one wag described the government as 'a deal between a flock of sheep led by a crook [the coalition Liberals] and a flock of crooks led by a sheep [the Conservatives].'¹² It seemed to have no purpose except to perpetuate itself. Similarly, once the immediate panic of 1931 was over, the Liberals led by Samuel no longer saw the preservation of the coalition as an overriding purpose.

In 1922, the revolt which destroyed the government came not from the Conservative leadership, which wanted to maintain the coalition, but from the backbenches and from parliamentary candidates. All the great figures of politics – Churchill, Lloyd George, F. E. Smith and Austen Chamberlain – wanted the coalition to continue. Only two obscure members of the Cabinet were opposed to it. The revolt which destroyed the coalition came from the grass roots. Many historians have emphasised the meeting of Conservative MPs at the Carlton Club in 1922, which voted against the coalition, but, long before that, the coalition had been repudiated by Conservative constituency associations, who had been adopting candidates opposed to its continuation. By the time of the general election of 1922, 180 Conservatives opposed to the coalition had been chosen by constituency associations. These candidates were opposed to the policies of their party leadership, but the party leadership could not repudiate them because they had been chosen by perfectly proper methods. If the party leadership ignores its grass roots, the leadership will be repudiated. Austen Chamberlain, the Conservative leader who had replaced Bonar Law in 1921, when the latter retired owing to ill health, thought that he could destroy the rebels by a show of force and he called a meeting at the Carlton Club to try and preempt them. But had the Carlton Club meeting voted to continue the coalition, the Conservatives would

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have split as they had in 1846. The rejection of the coalition was inevitable. One leading Conservative, as he was going up the steps of the Carlton Club, when asked 'What is going to happen?', answered, 'a slice off the top'.¹³ What he meant was that local constituency parties had already decided against the coalition and the only choice left for the leadership was whether to accept that decision or to see the party split. In the event, every major figure in the Tory party organisation voted against continuation of the coalition.

In 1932, also, pressure from the grass roots was important in the decision of the Liberals to leave the National Government and then, in 1933, to move on to the opposition benches. Liberal Party members were suspicious of the 1932 'agreement to differ' on the introduction of a tariff, and the 1932 conference of the National Liberal Federation condemned it. The Liberals, in an odd compromise, continued to sit on the government benches until 1933, saying that they would support the National Government on 'national' matters, but oppose it on 'Conservative' matters – an odd distinction. But they were pressed to end the compromise, again by the National Liberal Federation which declared that the 'appropriate place' for the Liberals 'is on the opposition benches'.¹⁴ Lloyd George said that the undignified position of the Liberals resembled that of a cat that 'has pushed its head into a cream jug and cannot get it out without either breaking the jug or having someone pull it out by the tail. It is the latter process that is going on at the moment and I hope it will succeed'.¹⁵

The longevity of the current coalition will, therefore, depend not primarily on relations between Cameron and Clegg, but on reactions at the grass roots. For this reason, the 2010 coalition may be somewhat less stable than many commentators suggest.

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The dilemma facing the Liberal Democrats in coalitions is not, I think, contingent, but inherent in the nature of modern Liberalism. In the nineteenth century, when politics was dominated by constitutional issues, Liberalism had a clear and coherent ideological basis. Its

fundamental principles of liberty and equality could be made compatible through the idea of 'one person, one vote'. In the twentieth century, when the political agenda has come to be dominated by social and economic issues, the two principles of liberty and equality come into conflict. Some Liberals, therefore, will be drawn to the left, on the grounds that liberty is best secured through an extension of social welfare. Others, fearful of the growth of the state, will swing to the right. This tension existed at the beginning of the twentieth century, with the growth of the New Liberalism, an attempt to reconcile Liberalism and social democracy. Many of the New Liberal reforms involved compulsion. For example the National Insurance Act of 1911 required compulsory insurance contributions from employers and employees; the Trade Union Act of 1913 required trade unionists specifically to contract out if they did not wish to contribute to the Labour Party. In addition, the Liberal constitutional agenda had come to be broadly accepted by the other parties. What, then, was the purpose of the Liberal Party? The Liberals came to be inherently divided: some of them were becoming, in effect, social democrats. By the late 1970s, social democrats, too, came to be divided: in 1981, one wing, led by Roy Jenkins, David Owen and Shirley Williams, left the Labour Party and helped form the Alliance; the other, led by Denis Healey and Roy Hattersley, remained with the Labour Party. Now some social democrats have moved back into the Labour Party. Social democrats, therefore, are still divided and Liberals are also divided. Liberal Democrats find it difficult to answer whether their main enemy is on the left – perhaps that is what Nick Clegg and David Laws believe – or on the right – which is perhaps what Simon Hughes and Tim Farron believe? That is the Liberal Democrat dilemma in a binary political system.

I have found it salutary to consider the history of coalitions, since the conclusion that I have been forced to draw from this brief historical survey goes somewhat against my political prejudices. My conclusion is that Disraeli may well have been right, that England does not love coalitions, although

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perhaps they are more loved in Scotland and Wales. Coalitions can be cohesive and enjoy a solid basis in wartime, when there is a single overriding aim, but in peacetime they tend to be uneasy, nervous and insecure after the situation that produced them has been resolved. And it is for this reason, as Disraeli predicted, that although coalitions triumph, their triumph has often been brief. Perhaps the binary assumptions of British politics are stronger than many of us had previously believed. That is the conclusion I reached, somewhat unwillingly, when considering the history of coalitions for my book, *The Coalition and the Constitution*.

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