

THE BLACK W

WHY BRITAIN'S CONSERVATIVE–LIBERAL DEMOCR

The UK may be relatively unfamiliar with coalition governments, but they are very common in other parts of the world – so much so that political scientists now have a very good idea of what makes some governments last and some end early.

Tim Bale summarises the cross-national research on coalitions and on the entry into government of parties that are unfamiliar with its constraints, and uses it, together with a case study of another Westminster system that suddenly had to get used to ‘hung parliaments’, to suggest that we must not assume that the Cameron–Clegg coalition is somehow bound to last the full five years.

WHETHER OR NOT Disraeli was right when he claimed that ‘England does not love coalitions’, it is certainly the case that, after the Second World War at least, it grew completely unaccustomed to them. Partly as a result, perhaps, most of those who inhabit the so-called ‘Westminster bubble’, be they pundits or politicians, know little or nothing of the wealth of overseas evidence on the formation and conduct of multiparty governments and on the fate of small, self-styled radical parties who sometimes play a part in them. If they did, they might not be quite so sanguine about the prospects for the administration formed by the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats in May 2010. This paper assesses the potential durability and stability of that administration in the light of what we have learned from decades of cross-national research on coalitions and ‘newly governing parties’ before drawing some parallels with, and lessons from, another ‘Westminster system’ where two successive coalitions

between an older, established party and a newer, smaller party ended in tears – at least for the junior partner involved.

1. Cross-national portents

There are factors which, on the evidence from cross-national research on coalitions, seem to favour the durability of the Conservative–Lib Dem government.¹ Most obviously, the two parties have put together, consciously or otherwise, what is known in the jargon as a ‘minimal-winning coalition’ – one that contains no more parties than are necessary to deliver an overall majority. This means that it has a much better chance of lasting than, for example, a minority government – the other option canvassed. That minimal winning coalition also contains the ‘central’ and ‘pivotal’ party, the Liberal Democrats, who most would agree (especially nowadays) sit roughly in the ideological middle in parliament and who were pivotal in the sense that their participation was necessary if any convincing

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GRAND COALITION MIGHT HAVE AN UNHAPPY ENDING



majority government was to be formed after the election in May. Coalitions that include such a party tend to last longer than coalitions that do not. The coalition also contains the party with the largest

number of seats, and cross-national research tends to show that this factor also leads to more durable coalitions. Moreover, there are also only two parties in the coalition, and cross-national research shows

'I'm off!' Clegg and Cameron at the start of the coalition, 12 May 2010

that the fewer parties the better – particularly, if those parties do not have any obvious substitutes should they leave the government. That government also contains the Conservative Party: although

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the reasons are unclear (it may be to do with some sort of governing mentality), coalitions containing conservative parties seem to last longer. In addition, it is possible to argue – especially if one confines the analysis to the leaderships of the two parties involved – that this is a minimal *connected* winning coalition. In other words, it contains parties that are apparently quite close to each other in terms of their policies and values. The coalition literature suggests that coalitions that contain parties with big differences between them tend to be shorter lived. Furthermore, it must be to the government's advantage that the two parties in this coalition, while close, are not so similar that their respective sets of potential rebels (the Tory right and the Lib Dem left) are likely to combine together to threaten the coalition's parliamentary majority: Europe is only the most obvious example of this 'divide and rule' advantage.²

One can argue that there are also some rules of the game, formal and informal, that benefit the current coalition. In a country which operates 'negative parliamentarism' – in other words, votes of confidence and supply do not so much have to be won as simply not lost – it is less probable that there will be a parliamentary defeat in the event that this government's majority is eroded sufficiently (perhaps by defections) to make such a defeat a possibility (Bergman, 1993). And the fact that the exclusive and unilateral power of dissolution has been (or at least seems to have been) effectively removed from the Prime Minister by the move towards a fixed term should also make a difference: where the PM gets to decide without consultation or constraint when to go the country, coalitions tend to be shakier. It may also be significant that the allocation of portfolios (the seats around the Cabinet table and the junior ministerial positions) is roughly speaking proportional to the seats each of the two partners brings to the coalition's strength in the Commons. Proportional allocation of portfolios is the norm and, inasmuch as might be unwise to go against it, the government may last longer for conforming to it (Verzichelli, 2008). There is also the matter of timing: the current coalition was formed a long time in advance

of the next scheduled election. Cross-national research suggests that such coalitions are less shaky than coalitions that are formed later on in the life of a parliament.

There are, however, plenty of negative portents for the Conservative–Lib Dem coalition in the cross-national research.³ Most obviously, that research suggests that the risk of a coalition breaking up before its time and thus precipitating an early election rises rather than falls as time passes. The idea, then, that, as long as the current government can get through its first year or two, it will go the distance until 2015 is nonsense. It actually gets harder to stay together as every year, even every month and week passes. And the coalition literature is clear about the phenomena that cause coalitions to break up, namely so-called 'critical events' – domestic or international crises that 'come out of nowhere' but divide the parties involved – or else the slow agony endured when the economy goes-belly up or simply fails to improve.⁴ Rising or persistent unemployment and/or inflation are the most common problems in this respect, with inflation seemingly a particular problem for coalitions which contain conservative parties since it is the one thing that voters expect them to get right.⁵ We also need to remember that the current coalition operates in a parliamentary system in which there is a premium on party discipline and in a governmental system with a strong tradition of cabinet collective responsibility: cross-national research tends to indicate that where this is the case, as in the UK, coalitions find it less easy to 'agree to disagree', making them more prone to falling apart when certain critical events occur. That research also shows that culture and tradition matter. This is why, for example, minority governments in Scandinavian countries stand a much better chance of lasting than majority governments in some Southern or Central European countries.⁶ Countries which are new to coalitions – new to the 'new politics' if you like – tend, at least initially, to produce less stable, less durable coalitions.

Having covered the coalition as a whole, we can now turn to one of its component parts and in particular explore some of the problems

that the Liberal Democrats may well face. The first and most obvious point to make is that the connectedness of this minimal winning coalition is contestable. How close in reality are the Lib Dems to the Tories? True, we need to be careful not to characterise (even caricature) the Liberal Democrats as having a right-wing leadership and a left-wing membership (Evans and Sanderson-Nash, 2011). But few would deny that there is indeed a difference between the parliamentary core and the extra-parliamentary penumbra around Nick Clegg, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a periphery of MPs whose faces do not quite fit and a fair proportion of members who have spent years delivering (or simply lapping up) *Focus* leaflets which denounced the Tories as incompetent and irredeemably right-wing. For this latter group, and of course for many voters, this is not so much a connected coalition as a counter-intuitive one. True, there is a history (albeit a short one) of Liberal Democrats doing deals with the Conservatives at a local level and this may well have made it easier for the leadership to gain consent to do the same thing at Westminster. At the national level, however, the stakes are much higher and the issues more ideologically loaded.

Secondly, the Liberal Democrats are, in the jargon, relatively 'weakly institutionalised' compared with their two biggest rivals. Although its Liberal heritage means that it can hardly be described as a new party, it is nevertheless a party that is still working out how to run itself as well as quite what to think, with some of the faultlines arising from its formation from a merger of two parties (the Social Democrats and the Liberals) still clearly visible (Grayson, 2010; Evans and Sanderson-Nash, 2011). Even more so than is the case for its bigger, older rivals, its ideological and policy stance is based on a series of contingent compromises rather than a heartfelt, hammered-out consensus. Organisationally, leadership control is still contested. Research suggests that such parties are more prone to disintegration, or at least severe internal strain, under the stresses that come with being in government – especially if those parties' appeal to the electorate, before they entered office, was an anti-establishment or

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even a protest one (Bolleyer, 2008; Dunphy and Bale, 2011). This is not merely because they are relative newcomers but because such parties float free of (or at the very least are less firmly rooted in) the sort of (often economic) interests that provide the kind of ballast needed to prevent capsize in rough political seas – one of the reasons why the SDP, for example, failed while Labour (still linked to the trade union movement) survived. Of course, the Lib Dems could argue that they spent the last decade building up considerable support among two interest groups – students and professionals who work mainly (although not exclusively) in the public sector. Given the direction of government policy since 2010, however, the chances of the Lib Dems retaining and relying on that support are virtually nil.

Thirdly, the Liberal Democrats, insofar as their public utterances reflect their private thinking, seem to be operating under the illusion that voters will show their appreciation for them taking a responsible stance, joining the government and participating in the deficit reduction programme. In fact the reverse is likely to be true. One of the most robust findings in the cross-national research is that voters are rarely grateful to governments. Even governments that do quite well nearly always lose votes between one election and another. And while cross-national research suggests that a favourable economic scenario can reduce the electoral cost of incumbency, it also suggests that the benefits are normally felt only by the party of the Prime Minister (and the Finance Minister) rather than by any other parties within his or her coalition (Strøm et al., 2008, pp. 417–418). If this were not bad enough, we also need to remember that if incumbency comes at a cost, it is one that smaller parties find much harder to bear: if large parties lose a few percentage points here or there, that is a pity and it can mean the difference between government and opposition; if the same happens to small parties, it can represent a tragedy, the difference between, if not life and death, then being a player and not being taken seriously. For the Liberal Democrats, there is a big (and non-linear) difference between the seats they are capable of winning on something

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close to the 23 per cent vote share they obtained in 2010 (which gave them 57 seats) and something closer to the 14 per cent share they got back in 1979 (which gave them just 11).⁷

Research on smaller, newer parties, either as members or supporters of a coalition, suggests that they find it very difficult to claim the credit for anything that goes well does but find it equally difficult to escape blame for anything that goes wrong. This would be bad enough news even for a party that could lay claim at the outset to having secured policy wins and portfolios that would allow them to maintain their profile and point to achievements throughout (or at least at the end of) its term of office. But this does not apply to the Lib Dems because, given their bargaining strength – based on their being the one party out of the three able to negotiate a coalition with either of the other two – they totally underplayed their hand in the coalition negotiations. They failed to gain as much leverage as they should have done from the fact that, notwithstanding differences in their relative sizes, they could credibly argue, since they were in parallel negotiations with Labour, that the Conservatives needed them more than they needed the Conservatives. Some political scientists, using coding techniques associated with the Comparative Manifestos Project, may suggest (albeit tentatively) that the Liberal Democrats got just as good a deal as the Conservatives – perhaps even a better one overall (Quinn et al., 2011). Others would seem to agree (Constitution Unit 2011). This is counter-intuitive – and for good reason: it is like determining the result of a football match using statistics on, say, possession, free-kicks, corners and shots-on-target rather than on goals scored.

In reality, the coalition agreement shows what happens when vegetarians negotiate with carnivores. On policy, there is little of real substance that the Conservatives had to give up – and certainly not on ‘red line’ issues such as deficit reduction, cutting immigration and maintaining the UK’s independent nuclear deterrent. Nor is there much that the Liberal Democrats gained that even ‘mainstream’ Tories cannot live

with. Admittedly, the increase in capital gains tax was a concession, but even that was watered down. So, too, was the ‘pupil premium’, which was originally intended to be funded from additional money rather than existing budgets. And the latter policy, like rising tax allowances and the abolition of ID cards, was very much in tune with ‘progressive’ Conservative thinking anyway. Moreover, the right accorded to Lib Dem MPs to abstain on increasing tuition fees, supporting marriage in the tax system and nuclear power, has not and will not prevent the Conservatives implementing those policies if they decide to. Finally, the granting of a vote on the Alternative Vote has to be seen not as a triumph but as a measure of just how little the Lib Dems got – not the introduction of the quasi-proportional electoral system they had long campaigned for but a referendum on a majoritarian system that their own leader had earlier dismissed as ‘a miserable little compromise’. There are of course Conservatives who rushed in (for the most part anonymously) to criticise the deal, but they would almost certainly have feigned disappointment with any government led by David Cameron, coalition or otherwise. Most of their colleagues are well aware that they have not been made to do much, if anything, that they had not wanted to do. Nor have they foregone much that pragmatic and logistical constraints, whether domestic or international, would have obliged them to forgo in any case: the kicking into the long grass of plans to repatriate powers from Brussels is only the most obvious example.⁸

The Liberal Democrats underplayed their hand, too, when it came to portfolio allocation. It might be proportional, but – unless one buys into the idea that Nick Clegg’s overworked and understaffed Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will confound expectations and end up exerting an unprecedented degree of control over government policy – it is not very promising. The party got none of the big offices of state or any of the ministries that might be expected to deliver tangible benefits to the electorate. Leading Lib Dems argue, of course, that they have been terribly clever in avoiding ‘political graveyards’

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like the Home Office, and that one of the advantages of not being in charge of Health and Education is that they do not have to preside over spending cuts driven by the need for 'efficiency savings' (in the case of the former) and deficit reduction (in the case of the latter). This suggests a touching faith in the ability of voters who are generally unable to tell pollsters which minister runs which ministry to distinguish between Mr Nice and Mr Nasty. That notwithstanding, avoiding high-profile roles in departments that allow a party even the smallest opportunity to demonstrate that it is delivering is surely too clever by half. The obvious one for the Lib Dems to have pressed for, not least because of its rising budget and the appeal solidarity with the developing world has to some of the party's core supporters (if not to the general public) would have been International Development. Of course, those core supporters may also be impressed if the Lib Dems are able to demonstrate delivery on their constitutional agenda and on energy and climate change, even if the goods produced by Chris Huhne's ministry are arguably as diffuse as they are collective. On the other hand, beyond those core supporters (and the so-called 'chattering classes'), progress on such matters butters precious few electoral parsnips. And while firms and financial commentators might conceivably be impressed by the work done at Business by Vince Cable – particularly to facilitate the continued migration of highly-skilled workers – ordinary people will only judge by the indirect effects it has on tangible indicators such as economic growth, jobs and, eventually, more funding available for cash-strapped public services and local councils.

2. The black widow effect: antipodean exemplars

Talking about what the Liberal Democrats will have to show for their time in government, however, assumes that the coalition, and indeed the Lib Dems, will survive intact until the next election. Although this seems to have become the common wisdom, this does not mean that the assumption will hold. We have already pointed to the potentially negative

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portents in cross-national research, and it is also possible to point to the unhappy precedents established by the coalitions established between the British Conservative and Liberal politicians during the First World War and the two decades that followed it (Dutton, 2004). Without going into detail, it is no exaggeration to say that they all ended pretty badly for the junior partner – so badly that one is drawn irresistibly to an analogy with what happens when the black widow spider mates with the female of the species which, as we all know, is traditionally 'deadlier than the male'. In fact, contrary to popular belief, the process does not inevitably end, once the deed is done, with the exhausted male being eaten by the greedy and much larger female. However, while it is not unusual for him to escape with his life, he often pays a high price: part of his body (often quite a precious part at that) may break off and be left behind as he makes his getaway.

This black widow effect is observable not just in historical coalitions between the British Liberals and the Conservatives, but also in more recent experiments in multi-party government in a polity – New Zealand – which for many years could lay a strong claim to being more Westminster than Westminster in its tendency to produce single-party majorities for one of the two main players that dominated parliament even if, on occasion, minor parties garnered substantial shares of the vote. This dominance ended, however, when voters decided in the early 1990s to get rid of the First Past the Post System and replace it with the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system that operates in Germany. This institutional change naturally means that the parallels with the UK case (or indeed any other case) can never be exact, and, despite how frequently New Zealand appears in international comparisons given its small size and global footprint, no one would want to argue that its lessons are somehow timeless or universal. However, the political dilemmas faced by the two countries, both of which were unused to 'hung parliaments' but were obliged to deal with the consequences, are sufficiently similar to render the parallels instructive.

New Zealand's recent experience presents us with two cases of early termination of a coalition.⁹ The first is of a counterintuitive coalition: a two-party government that made little sense to many of the people who voted for those parties, and even to some of the people who joined the government itself. In this coalition, the portfolios were poorly allocated and the country was unacculturated to coalitions. The senior partner in the coalition was much bigger, stronger and better-established than the junior partner. That junior partner did not have a settled ideology, nor did it have an anchoring in a particular economic interest. The second case also involved an older, bigger party and a newer, relatively 'weakly institutionalised' party, although in that case they could at least claim quite a lot in common with each other on policy. The latter did not, however, prevent it falling apart early, when as in the first case, those involved were hit by 'critical events'.

The first case occurred after the first election under MMP which took place in 1996. The election produced an inconclusive result and triggered parallel negotiations between one smaller party and two larger parties competing against each other to persuade it to join them in government. The outcome was a counterintuitive coalition between the conservative National Party and New Zealand First. The latter was a relatively new party which combined an anti-establishment, populist appeal with a centrist economic policy geared to defending public services and halting privatisation. Most of its voters – many of whom had previously voted for Labour but still felt let down by its drift to the right in the 1990s – expected it to enter a coalition with the Labour Party. New Zealand First decided, however, to go with the National Party for two reasons, both of which might sound familiar. First, a coalition with Labour would not have produced a majority government, but only a minority coalition. Secondly, New Zealand First's leader (partly because of ideology and partly because he thought he would secure a more important portfolio if he did so) probably always intended to go with National rather than Labour and dragged out negotiations

with the latter mainly in order to improve the offer from the former.¹⁰

In the event, the coalition thus formed broke up in 1998, the reasons behind it being relatively easy to trace if we look at what happened from the perspective of both parties in turn. Most obviously, the relief of National Party MPs that they were back in government soon gave way (especially among those on the right) to concerns about the compromises that coalition government entailed. This then turned into irritation and even anger at the so-called ‘tail wagging the dog’ situation in which they felt they had been landed. So anxious did they become that they mounted a successful coup against the leader responsible for landing them in it. The new National Party leader (and Prime Minister) was determined to show both her party and the electorate that she was the boss. She precipitated – not altogether accidentally – the collapse of the coalition by pushing New Zealand First to accept policies that its leader found impossible to swallow without losing face. The sophisticated dispute resolution procedure the two parties had set up at the beginning of their relationship made absolutely no difference.

New Zealand First’s MPs had long felt that they got a less of a say in the coalition than they had hoped and had realised almost immediately after the coalition agreement was signed that it came as both a shock and a disappointment to many of the people who had voted for them and/or worked to get them elected. As time went on and as the party’s opinion poll ratings headed further and further south, they looked set to face annihilation at the next election. Some MPs, including the leader, began to feel that they might need to leave the coalition if they were to have any chance of them saving their skins and were less than devastated when their arrangement with National collapsed. Others, however, in keeping with the black widow effect, decided to stay behind. Those who stayed either remained as independents or formed a new political party but were all similarly washed away at the next election. Some of those who went and stuck with New Zealand First also lost their seats but a few survived because, while

the party dipped below the threshold, it was returned to parliament under the rule that any party winning a seat in the constituency section of the ballot is entitled to seats equivalent to its vote share in the party vote section.

Obviously, there are some differences between New Zealand in 1996 and the UK in 2010. For one thing, National (unlike the Conservatives) was in government before the election: when New Zealand First went into coalition with it, it was propping up a party that people were already tired of, which is what would have happened in the unlikely event that the Lib Dems had gone with Labour. For another, New Zealand First, if anything, got too good a deal out of National (Barker, 1997). Rather than underplaying its hand, the junior partner used what coalition theorists would term its ‘walk-away value’ to blackmail its senior partner into giving so much away that it sparked ultimately unmanageable resentment within its own ranks; as we have already seen, this is not a mistake that Nick Clegg has made. Finally, in New Zealand, it was the leader of the junior partner who pulled out of the coalition, taking some of his closest lieutenants with him and leaving some of his troops behind. If such a split were to occur in Britain, most observers would lay bets on the leader and his closest associates staying while his followers made the decision to leave.

After the next New Zealand election in 1999, the Labour Party came into government by teaming up with the left wing Alliance – the result of a merger a few years previously between a number of smaller, generally left-wing parties. The advantage of the Labour–Alliance coalition enjoyed was that it was clearly more connected: this was a coalition that made sense to most voters. Nevertheless, two years into the coalition, Alliance MPs (particularly those on the left) were beginning to get extremely worried. The poll ratings of the party had plummeted and it was even beginning to look as if they were going to dip under the electoral threshold. Alliance MPs could not really claim any policy wins. Anything good that had been done by the coalition was generally attributed to the Labour Party even when (as with a measure like paid parental leave or

a new ‘people’s bank’) it had originated in an Alliance proposal. They also had to deal with the problem of the war in Afghanistan, where some MPs had predictable objections to New Zealand’s military involvement with the American-led operation. The leader of the Alliance, however, exhorted his MPs to stick with it, not to worry – the voters would eventually give them the credit they deserved. For a while they sat tight but eventually they could stand it no longer and the party broke up messily before the election. The leader and his cronies stayed with Labour, while the majority departed, winning custody of the party’s name and (such as they were by that stage) its organisation and resources. The result at the next election was that the Alliance failed to make it over the threshold and, because it was also unable to win a constituency seat, dropped out of parliament and was soon on its way to oblivion. Most of its voters went to its erstwhile senior partner, just as many as had predicted and perhaps just as that senior partner (led, interestingly enough, by an academic political scientist) had always calculated might happen. Since then, all governments in New Zealand have been (in effect or in actuality) single-party minority governments supported – Swedish style – by increasingly sophisticated confidence and supply agreements by minor parties seemingly happy to avoid the black widow effect (Bale and Bergman, 2006).¹¹

3. Conclusion

The fate of the coalition is not set in stone. Nor is a Lib Dem break-up inevitable. Predicting political outcomes, including the fate of this coalition, is, to coin a phrase, a mug’s game. Yet, the cross-national research, the 20th British political history and the New Zealand parallels alluded to here should at least give us pause for thought and provide an antidote to any complacency surrounding the ability of the current coalition to serve out its full term. It may, of course, do so, and supporters of the coalition have advanced some very good reasons why it is in the interests of both partners that it should.¹² And even if it does not go the distance, it may not be a disaster for either party

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involved: the Conservatives will have proved once again that they are willing to adapt to changed circumstances and mounted a serious challenge to the idea that, in British politics at least, a progressive alternative necessarily means their exclusion from power; the Lib Dems, meanwhile, should find – if European experience is anything to go by – that having joined and (hopefully) stayed in a coalition will mean that they are much more likely to be asked to do so again in the future.¹³ However, if we finish by briefly interrogating the arguments commonly made by those who believe that the coalition will indeed survive intact until the next election, it soon becomes apparent that neither they, nor the coalition partners themselves, should relax just yet.

The first argument made by those who believe the coalition will go the distance is that, however bad things get, MPs – particularly Lib Dem MPs – realise that if they do not hang together than they will be hanged separately. Yet, the logic that cutting the rope might just save a few necks from the noose is surely every bit as powerful. Secondly, those who think the coalition will last seem to think that once the economy bounces back, the parties in it will harvest the gratitude of the electorate. But gratitude is the most perishable commodity in politics and if the electorate do turn out to be grateful it is likely that their goodwill will flow not to the Lib Dems but to the Conservatives.

Thirdly, one can of course argue that the big difference between the situation in Britain and the situation in other countries (including, of course, New Zealand) is that, because the British electoral system has no set threshold that must be overcome in order to make it back in to parliament, then there is no particular opinion poll rating which automatically sets alarm bells ringing in the ranks of the coalition's junior partner. Nor, in the absence of such a threshold, is it easy to identify a particular tipping point in polls that would have the same effect. However, if the Liberal Democrats find themselves polling in single figures in a year or 18 months, then they will surely feel that they are in trouble. If some Lib Dem MPs feel as if they are watching a slow motion car crash, then

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they will want either to jump out of the vehicle or to wrest the wheel from the driver. Anyone summarily dismissing the latter as a serious possibility needs to recall, as many Lib Dem MPs will no doubt recall, what happened to Labour when it failed to ditch Gordon Brown as its leader before it was too late. Nor, of course, should we forget that – as in New Zealand in 1998 – pressure to escape the coalition could just as easily come from restive MPs belonging to its senior rather than its junior partner. There are plenty of Tory backbenchers, particularly on the right of the party, who are already chafing at what they believe are the constraints imposed on 'their' government by Cameron having to 'appease' the Lib Dems, and five younger MPs have already published a book, provocatively titled *After The Coalition* (Kwarteng et al., 2011).

The final argument made by those who see the coalition lasting is that, notwithstanding such internal pressure, David Cameron will try as hard as he possibly can to prevent the Lib Dems imploding. At the moment, the coalition is functional for the Tories: the Lib Dems provide useful political cover and, having failed to win the votes of those who supported Clegg and co. at the last election, the Conservatives have nevertheless been able to count on the seats that those votes resulted in; given their inability to persuade voters in Scotland and the North to elect Tory candidates, the argument goes, Cameron will probably need the current arrangement to last until and possibly beyond the next general election if he is to continue as Prime Minister; as a result, if things look bad for the Lib Dems, he will do all in his power to keep them happy and to ensure that they get the credit for what they have achieved.

This is a persuasive argument – even more persuasive if one buys into the idea (which not every expert does) that legislation passing through parliament will make an early election all but impossible.¹⁴ But it has to take account of the fact that there will be a good deal of counter-pressure on David Cameron (above all from within his own ranks) not to make concessions to the Lib Dems – concessions which in any case may not turn out to help them much

electorally. By the same token, if the Conservative Party's poll ratings rise to the level at which a single-party majority government looks like it might be in sight, it will be difficult for Cameron to resist the temptation to leave the Lib Dems – or at least some of the Lib Dems – behind. It is perfectly possible, we should remember, for this coalition to continue, albeit in a slightly different form, even if the black widow effect does come into play: the Conservative Party can rely on a parliamentary majority as long as they can tempt enough Liberal Democrats to stay with them should others decide to leave. Should such a departure take place, there will almost certainly be an argument about who gets to keep the party's name. Only a suggestion, of course, but if Nick Clegg and those around him end up losing the custody battle, they might just want to avoid calling themselves the 'National Liberals'.

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- governments – and why it 'works' in some places rather than others – remains Strøm (1990). On Central and Eastern Europe, see Somer-Topcu et al. (2008).
- 7 On the arithmetic of Lib Dem parliamentary representation, see Russell and Fieldhouse (2004). For an update, see Quinn and Clements (2011).
- 8 See the afterword in Bale (2011).
- 9 Rich narrative accounts of the formation and fates of the two coalition governments that ran New Zealand after the first two MMP elections in 1996 and 1999 can be found in the following: Boston et al. (1997, 2000, 2003). A useful work which sets such events in terms familiar to comparativists is Miller (2005).
- 10 No one who reads Rob Wilson's very measured and balanced account of the coalition negotiations in the UK in 2010 can escape the conclusion that Nick Clegg spent much of the time trying to keep Labour in play so as to get a better deal from the Conservatives rather than because he thought there was a genuine chance of an alternative. For chapter and verse, see Wilson (2010). For a sceptical Lib Dem take on the negotiations and their outcome, see Howarth (2011).
- 11 Note that New Zealand has pushed things even further than Sweden in recent years by appointing as Cabinet ministers the leaders of parties who are not formally part of the government.
- 12 See, for example, Lib Dem blogger, Mark Pack, accessed at <http://www.markpack.org.uk/seven-reasons-the-coalition-looks-set-to-last/> on March 30, 2011, and Boles (2010).
- 13 For the evidence, see Tavits (2008).
- 14 For a taste of the scepticism on the part of some constitutional experts, see the evidence considered by the House of Lords Constitutional Committee, usefully summarised here: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201011/ldselect/ldconst/69/6904.htm>.

Endnotes

- 1 The following is based on findings from Saalfeld (2008) and Strøm et al. (2008).
- 2 This point is made (and proven) by Cowley and Stuart (2010). Of course, this point only applies if one is considering ideological rather than instrumental reasons for the two wings getting together; ultimately, there is nothing to stop them doing so if they simultaneously come to the conclusion that it is in their strategic interests to bring the government down.
- 3 See note 2 above.
- 4 For more detail, see Browne et al. (1984).
- 5 While most analysts agree that the risk of early termination rises with unemployment and inflation, the relationship is not so automatic that there is general agreement, say, that a rise of x per cent in either or both increases the probability of termination by y per cent. There is also room for disagreement about the relationship between the ideological position of governments and their vulnerability to one or other of these economic phenomena. For more on this, see the separate contributions by Damgaard, Saalfeld, Narud and Valen in Strøm et al. (2008).
- 6 The locus classicus on minority

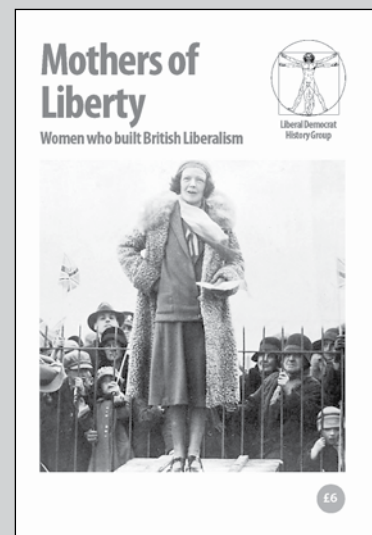
Mothers of Liberty

Women who built British Liberalism

Even before they gained the right to vote and to stand for election, women played many key roles in the development of British Liberalism – as writers and thinkers, campaigners, political hostesses, organisers and, finally, as parliamentary candidates, MPs and peers.

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RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 3) for inclusion here.

Letters of Richard Cobden (1804–65)

Knowledge of the whereabouts of any letters written by Cobden in private hands, autograph collections, and obscure locations in the UK and abroad for a complete edition of his letters. (For further details of the Cobden Letters Project, please see www.uea.ac.uk/his/research/cobdenproject). *Dr Anthony Howe, School of History, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ; a.c.howe@uea.ac.uk.*

The political career of Edward Strutt, 1st Baron Belper

Strutt was Whig/Liberal MP for Derby (1830–49), later Arundel and Nottingham; in 1856 he was created Lord Belper and built Kingston Hall (1842–46) in the village of Kingston-on-Soar, Notts. He was a friend of Jeremy Bentham and a supporter of free trade and reform, and held government office as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Commissioner of Railways. Any information, location of papers or references welcome. *Brian Smith; brian63@inbox.com.*

The emergence of the 'public service ethos'

Aims to analyse how self-interest and patronage was challenged by the advent of impartial inspectorates, public servants and local authorities in provincial Britain in the mid 19th century. Much work has been done on the emergence of a 'liberal culture' in the central civil service in Whitehall, but much work needs to be done on the motives, behaviour and mentalities of the newly reformed guardians of the poor, sanitary inspectors, factory and mines inspectors, education authorities, prison warders and the police. *Ian Cawood, Newman University College, Birmingham; i.cawood@newman.ac.uk.*

The life of Professor Reginald W Revans, 1907–2003

Any information anyone has on Revans' Liberal Party involvement would be most welcome. We are particularly keen to know when he joined the party and any involvement he may have had in campaigning issues. We know he was very interested in pacifism. Any information, oral history submissions, location of papers or references most welcome. *Dr Yury Boshyk, yury@gel-net.com; or Dr Cheryl Brook, cheryl.brook@port.ac.uk.*

Recruitment of Liberals into the Conservative Party, 1906–1935

Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. *Cllr Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk.*

Four nations history of the Irish Home Rule crisis

A four nations history of the Irish Home Rule crisis, attempting to rebalance the existing Anglo-centric focus. Considering Scottish and Welsh reactions and the development of parallel Home Rule movements, along with how the crisis impacted on political parties across the UK. Sources include newspapers, private papers, *Hansard*. *Naomi Lloyd-Jones; naomi.n.lloyd-jones@kcl.ac.uk.*

Beyond Westminster: Grassroots Liberalism 1910–1929

A study of the Liberal Party at its grassroots during the period in which it went from being the party of government to the third party of politics. This research will use a wide range of sources, including surviving Liberal Party constituency minute books and local press to contextualise the national decline of the party with the reality of the situation on the ground. The thesis will focus on three geographic regions (Home Counties, Midlands and the North West) in order to explore the situation the Liberals found themselves in nationally. Research for University of Leicester. Supervisor: Dr Stuart Ball. *Gavin Freeman; gjf6@le.ac.uk.*

The Liberal Party's political communication, 1945–2002

Research on the Liberal party and Lib Dems' political communication. Any information welcome (including testimonies) about electoral campaigns and strategies. *Cynthia Boyer, CUFR Champollion, Place de Verdun, 81 000 Albi, France; +33 5 63 48 19 77; cynthia.boyer@univ-jfc.fr.*

The Lib-Lab Pact

The period of political co-operation which took place in Britain between 1977 and 1978; PhD research project at Cardiff University. *Jonny Kirkup, 29 Mount Earl, Bridgend, Bridgend County CF31 3EY; jonnykirkup@yahoo.co.uk.*