For the study of Liberal, SDP and Liberal Democrat history

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Journal of Liberal HISTORY

Coalition and the Liberal Democrats

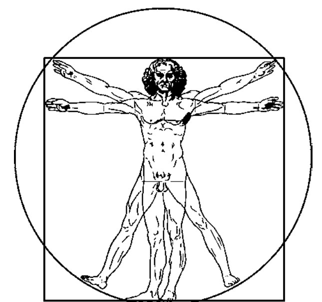
Adrian Slade
Coalition and the deluge Interviews with Nick Clegg and former ministers

Stephen Tall, Nick Harvey, John Pugh, Matthew Huntbach, David Howarth
Why did it go wrong?

Robert Hazell, Peter Waller, Jonathan Oates, William Wallace, Matthew Hanney
Managing the coalition

Craig Johnson, Caron Lindsay, Jim Wallace, David Dutton
The impacts of coalition and **Comparing coalitions**

John Curtice, Michael Steed, Mark Pack
The 2015 election campaign and its outcome



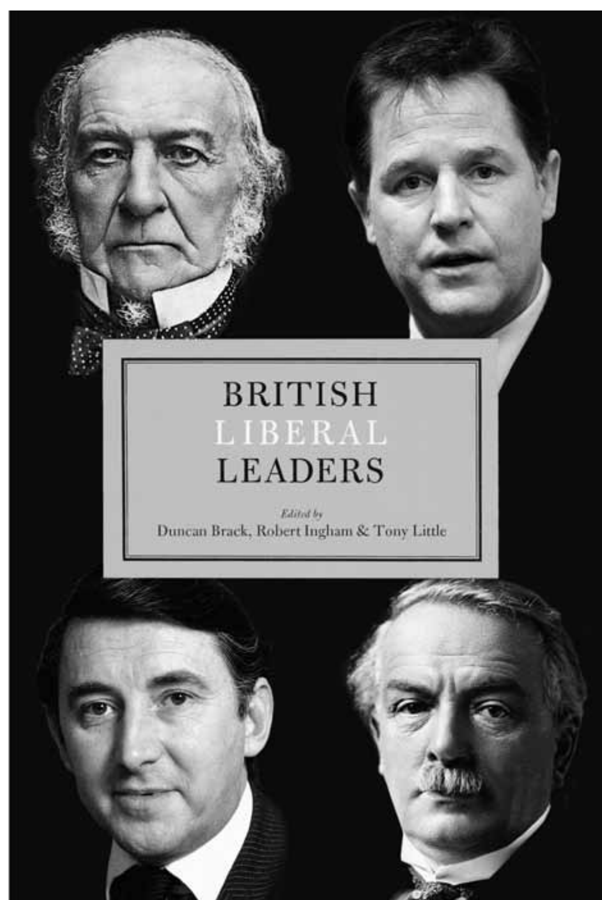
Liberal Democrat History Group

New from the Liberal Democrat History Group

British Liberal Leaders

Leaders of the Liberal Party, SDP and Liberal Democrats since 1828

Duncan Brack, Robert Ingham & Tony Little (eds.)



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British Liberal Leaders will be launched at the Liberal Democrat History Group's fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrats' autumn conference in Bournemouth, on Sunday 20 September (see back page).

British Liberal Leaders is available at a special discounted price to subscribers to the *Journal of Liberal History*: £20.00 instead of the normal £25.00. Copies can be purchased:

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- Via our website, **www.liberalhistory.org.uk**; or
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Duncan Brack (Editor)
54 Midmoor Road, London SW12 0EN
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Patrick Mitchell
6 Palfrey Place, London SW8 1PA;
email: subs@liberalhistory.org.uk

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Liberal Democrat History Group

The Liberal Democrat History Group promotes the discussion and research of topics relating to the histories of the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party, and SDP, and of Liberalism. The Group organises discussion meetings and produces the *Journal of Liberal History* and other occasional publications.

For more information, including historical commentaries, details of publications, back issues of the *Journal*, and archive and other research sources, see our website at: **www.liberalhistory.org.uk**.

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COALITION AND THE I

Duncan Brack introduces this special issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*, devoted to the impact of the co

Welcome to this special issue of the *Journal of Liberal History* (and, incidentally, the longest issue we have ever published).

If the history of the Liberal Democrats since the party's formation in 1988 can be likened to a roller-coaster ride – from the lows of 1989, fourth placed behind the Greens in the European elections, and of 2006 and 2007, when successive leaders were forced out of office, to the highs of 1997, with a doubling in the number of seats, and of 2005, and the highest number of seats won by a third party since 1923 – then the period from 2010 to 2015 has encapsulated even more dramatic swings in fortune over just five years. The collapse from 2010, when the Liberal Democrats gained their highest share of the vote in any election so far (23.0 per cent, the second highest total enjoyed by a Liberal party since 1929) to the catastrophic 7.9 per cent of 2015 represents the largest fall suffered by any party at any British election ever (leaving aside the unusual elections of 1918 and 1931, when Liberal factions fought each other). And in between, of course, Liberals participated in national government for the first time since 1945, in the first coalition to be formed in peacetime since 1931.

This five-year period is therefore a prime candidate for study and analysis – and indeed will be the subject of many books and articles to come over the next few years. This issue of the *Journal of Liberal History* aims to offer raw material for the political scientists and historians writing those analyses.

The core of the issue is provided by the interviews with Nick Clegg and ten other former ministers, on their experiences of coalition, conducted by Adrian Slade (our most sincere thanks go to Adrian for his hard work in this respect). To accompany this, we asked John Curtice and Michael Steed to analyse the 2015 election result in detail; their findings show how in most of the country the party's support has fallen back not to the level of 1970 (the last election at which the number of Liberal MPs was in single figures) but to the Liberal nadir of the mid 1950s.

Phil Cowley used the term 'zugzwang' to describe the predicament the Liberal Democrats found themselves in in May 2010. A term used in chess, 'zugzwang' describes the position where a player has to make a move (since it's their turn) but every possible option open to them worsens their position.

For the remainder of the issue, we invited a wide range of contributors (mostly, though not entirely, drawn from within the Liberal Democrats) to write about any topic of their choosing of relevance to the impact of the coalition on the party and of the party on the coalition. Their thoughts are gathered under four headings: overviews of why the coalition experiment ended so disastrously; aspects of how the coalition worked in practice; reviews of some of the impacts on the party; and comparisons of the coalition with other experiences.

So what went wrong? How did the party crash so disastrously from 2010 to 2015? Between them our contributors identify four reasons.

The first was simply the decision to enter into coalition with the Conservative Party, the historic enemy of the Liberal Democrats and its predecessor parties. Probably, this was the main factor underlying the scale of the defeat in 2015 – but none of our contributors argue that it was the wrong thing to do.

In the meeting organised by the Liberal Democrat History Group in July (to be reported in full in the winter issue of the *Journal*), Professor Phil Cowley used the term 'zugzwang' to describe the predicament the Liberal Democrats found themselves in in May 2010. A term used in chess, 'zugzwang' describes the position where a player has to make a move (since it's their turn) but every possible option open to them worsens their position. After the 2010 election had resulted in a hung parliament, Liberal Democrats knew that coalition with the Tories was a highly risky choice; but every alternative (a confidence and supply arrangement, or no deal at all – there was never a realustic prospect of coalition with Labour) looked worse – and the financial situation seemed to require the rapid formation of an effective majority government. And furthermore, no one bounced Liberal Democrats into coalition. The highly democratic process the party followed in agreeing the deal helps to explain why the Liberal Democrats avoided the disastrous splits so characteristic of Liberal history in the early twentieth century – and also why it was the Conservative parliamentary party that was more prone than Liberal Democrat MPs to rebellion in Parliament.

The second reason behind the 2015 catastrophe was the performance of the Liberal Democrats in coalition: could the party have run things better? Here our contributors differ widely in their views, and this will be the contested ground for much debate and discussion in the future.

I share the views of those who think the party made serious mistakes – a series of decisions and actions that in the end almost entirely submerged the Liberal Democrats' identity and led voters to conclude that the party had simply made itself irrelevant and that the coalition was in reality a Conservative government (a view which voters may well be reassessing now, but rather too late for the Liberal Democrats!).

The first mistake lay in the allocation of government departments. Although one can follow the logic behind the responsibilities the five Liberal Democrat cabinet ministers ended up with, with the benefit of hindsight it was a mistake for the party not to have control of any major spending department, such as education or transport. One Lib Dem cabinet minister mainly appeared in public to defend spending cuts and another was largely invisible outside Scotland. Constitutional reform and climate change are important issues for the party but are much less salient to the general public. And although many Liberal Democrat junior ministers had real achievements to their credit, they were usually not obvious to the electorate.

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

oalition government of 2010–15 on the Liberal Democrats and of the Liberal Democrats on the coalition.

More importantly, the Liberal Democrats forfeited voters' trust, above all by the tuition fees episode, a disaster from start to finish. Having had the argument within the party, fought an election with phased abolition of fees in the manifesto, and forced all its parliamentary candidates to sign a pledge opposing any increase in them, the worst possible thing that ministers could have done was to scrap all of that and sign up to a rise in fees. It did not matter that the commitment to abolish tuition fees was not an election priority: it symbolised the Liberal Democrats in the minds of the electorate. Although I accept, as several of our contributors argue, that most of the damage to the party's standing had been done before the vote on tuition fees in December 2010, it helped to create the image, which was never shaken off, that the Liberal Democrats in general –and Nick Clegg in particular – had abandoned their own beliefs simply to get into power .

This image was reinforced by Liberal Democrat agreement to a series of high-profile Tory policies – most notably, reform of the NHS, the introduction of the so-called 'bedroom tax' and the lowering of the top rate of income tax to 45 pence; and, more generally, signing up to the austerity programme, despite fighting the 2010 election on a very different message. Policies like these were what the electorate expected from the Tories, not the Liberal Democrats, leaving voters with the impression that the party had no real influence within the coalition. Although there were genuine Liberal Democrat achievements in coalition – same-sex marriage, the pupil premium, the Green Investment Bank, to name a few – none of these resonated strongly with significant numbers of voters. Probably the only economic policy the electorate liked and recognised as Liberal Democrat – the raising of the income tax threshold – was coopted by the Tories anyway.

The other way in which the party mishandled coalition was in going overboard, during the first nine months, in proving that it could work. Obviously it was important to demonstrate that a coalition, unfamiliar as it was to the electorate, could deliver effective government, but the Liberal Democrats did this so impressively well that – once again – they submerged their identity. Everyone remembers the 'Rose Garden' press conference, and the picture of the two leaders entering Number 10 with Nick Clegg's hand on Cameron's back. But the impression of unity, of an indivisible whole, was underlined time and time again. At the Liberal Democrat conference in September 2010, Clegg claimed that the coalition was 'more than the sum of our parts', and in March the following year he was captured on microphone joking with Cameron that 'If we keep doing this we won't find anything to bloody disagree on in the bloody TV debate'.

Of course, this went into sharp reverse after the 2011 local, Scottish and Welsh elections, and the AV referendum disaster but – again with hindsight – by then it was too late. In the first twelve months of the coalition the Liberal Democrats fell from 23 per cent to 9 per cent in the opinion polls, and essentially never recovered thereafter.

The third contributory reason behind the 2015 catastrophe was the election campaign itself: could the party have fought the election more effectively? Certainly many party activists – including several of our contributors – found the campaign deeply uninspiring, focusing mainly on what difference the Liberal Democrats could make to the other two main parties, giving the Tories a heart and Labour a brain, cutting less than the Tories and borrowing less than Labour, and so on. This seemed to convey two messages: the Liberal Democrats were desperate to get into power, and didn't much mind with whom; and the party didn't stand for anything by itself. To an extent, however, the party did not have much choice in its approach: given the media's focus on the likelihood of a hung parliament and another coalition, the Liberal Democrats clearly had to give some indication of what they were likely to do, and could not realisically be anything other than even-handed. In any case, probably by then the party's fate was sealed – and it wasn't as though there were many near-misses which could perhaps have been saved: only four Liberal Democrat seats were lost by less than 2,000 votes; most were lost by far more.

> **The party made serious mistakes – a series of decisions and actions that in the end almost entirely submerged the Liberal Democrats' identity and led voters to conclude that the party had simply made itself irrelevant and that the coalition was in reality a Conservative government.**

The fourth factor was entirely outside the party's control: the fact that the overriding issue in the election became whether the country could risk what seemed likely to be a weak Labour government at the mercy of the SNP. Again, however, this helped to marginalise the position of the Liberal Democrats.

The remaining question hanging over the coalition is: was it worth it? Did the party achieve enough to make the electoral setback of 2015 justifiable? We do not have space, in this issue, to review individual policy areas, but we aim to run a series of articles analysing issues in detail in future issues. One can argue, however – and some of our contributors touch on this – that the 2010–15 experience has helped at least to create an image of coalition as a form of government that can work, and work effectively – a rather different image than that prevailing in 2010. What happened to the Liberal Democrats as a result of it, however, is likely to deter any other party from signing up to coalition in the near future.

These are matters of speculation; but what we offer in this issue of the *Journal* is the story – or, more accurately, many stories – of what happened during those five years of coalition government. I hope you enjoy reading them.

Duncan Brack is the Editor of the Journal of Liberal History. During the coalition years, he was special adviser to Chris Huhne, 2010–12, and Vice Chair of the Liberal Democrats' Federal Policy Committee, 2012 to date.

COALITION AN

In the immediate aftermath of the 2015 general election **Adrian Slade** interviewed Nick Clegg and ten o
to assess and compare their original hopes for coalition with their views now.

Very few Liberals alive today were adults during Churchill's wartime coalition and none are old enough to remember Lloyd George's coalition or the political arrangements of the '20s and '30s. We can ignore the 'Lib–Lab Pact', which was a qualified agreement to support rather than a full coalition. So the political experience of the last five years has been unique for MPs, journalists and the public alike. Partly because it was so new, coalition has created plenty of controversy and it will inevitably attract a good deal more in the political analysis still to come, even though it may no longer be the political pattern of future government that it looked like being before the surprise return of a majority Tory government on 7 May 2015.

In 2011, a year after the formation of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010, the editor of *Liberal Democrat News*, Deirdre Razzall, gave me the chance to interview for the paper Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg and eleven of the Liberal Democrat secretaries or ministers of state appointed in 2010. I had also interviewed Nick Clegg in September of that year.

Contrary to many original predictions, the coalition did conclude its full five years in office without falling apart, so I am grateful to the *Journal of Liberal History* for supporting me in the idea of revisiting most of those original interviewees, and also one later secretary of state, Ed Davey, to gauge their reaction to national coalition in practice. I am also grateful to Nick Clegg and all the ex-ministers I have interviewed this time around for agreeing in principle, before the election, to let me talk to them afterwards whatever the result.

Where applicable, these new interviews are prefaced by short excerpts from my interviews of 2010 and/or 2011. Inevitably some of the comments from the interviewees will have been coloured by their own or the party's results – in other words, by the public's final verdict on the coalition. The election was not an easy experience for any Liberal Democrat, but I have aimed for the objective view. What were relationships between the two parties in government really like? What rewards and achievements, if any, were there? What were their greatest frustrations? Comparing their original hopes for the coalition with 2015, could they explain why the election result was so disastrous for all Liberal Democrats? Was the sacrifice of party independence for a partnership in government worthwhile or was it the issues of the coalition itself? These were just some of the questions to which I was seeking answers.

Because political events moved so fast after 7 May – and to reflect the potential impact that the return of a Conservative majority government, the cataclysmic loss of Liberal Democrat seats and the resulting leadership election may have had on some of their answers – with the exception of Nick Clegg, the order that follows indicates the order in which the interviews were conducted. I believe this analysis also deserves just one view of the coalition and its unpredicted electoral outcome from an informed outsider. That is why I invited Chris Huhne to fill that role with a final 'postscript' interview.

D THE DELUGE

ther Liberal Democrat ex-ministers, nine of whom he had interviewed for *Liberal Democrat News* in 2011,

Nick Clegg

Leader of the Liberal Democrats 2007–15; Deputy Prime Minister 2010–15; MP for Sheffield Hallam since 2005

How it looked to him then (September 2010)

'As Liberal Democrat leader and deputy prime minister, I am in a very strong position to see that Liberal Democrat policies and values are effected in what we do. In a coalition where we are simply not in a position to implement the whole of our manifesto, any more than the Conservatives are. So there is a degree of compromise and, at times, restraint, which means that neither I, nor indeed David Cameron, can or should speak out with unbridled gusto exclusively on behalf of our parties because we are trying to keep the balance and it is a delicate balance. I am learning all the time, and I suspect David Cameron is too'.

'We are in very different territory now and the media don't yet recognise it.'

'Liberal Democrats get the flak for the bad things and no credit for the good things partly because, unfortunately, this tends to happen to smaller parties in coalitions around the world. No, it's not always endemic but there is a pattern. The second thing is that Labour have become enveloped in a mass fit of bile towards us, and that is reflected in parts of the press. We know that in the first few years of this government we are going to have to do unpopular things, which will overshadow a lot of our achievements.'

'Selling coalition to the public and the media will not be easy. We have five years. We have to hold our nerve. The prize is not now. We have to look ahead to 2015 when we can say, "You may not have liked the coalition before and may have disagreed with what we had to do to restore the economy but now your children have got jobs to go to, you have a pupil premium, fairer taxes, a pension guarantee, a greener economy, a reformed form of politics, restored civil liberties …." I think that would be a record that people would say "OK they took a risk for the benefit of the country and it paid off." '

(September 2011)

'Autumn to May [2010–11] was a gruelling and unforgiving period where we were being vilified and blamed for everything unpopular, not credited with anything popular, and aggressively targeted by our opponents, generally and personally. I always knew we would be attacked from left and right but it was remorseless, and particularly painful over the tuition fees issue.

'In retrospect we should have taken more time. Remember that politically we were completely isolated as a party. Both the other parties wanted to raise fees. Also the other alternatives would have meant taking money away from, perhaps, pensioners, the pupil premium, or early years education. If you believe in social mobility it is important that you invest in younger children and a fair distribution for the graduate. We would have been in a better position if we had taken more time to explain the dilemma.'

Liberal Democrats get the flak for the bad things and no credit for the good things partly because, unfortunately, this tends to happen to smaller parties in coalitions around the world.

He and the whole cabinet had invested a lot of political capital in economic recovery. Weren't his hopes in very real danger of biting the dust?

'There is no doubt that things have deteriorated in Europe and the world, and it's having an unforgiving effect on us here too. That is not to say we are powerless. There are things we can do and are doing, for example, to make it easier for people to grow businesses and employ people. And then there is investment for the long term – rail transport, renewable energy and the extra borrowing we are allowing local authorities to boost house building. But it does not do it all by next week.'

… and how it looks now (2 June 2015)

It was Nick Clegg's first interview since the electoral disasters of 7 May. The time was 9.15 am, just three hours after the news broke that Charles Kennedy had died. We both had some difficulty in getting down to business. Nick Clegg had already suffered more than his fair share of shocks. Now here was another very personal one, for both of us, and he would soon be in the House of Commons paying his tribute to Charles. Luckily there was still time for us to move on.

Results

During those twenty-four hours after the polls closed on 7 May, he

had just held his Sheffield seat but had otherwise been surrounded by disaster as all but seven of his colleagues lost their seats. It must have come as a terrible body blow after all he had done over the last five years. How had he coped with those two or three days after the results were declared?

'Well I think that, like everybody else, I am actually still coping. It is not something you can compartmentalise. The reflections and reverberations will continue for a very long time. Like everyone else I was braced for a difficult election night but I was completely shocked when that exit poll came out. I couldn't believe it. It seemed at odds with everything we had found and been told. Our campaign was felt to be among the best the party had ever fought and there was high morale and optimism around. What I did feel in the final week was that it was as if the exam question had changed, with the examiner replacing the question you are answering with another quite different question. We had started off with the fairly conventional right–left argument between Tory and Labour, to which we could present the Liberal Democrats as the plausible alternative, but by the end it had become an argument about fear – fear of Miliband and Alex Salmond – which really got under the English skin. That, combined with the Nationalist fervour in Scotland, had a dramatic effect that was very much harder to counter.'

So what, before 7 May, had he privately thought the result might be? 'I expected a difficult night but I thought it would be perfectly achievable to be in the mid-thirties or on a good day hold more seats. That would have been quite a loss but perhaps a reasonable one in the circumstances.'

Incumbency

A lot of faith had been put into in the value of incumbency. That hadn't happened, had it?

'No, it didn't and in our post mortem we need to ask ourselves whether the power of incumbency was diminished because we were in coalition and/or because of the huge amounts of money being spent by the Tories centrally on effectively parachuting targeted campaigns into people's living rooms. Some of the winning Conservative candidates were seriously underwhelming, compared to the popular Liberal Democrat MPs they defeated, but the sheer weight of campaigning emails, telephone calls and direct mail, targeted at undecided voters, was overwhelming our local campaigns, whether or not the Conservatives had any viable local infrastructure. In our post mortem we may need to ask ourselves whether the days of our kind of local campaigning are now being seriously challenged.'

So why was the electorate apparently so unresponsive to everything that the Lib Dems had achieved in government over the last five years? Furthermore, the message of Lib Dem moderation of what the Tories might have done seemed to have fallen on deaf ears. Why was that?

'Well, that's the ten-million-dollar question. I don't think politicians should ever really expect people to vote for them out of gratitude, but the galling thing is that there now seems to be far more willingness to recognise our brave contribution in government than there ever was before or during the election itself.'

Hindsight

And 16,500 of those who had felt the result was unfair to the Liberal Democrats had joined the party after the election?

'Yes. Certainly from the press point of view there is a generosity with hindsight, which I suppose is better late than never but it would have been more useful at the time. My view has long been – and I know some people will say it was about this decision or that decision, about tuition fees, the NHS or whatever – that in the long term ordinary people don't follow or make decisions on every twist and turn in the Westminster village. They make big judgements about what is best for them and their families and broad-brush decisions about the political parties. What we had to contend with from the outset was that we were so remorselessly denigrated from right and left, day in day out for half a decade, as a party that was weak and had lost its heart and soul. This was never true, indeed quite the opposite, but it did huge damage so that, when people were frightened as they were on 7 May, they didn't want to turn to a party that had been portrayed in this way.'

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Trust

But hadn't issues like tuition fees and the NHS reforms undermined trust in the party among large key groups of former Lib Dem supporters such as teachers, students and health workers?

'There is actually not much evidence that we are thought to be any more or less trustworthy than any other party' – he cited instances where the Tory and Labour parties were equally open to accusations on trust. 'All political parties are mistrusted and even now we [the Lib Dems] are still seen, according to the polls, as more likely to have our heart in the right place. Now, the fundamental structural problem the Liberal Democrats need to face is that we are a smaller party in a Whitehall system that is not used to dealing with smaller parties, in an electoral system that doesn't recognise the support of smaller parties, with a press that is indifferent at best or implacably hostile at worst, with far less money than our major opponents and with no vested interest to defend us. So, when we came under pressure – like on tuition fees – we didn't have voices who answered back on our behalf.

Regrets

Given what had happened to him and the party at the election, had he any regrets about having gone into coalition and, given the basinful of disappointments he had suffered over the five-year parliament, did he harbour any resentments about the way the Tories had treated the Liberal Democrats? He thought long and hard.

'I obviously turn over and over and over what we could have done differently … but I come back to what I said earlier. I think people make very, very big judgements … Surveying the rubble, I don't honestly believe that tweaking here or there would have achieved very much for us. There was a fundamental judgement we had to make as to whether or not we should go into coalition in 2010. Given the situation in the country then I can't imagine any circumstance in which I would have recommended that we didn't. The country desperately needed it. I cleaved to the view, not unreasonably I think, that in the end, if you are seen to do something for the country that needed to be done you would get some reward

for it. That is clearly not the case but it wasn't irrational to think so.'

He recalled similar disappointment after the 2010 general election, although not on such a large scale. At that time, many Liberal Democrats felt aggrieved because, despite 'Cleggmania' and other positive pointers to the contrary, the party had lost seats when they had expected it to gain more. In that instance, the analysis of many party members had been that voters ran away from the party because 'it had no experience of government'.

After leaving the room to take a telephone call he returned clearly incensed by the memory of the failure of the 2011 AV referendum, which he described as 'the second big moment'. As it happened it was also the next subject I wanted to raise.

AV disaster

Was the marked failure of the AV referendum and the attempt to reform the House of Lords down to a matter of timing?

'The timing made a very big difference. It would have been much better if the referendum had been held later, but at the time there was a clamour of expectation that it would be held quickly and almost an assumption that the Liberal Democrats needed to do so to prove their electoral virility and that if we hadn't we would have betrayed every shred of our credibility on electoral reform. Clearly with hindsight we should not have been stampeded into holding it in the immediate wake of the high point of the economic crisis and the difficulties over tuition fees and the NHS but we were committed to it.'

And the Tories were pretty unhelpful? 'Unhelpful is putting it mildly. They were totally unscrupulous. It was a real low point. They not only deployed very specious arguments against AV but also went for the jugular personally. Cameron and Osborne could have stopped them but they chose not to. That they would fight hard was no surprise, but their willingness to use the record of their own government as an argument against reform was surprising even by their standards. And don't forget, on the other side of the coin, how lamentable the Labour Party was. We had put AV and House of Lords reform in the coalition agreement in part because both were in the Labour Party's 2010 manifesto. Where we had been expecting them to take some sort of lead on both issues, they then refused to go along with either, preferring to continue to snipe at the Liberal Democrats.

Surveying the rubble, I don't honestly believe that tweaking here or there would have achieved very much for us. There was a fundamental judgement we had to make as to whether or not we should go into coalition in 2010. Given the situation in the country then I can't imagine any circumstance in which I would have recommended that we didn't.

Resentments

'You asked me earlier whether I felt resentful about the Tories in coalition. I don't believe you can go into politics and hold grudges or resentments. Life is too short. But, in the same way I was astonished by the behaviour of the Tories during the AV referendum, I was really dismayed by the way in which the Labour Party spent five years almost wilfully denigrating the Liberal Democrats at every turn – and in the most loopy language, almost as if, according to Ed Miliband, we were some kind of collaborators who had committed some primeval sin. And yet those very same people are now beginning to wake up to the reality of a majority Conservative government that they had accused us of 'propping up', with some now even publicly recognising what we did and how much we restrained the Tories.'

On the five previous occasions I had interviewed Nick Clegg as party leader he had invariably demonstrated a remarkable degree of resilience in the face of difficulty but on this occasion some bitter memories had clearly stayed with him.

David Cameron

In an attempt to introduce a more positive note I reminded him of the good working relationship he claimed he had had with David Cameron in the early years. Had that relationship persisted?'

'It persisted throughout. Much though I lament what happened to us at the hands of the Conservatives at the election, I am not going to rewrite history. In 2010 he was right to recognise the need for a coalition. We both recognised what needed to be done for the country and both of us tried to conduct ourselves in a grown up way. The so-called mateyness of the Rose Garden was never there. We both knew we had a job to do and we just swallowed our pride and got on with it. It would be graceless of me now to pretend otherwise.'

Achievements

If he had his time again would he have played the coalition negotiations differently in any way? No, he was clearly proud of the number of important Liberal Democrat policies that the Tories had been persuaded to accept. He picked out a number of principles and key proposals from the 2010 Liberal Democrat manifesto as examples incorporated into legislation.

'It was clearly a remarkable achievement. What I think is a different question is whether we could and should have presented the coalition and its policies in a different way at the time, and I can accept there is a debate about that. You have got to remember that the whole concept of coalition was very new to people at that time and given the breathless media hysteria about the coalition that preceded the 2010 election I felt, in that first year against a continuing background of press vilification and prediction of the coalition's early demise, we had to demonstrate that it worked. I accept that after that we needed to differentiate ourselves and in a speech I gave in the National Liberal Club in 2011, after those disastrous local election results, I signalled that we would now begin taking a more robust approach.'

Despite all the frustrations he encountered, inside and outside government, over those five years he seemed to have managed to retain the loyalty of all his Liberal Democrat ministers, of whom some – such as Steve Webb and Vincent Cable – had remained in the same office for the full parliament. How had he managed that and, if he had to pick the two Liberal Democrat policy contributions most likely to last, what would they be?

'I am not a historian but when you look at the history of the party, when pressure has turned into disaster that is when we have split. I was determined that this should not happen this time. I don't think we now face a generational setback and I do believe that, under a new leader, we will soon return to rude health. I like to think that one of the reasons we haven't split is because I felt that, as leader, it was up to me to accept the criticisms, crossfire and the brickbats, to listen to colleagues and make quite sure on a regular basis that they knew

what I was doing and why I was doing it. I also regarded many of them as friends.

'As for their achievements I believe one of the most lasting will be Steve Webb's reforms on pensions. I have told him that, if he wasn't so infuriatingly modest, he would already have statues erected to him around the country! But I am also very proud of what we have achieved for poorer children in secondary and primary schools with free childcare and the pupil premium. Of course there was also Danny Alexander's tenure in the Treasury and the delivery of tax reform; Lynne Featherstone's work on equal marriage and international aid; and the greater priority for mental health that Norman Lamb and I have been able to achieve. There are many things.'

Referendums

And yet the UK still didn't feel like a more Liberal country, I suggested, citing as one example the increasing use of referendums instead of representative democracy to solve issues. In the fifty years before 2010 we had had only four referendums – one on Europe in 1975, one on independence for Scotland in 1979 and two on devolution to Scotland and Wales in 1997; yet there had been two in this parliament – AV and, most notably, independence for Scotland – and a third, on Europe, was in prospect in 2017. The successful 'No' vote in Scotland had triggered the biggest surge of nationalism that the UK had ever seen and now there was a real danger that the referendum planned for 2017 could lead to the UK's exit from Europe. This was not what I recognised as Liberal representative democracy and yet it seemed that was the way politics was going. How did it look to him?

'I don't think it is the mechanism of referendums that changes the temper of a country – but what the Scottish referendum, and possibly also the European referendum, will do is lift the lid on a very worrying trend, and that is the trend towards identity politics. One of the reasons that Liberalism is struggling in our country, as it is across Europe, is that the old distinctions – between right and left, market and state, bosses and workers, the north and the south, the private sector and the public sector, etc. – are breaking down and giving way to a much more visceral form of identity politics about us and them, different tribes, different communities, different nations: the antithesis of what Liberals believe. We don't believe that individuals should be defined by their tribe but liberated to be what we want to be.

One of the reasons that Liberalism is struggling in our country, as it is across Europe, is that the old distinctions – between right and left, market and state, bosses and workers, the north and the south, the private sector and the public sector, etc. – are breaking down and giving way to a much more visceral form of identity politics about us and them … the antithesis of what Liberals believe.

'So we are witnessing a creeping transformation of British politics where the categories we have traditionally used in the dim and distant past no longer apply. Instead the new politics you can see in movements like the SNP and other resurgent movements in Europe are the politics that divide people one against another and vociferously promote the cause of one group rather than another. That is the very opposite of the tolerance, and compassion, and evidence-based approach taken by Liberal Democrats. That is why Liberalism is increasingly under threat and ironically also why it is most needed.'

A final reflection

Four years ago he had high hopes that the Liberal Democrats would defy the experience of other minority parties in coalition in Europe and emerge with credit at the end of its term. It had not happened, had it? The electors had opted for majority party rule. In concluding, I wanted to hear again his main reason as to why not.

'I think there were two main reasons. One, north of the border, was the Nationalist fervour that virtually swept everyone aside and by the way has delivered this utterly disproportionate result. And two, in the south there was a widespread reaction against that and a fear of a government consisting of Labour and the Nationalists. You can add to that the caricature perception that the Liberal Democrats were weak and powerless to stop it. That is why people decided to play it safe and, when it comes to voting, the Conservative Party has always been the safe party to turn to. Safety is what it stands for.'

Finally I suggested that he had been very widely respected for the courage he had shown in taking the Liberal Democrats into coalition and had been almost as widely respected for what he had done since. Nevertheless he was leaving a huge gap in the political spectrum, particularly over Europe. What was his greatest regret about the last five years?

'Exactly what we talked about – that, despite the party providing a huge service to the country at a time of unprecedented post-war crisis, we were not able to convert that into electoral success. It shows that doing the right thing does not always equate with doing the popular thing. I am only 48 and I shall continue to enjoy being MP for Sheffield Hallam but I have also been lucky enough to be Deputy Prime Minister. I have learned a lot in the job. My only personal regret is that I won't be able to make full use of the experience!'

Lord (Tom) McNally

Leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords 2005–13); Minister of State for Justice 2010–13

How it looked to him then … (July 2011)

Tom McNally was a young Labour Party official when Harold Wilson's government had to devalue the pound in 1967. He ran Prime Minister Jim Callaghan's cabinet office for three years from 1976, while the economy went into meltdown and the country was saved from disaster by the formation of the Lib–Lab Pact and a bail out from the IMF. He was a late convert to the SDP in 1981 and an early convert to merger with the Liberal Party in 1988.

He was now in his third economic crisis, this time as a minister of state under Kenneth Clarke. 'I told the prime minister that, if he'd lined up his cabinet and asked me who I would most like to work with, I would have said Ken. We have known each other for forty years. He is sometimes described as a closet Liberal. He is not. He is an old-fashioned one-nation Tory.'

Clarke and McNally would seem to have been the ideal combination of party 'big beasts' to push through 'liberal' prison reform, but they were disappointed that

many of their proposals had been weakened by David Cameron. 'We have had to make some concessions to the bang-them-up-and-throw-away-the-key lobby, but the central thrust of the legislation is still there – a rehabilitation agenda to tackle some fundamental issues of a very large prison population, over half of whom reoffend.

'But it's very difficult to battle against popular press hysteria about any kind of reform, never facing up to the fact that putting more people in prison for longer and longer is very costly and self-defeating. We are going to try and reform the prison system so prisoners get more education, training and work. We are going to do more for drug dependents and the problem of drugs in prison. We are going to look at post-prison support.'

Nevertheless, the 50 per cent sentence discount for early guilty pleading went, some sentences becoming longer or mandatory, and the bill even gained the approval of Michael Howard. The end of any prospect of real liberal reform?

'No. The 50 per cent discount would have reduced the need for victims to testify and saved court costs but a number of judges and penal reformers thought it was too generous. So the one-third discount remains. The big gain is the intention to end indeterminate sentencing.

'I hope that at the end of this parliament we shall be able to say that having Liberal Democrats in government has meant that, for the first time in thirty years, issues in the criminal justice system have been looked at in a different, more humane and civilised way, and that has produced results.'

… and how it looks now (12 May 2015)

Within seconds Tom McNally was telling me that a month before the election he had predicted that the Tories would get at least 35 per cent of the vote and 320 seats or more and that Labour would get 30 per cent and around 220 seats. 'Because of the 8 per cent poll rating, I expected Liberal Democrat losses – but what I got completely wrong was that I thought the Liberal Democrats and the SNP would each get between thirty and thirty-five seats. Like Paddy Ashdown, I thought the incumbent argument would see us through and I didn't believe the exit poll. I also believe we ran a good campaign with the right messages and that Nick Clegg was an outstanding candidate.'

In support of his own commitment to going into coalition, he cited a 'marvellous quote from Machiavelli' – 'The prince who walks away from power walks away from the power to do good.' He saw himself as still in politics to do good. 'You can't pick and choose when you get power, and you can't choose how you get power. I remain absolutely convinced that in 2010 we were right to step up to the plate in a national crisis.

'I don't think it will take too long for people to start fully appreciating just what an effect we had on the Conservatives in preventing some of their nastier ideas.'

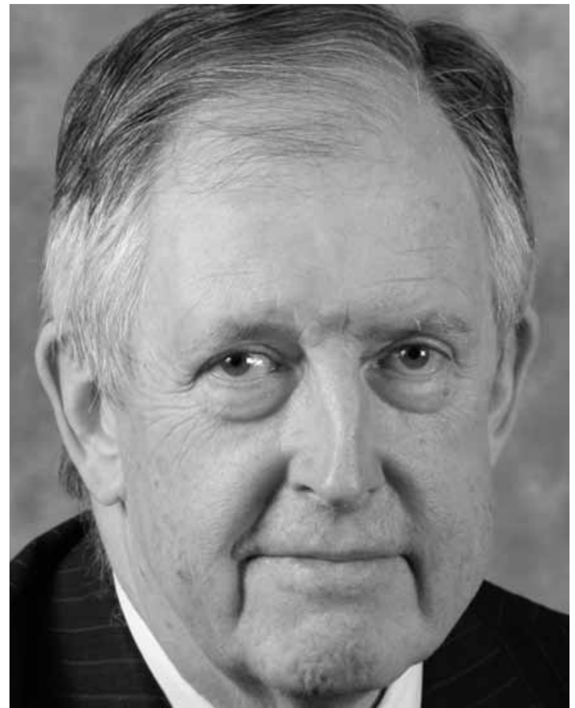
He and Shirley Williams were the only two Liberal Democrats with previous experience in a government required to work with another party. How had the recent Con–Lib Dem coalition compared in effectiveness with that of the Lib–Lab Pact of 1976–78?

'It was infinitely more effective, in that the junior partner had real influence and was better prepared than the Liberal Party of '76, but I also don't resile from the fact that '76–78 was also an effective period of government in which the Liberal Party restrained some of the more loony tunes in the Labour Party.'

But at the end of it the Liberal Party suffered a similar drop in its vote? Wasn't that a parallel? 'Yes but it was not as bad. And, if you are going to be prepared to take part in government, experience across Europe shows that the minority party will not necessarily get much credit.'

But what did the Liberal Democrats do wrong in the last five years to get so little of the credit that was going? 'Whether we can find the alchemy to be in government, share responsibility as a junior partner *and* get the credit I am not sure. I was always against open warfare. I think people will look back at the coalition government as one of the more cohesive and collegiate governments and the fact that we were punished for it doesn't take away its merits.'

We turned back to his time as Minister of State for Justice under Ken Clarke. Were there any other Tory ministers like him? 'No. He was the last of a generation.' They had worked well together and introduced a number of liberal penal reforms but also a controversial cut in legal aid which, in retrospect, he regretted as 'one of a number of mistakes the coalition made in those early days.'



But its financial approach was not another of them. He had learnt his lesson on that in the 1974–79 Labour government. 'In those early days I told Nick Clegg and David Cameron that in '74 Labour had not faced up to the enormity of the crisis and that, if we were going to do so now, they shouldn't make the same mistake. They had to go hard, fast and deep. I think the Keynesians now being wise are wrong. It had to be done.'

McNally has wide experience of communication and the media. The initial press hostility to the idea of coalition and the subsequent cynicism about it was drummed into the public over the five years, even if predictions of its collapse died down. Why did that never get better?

'Partly because papers such as *The Guardian*, which could have been helpful, refused to be; and partly because the media have always preferred biff-baff between two parties to multi-party politics.

'If I had to give advice now to Nick Clegg's successor …'. He paused. 'He did tend to cut himself off from what had gone before. In a way he had to learn his Liberalism.

I don't think he had any historic feeling for the party although he was a fast learner. Only once, for example, did he assemble former leaders around the same table … it was very difficult to find experienced people around him. I think the Lib Dems in government were weak on communication.'

Ken Clarke was sidelined as a minister in 2012 and Tom McNally decided to resign in 2013. Was that because of what they were trying to do or for some other rearrangement reason?

'Oh no, the problem with Ken was that Tory polling showed Labour policies were being seen as increasingly close to ours. I remember Chris Grayling [Clarke's successor] saying quite frankly that, although he was no swivel-eyed right-winger, he had been brought in to buff up the Conservatives as the party of law and order. He wanted to outflank the Labour Party and it is a long time since they have stood up for any civilised legal reform.'

Had the five-year parliament worked and would it continue? 'The Tories won't be in a hurry to change it. The alternative in the last five years would have been constant instability and speculation about disagreements and imminent new elections. Why would they want that this time? This is a government with a majority of just twelve.'

The Liberal Democrats are left with only eight MPs but there are still around 100 peers in the Lords. What effect would they have?

'If we are "the last men standing", as it were, we have a duty and responsibility to put forward Liberal values in a strong and coherent way – on issues like the Human Rights Act and emasculation of the BBC and defence of European membership. There will be a real Liberal agenda to be defended and the House of Lords must be the place to do it. The Tories' savaging of Lords reform has come back to bite them. They will no longer have an automatic majority.'

Looking back over the five years of coalition, what in the end had been most damaging to the Liberal Democrats in the election – the fact of going into coalition with the Tories originally, tuition fees and NHS reform, or the failure of the party to communicate its successes effectively?

I don't think that the simple decision to go into coalition made this inevitable at all but I do think that pretty well everything that happened thereafter contributed to it. To say that it was bungled would be a gross understatement.

'A combination of all three. There is no doubt that tuition fees remained in a totemic way a sign of our betrayal. We could have presented the argument more robustly. Here was a policy initiated by the Labour Party, followed by the even more draconian Browne report, which was supported by both Labour and the Conservatives and which we made more massively more supportive of poorer students, and yet we took all the stick because of the £9,000. It was toxic and I suspect it will remain with us for a long time.

NHS funding would always be a difficult problem for all parties, and the debate had debilitated the Liberal Democrats, but he added 'I think if you got David Cameron alone he would say he made a mistake in letting Andrew Lansley get on with his package for several years.'

The third issue the party underestimated was the weakening of the local government base. 'We lost so much through that.'

Did these results mean that the whole concept of coalition, including possibly the future prospect for PR, was tarnished by the return of one-party government? If so, what was the future for a party of eight or, to put it another way, what was the party now for?

'The Liberal Democrats are a party of government. They now have the opportunity to re-establish themselves as a left-of-centre party of conscience and reform, but they should not start apologising for the coalition. I believe it will not be long before the contribution of the Lib Dems to good government will become more recognised and that we will make a remarkably quick recovery at local level and in the next European elections.'

Sir Nick Harvey

Minister of State for the Armed Forces 2010–12; MP for North Devon 1992–2015

How it looked to him then … (July 2011)

Many people who knew Nick Harvey before he became MP nearly twenty years ago, remember him as being on the more radical wing of the party. Did he still see himself that way?

'More or less, yes. What you might call the 'Orange Book wing' wasn't there years ago and perhaps gives us a different reference point, but I think I still come from the same bit of the jungle. I was never an out and out hardliner but, yes, I think I am still a quiet radical.

'The decisions I have to grapple with now are not all that party political. There isn't a huge divide. Obviously we disagree on Trident, and there were huge disagreements on Iraq but that is not current business. Different perspectives on Europe also surface from time to time but … reluctantly we all accepted that cuts had to be made.'

He talked regularly with Liam Fox and, as the only minister of state in the department, quite often found himself deputising for him. With more cuts still being made, were Britain's armed forces 'fit for purpose' and, if so, what was that purpose?

'We do have forces fit for purpose but there is a debate about what that purpose might be. When we conducted the strategic defence review last year, we were invited to choose between three different postures: 'Vigilant', which effectively would have meant drawing back within our own homeland; 'Committed' which would mean ramping up internationally and trying to sustain a completely comprehensive British force; or 'Adaptable' – the option we chose – which was to maximise flexibility and the ability to do certain things, even if we would usually have to rely on others to act with us.'

So, even after all these years, did Britain still see itself as a world policeman? 'I don't think we are a world policeman, but we are prepared to take on constabulary tasks,' said Nick. This did not, in his view, include going into Syria or any other Middle Eastern country where there had been no regional or UN call for Britain to do so.

The decision to make no decision on the replacement of Trident until after the next general election was in the coalition agreement. Nick Harvey has never favoured a like-for-like replacement but did

the 'no decision now' decision make it more, or less, difficult to budget?

'At this stage neither. The ultimate cost will fall within the defence budget but the big expenditure, if we were to replace with a like-for-like, would not start until 2016. However that means the military community must soon start to debate the opportunity cost of putting all the money into a system that theologically is there not to be used.'

… and how it looks now (13 May 2015)

It was Nick Harvey's last day in his imposingly comfortable parliamentary office on the fifth floor of Portcullis House. He was surrounded by boxes and piles of paper but he was kind enough to see me face to face because the next day he would be back in Devon, leaving London behind.

He accepted my commiserations very graciously before we got down to business. Had he ever expected his or the Liberal Democrats' national results to turn out the way they did?

'I had realised from our poll standing that the election would be difficult and the thought that I might lose narrowly had occurred to me but I had been swept along with the general feeling in the party that incumbency might protect thirty or so of us and that I had a pretty good chance of being one of them. We had managed to convince the pollsters and most of the media accordingly. I never anticipated the tsunami that hit us. Perhaps we should have done.'

Was it the going into coalition with the Tories, a particular issue or group of issues, or the party's failure to communicate its successes that most undermined Liberal Democrat support on 7 May?

'I don't think that the simple decision to go into coalition made this inevitable at all but I do think that pretty well everything that happened thereafter contributed to it. To say that it was bungled would be a gross understatement.'

Did he say 'gross', I wondered? Yes, he did. 'Profound mistakes were made. The relationship with the Conservatives was all wrong. We nuzzled up to them far too closely, sending out all the wrong messages on so many issues, conceding things to them that we never should have done.'

For instance? 'I still don't understand how, having fought the election basically agreeing with Labour's view of the economy, we so easily backed the Tory view of the economy and set about going along with those draconian cuts of 2010 with quite such relish. The tuition fees saga, nuclear energy, you name them, we seem to have conceded on all these issues in that period of the pink hue of the Rose Garden. That was a terrible mistake. At the tail end of the parliament, so desperate were we to show clear water between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives, we ended up looking rather petulant and childish, and that did us no good either. We so misadvised ourselves about achieving great things on some of our own policies that we were far too willing to give way on other issues.'

Not even achieving on the economy? He paused. '… We raised the tax threshold. That was good but the Tories claimed it for themselves and I am not convinced that we got any credit for it. The European ministers with experience of various coalitions who came to talk to us in the autumn of 2010 all said "If you are in coalition and you don't agree with something, don't agree to it." It was all too late by then so, if the upshot of the recipe I am offering is a government that does less, I think that would be a good thing. Governments try to do far too much. It would have forced more devolution and less central government.'

So the coalition had not been a success? 'I don't think the coalition was a success. If I had been elected, I had imagined going to a pretty bloody meeting last Saturday [9 May 2015] where Nick and his team would be trying to propel us into another coalition of some sort and where there would have been a number of MPs, including myself, saying "Not on your nelly!" There would then have been further difficulties with some of the peers and the Federal Executive before it even got to a special conference. That would have been so whichever party was being talked to, but the results made all those decisions irrelevant.'

So what would he have done differently? 'I would have been far more willing to say "No" to the Conservatives when they were doing things we didn't like. We allowed business as usual far too much and we got carried along. On student fees we should have seen that was going to be politically disastrous. Other than that I do believe Lib Dem ministers genuinely did do good things, and that we did stop a lot of things, but we also let too much through.'

We turned back to his time as a minister and his working relationship with his very right-of-centre secretary of state, Liam Fox. How had the 'radical' Nick Harvey squared that, particularly over cuts and issues like the bombing of Libya?

'It was uncomfortable but, aside from Trident and European defence cooperation, there weren't gaping chasms between us. Neither Fox nor Philip Hammond were easy to deal with, although I had a perfectly reasonable relationship with both. On Libya, surprisingly, Liam Fox was far from enthusiastic about it, nor indeed were most of the senior staff at the Ministry of Defence. He was one of the most dove-ish members of the cabinet on the issue. The decision was taken in Downing Street after pressure from Sarkosy.'

Was the MOD usually hawkish in its views, particularly on cuts? 'No, less so than one might think. The calibre there is very high. They understood the need for cuts, and had already accepted the 2010 strategic review which set out cuts in the immediate term, but there was

always the understanding that they would be restored by 2020.'

Under Fox, Nick Harvey had been given 'the dirty jobs, like tricky bouts with Jeremy Paxman and others, but Philip Hammond always wanted to do everything himself'. So, after a year of 'media blackout' as he put it, he was sidelined from his job in a Clegg reshuffle.

Looking back had he and other Liberal Democrat ministers been fully able to be themselves in government, or had they always felt subservient to the Conservatives? 'You might get a different perspective from people like Vince [Cable] or Ed Davey. Never underestimate the power of a secretary of state, but the truth is we were never really able to be ourselves. We were just part of the realpolitik.'

Had the media and the public ever really understood what coalition was about? 'Not really. I can't tell you how many people said to me that they couldn't understand why we went in with the Tories – and then, quite illogically it seemed to me, they said they were going to vote Conservative.'

Perhaps, I suggested, that was because the majority of electors decided they found this unprecedented choice of parties on offer too confusing and they just wanted one majority party to get on with it, and that party had to be the Conservatives?

'That could very well be.'

So did that mean coalition was rejected for the future? If so, where did that leave the future for PR and for the Liberal Democrats? 'I don't think people will be giving much thought to PR. The Tories will clearly not be for it, and once Labour have a new leader they won't be either, But I was quite interested in [Green MP] Caroline Lucas's suggestion that, in the absence of PR, the progressive parties should be considering some kind of electoral pact. I realise that some people would have the hee-bie-jeebies about that but we now have a hell of a mountain to climb and a hell of a lot of candidates to find. It may be that some division of seats between Labour, Lib Dem and Green is something we should consider.'

A radical suggestion but possibly not one that would be popular with Liberal Democrats.

Michael Moore

Secretary of State for Scotland 2010–13; MP for Tweeddale, Ettrick & Lauderdale 1997–2005, Berwickshire, Roxburgh & Selkirk 2005–15

Scotland then … (March 2011)

His principal responsibility at the time was to develop and pilot the Scotland bill through parliament and its committees.

'It's demanding and very rewarding,' he says. 'We have a relatively small set up here, primarily for administering elections and overseeing the constitutional settlement, but now we have this crucial bill which has had to go through every development and consultation processes both here and in the Scottish parliament.

'I spend as much time as I can talking to cabinet colleagues about this and all the other issues that affect Scotland. Chris Huhne's decisions on energy and climate change are particularly important to us, as are Vince's on business and skills.'

The Scottish Secretary is a full member of the cabinet with the right to contribute to every cabinet discussion, not just to Scottish issues. He described the cabinet meetings as 'focused and contributory to the development of policy' and he praised the chairmanship of David Cameron. 'He encourages discussion. He listens. It's an important place for information sharing. Of course a lot of the other significant work is done in cabinet sub-committees.

'Without the pressure exercised by Nick Clegg and Danny Alexander in negotiating the coalition agreement there would have been no firm commitment to legislate the Scotland bill, but it was clear that it needed additional pressure from me to persuade the Treasury to devolve the right to raise half of Scotland's income tax revenue. That is huge. It is 15 per cent of the whole Scottish budget. Add it to other existing tax-raising powers and it comes close to one-third of the parliament's total revenues. So we are adding financial accountability as well devolving spending powers, while retaining Scotland within the UK.'

What would he like to do to improve attitudes and banking practices to the benefit of Scotland?

'There was clearly something very badly broken about the existing banking arrangements but we have now set out a pretty rigorous set of proposals on the bonus issue, taxation and codes of conduct, which I think will tackle some of the worst excesses. What I have been at pains to do alongside that is to highlight the importance of the financial services sector to Scotland. It provides thousands of Scottish jobs and we want to see it continue to prosper and grow.

'As you would expect, Alex Salmond and I have had various forms of communication over the Scotland bill, one to one, by correspondence and through the press. Clearly we are not looking to satisfy a Nationalist agenda but despite his criticism of our proposals he has yet to produce an alternative plan of his own. The three parties in the Scottish parliament therefore had no difficulty in supporting our view rather than theirs.'

… and Scotland now (22 May 2015)

Like Nick Harvey, who had recaptured and held former Liberal leader

Jeremy Thorpe's old seat for twenty-three years, for eighteen years Michael Moore had won the seat formerly held by David Steel. Now both were among the many Liberal Democrat losers, and Michael Moore, like Nick Harvey, was sadly dismantling his life. 'It's a mixture of grisly tasks like making everyone redundant, including my wife, and hearing about some people just not going out because they are so upset, but I am not quite doing that.'

What did he think most contributed to the disastrous results – going into coalition with the Conservatives, the rise of the SNP or other issues?

'All the above. There was a residual anger about the coalition across the country, complicated by the rise of the Scots Nats particularly affecting our Scottish seats. That played as much against the Labour Party as against us but, as Vince Cable confirmed when I spoke to him in Twickenham not long before polling day, it also began to play on the Lib Dem and Tory wavering vote south of the border. I knew my fate before I went to my count but watching the English results and people like Vince and David Laws falling I thought "This is terrible." '

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In 2011, when we had last talked, he was Secretary of State for Scotland, heavily involved with processing the new Scotland bill and setting up the coming referendum. Given the subsequent explosion of SNP support, had he any regrets about the powers the bill had devolved or the posing of a single question referendum?

'I am as relaxed today about what we did as I was at the time. We cannot get away from the fact that the SNP already had a mandate. They had won a majority in the Scottish parliament. If the parties in Westminster had chosen to be obstructive and ignore that, and not granted a referendum, I am in absolutely no doubt that Scotland would have organised its own referendum and by now Scotland would be on course for independence.'

Had he met with obstruction from Downing Street and other Tories to stop what he was doing? 'Some of the Tories were very gung-ho against the SNP and, of course, Salmond was pushing for everything from the beginning. But by being generous in agreeing that there would be a referendum, we earned the right to be more firm about the powers that would be devolved. It took a few months of persuasion but we retained control of the process.'

Michael Moore stood down as Secretary of State for Scotland in the autumn of 2012, but not until the Edinburgh Agreement – about the handling of the single-question referendum – had been settled with Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP.

'I just couldn't see how anything other than a single question referendum had any chance of being accepted if it went the wrong way for Scotland.' And yet, when the referendum was actually held and lost by the Yes campaign, the result seemed to light the touch paper of a further surge in SNP support which carried through to 7 May. Why was that?

'I am happy to join you in the luxury of the benefit of hindsight but, if you had made that statement the day before the referendum, you would not have found one person in the country who thought that was going to happen as a result. Part of the reason it did was because, unlike the Unionists who split apart after the campaign and went their own ways, the SNP carried on campaigning, managing to keep under their banner all those different tribes and sub-factions that make up Nationalism.'

Lack of counter-campaigning might have been a factor, but surely coalition policies and attitudes had been more responsible for creating that support? 'On the one hand there was the economy and the mess we inherited. The austerity measures that were so necessary to get us back on some kind of even keel made us very easy targets. The second part was in that in doing that we got some things horribly wrong, for instance tuition fees. We knew that before we did it. Nick said to us cabinet ministers at one of our Monday meetings that Vince was in charge of the policy and that he [Nick] was "not going to exercise his opt out as deputy prime minister because he deserves my support", so it kind of cascaded from there. The cabinet ministers went along with that, as did all the other ministers and before long you had nearly a third of the parliamentary party in support. In the end another third abstained and a third voted against it. Should we have come up with a different policy? Well …'

'The other two things that became part of the anti-government motif in Scotland against us were around welfare reform – the bedroom tax and sanctions. I got very fed up with the simplistic justification going around that were one million over-occupied houses in the country and one million under-occupied and that somehow people should be moved from one to the other. That might have made an interesting challenge in a public debate, but as beginning, middle and end of a policy it was bloody hopeless. And as for sanctions, a commercial banker I know, of all people, summarised my feelings very well: "How can we live in a society where we can coerce people into work by starving them?"'

I suggested the election result might mean that the whole concept of coalition between parties in the UK was now rejected by the electorate and possibly permanently tarnished? He admitted that the Liberal Democrats, having been in coalition with Labour during the first four years of the Scottish parliament, had lost seats at subsequent elections but that he had wrongly predicted the result of every single national election he had ever fought. Despite the difficulties encountered he saw a future for coalition and a further fragmentation of the parties.

A referendum on Europe was coming in 2017. The SNP wanted Scotland to remain in Europe. If there was a joint cross-party campaign for a Yes would he be happy to see the SNP being part of it? 'Of course I would. All of us who want to see the country remain in Europe should be seeking common cause.' But did he see Labour or the Tories seeking common cause with the SNP? He wasn't sure but he very much hoped they would because he believed that if the Yes campaign was fractured it could easily fail.

Looking to the future for the Liberal Democrats now that they were electorally on the floor, what lessons did he think they should learn from the experiences of the last five years? 'That the campaigning has to be on a permanent footing. That should be one lesson for us. We need to know our own minds, maintain our identity and

have the policies that match what we believe. If it is a choice between Norman Lamb and Tim Farron for the leadership that will happen because they are both good Liberals and good campaigners.'

We closed with a brief discussion as to whether the British public and the media would ever learn to appreciate minority party involvement in coalition. If they didn't, what would be the future for the Liberal Democrats as an effective force in politics?

'There will always be a need for a Liberal voice. You only have to look at what the Tories are doing already on human rights, Europe and welfare to know that we will be needed. Even *The Guardian* now claims to recognise that! But perhaps we will need to wait half a generation or even a whole generation until we are all minority parties and somebody finally recognises that PR is the only way we are going to have a fair reflection of politics in parliament.'

Steve Webb

Minister of State for Work and Pensions 2010–15; MP for Northavon 1997–2010, Thornbury & Yate 2010–15

How it looked to him then … (May 2011)

Against the background of the AV campaign and disappointing local election results, did he believe that the compromises required of coalition could still be made to work positively for the Liberal Democrats?

'Yes. Remember what the alternative is, and was: almost certainly Tory majority rule. Clearly this coalition is a big improvement but we have just got to demonstrate that better.

'Half the problem is the public's apparent inability to understand what coalition is about, They expected the Tories to do what they do, they did not expect the Liberal Democrats to do the same thing.

'After seventy years of majority rule they are just not used to the idea of nobody having a mandate, and it will affect the way future election campaigns are conducted. People will legitimately ask more questions about priorities if there were to be no majority. Elections will become more about values and less about shopping lists of policies. Policies change but values don't.'

In his ministerial patch he was pleased with the way the state pension reform was going, describing its future structure as clearly having Lib Dem roots. 'It's akin to a citizen's pension, it's flat rate and it's above the poverty line, so I am very proud to have helped to get it to the starting gate.'

But, how was an adequate state pension for all going to be affordable? 'First we are going to have to recognise that working lives will have to be longer. Partly that's about reducing the numbers stopping work well before pension age, by making it easier to work beyond, and by outlawing the practice of making people redundant when they get to 65, but it is mainly about the pension age itself. It would rise to 65 for women by 2018 and 66 for men and women in 2020, probably to be followed by a further rise and a reduction in the qualifying period for a full state pension to thirty years.

'We want to ensure that people also have an income from private sources, so from next year, with the help of a number of large and smaller companies, we shall be enrolling into workplace pensions schemes around ten million people who don't currently have them. They will put in a small contribution, initially just 1 per cent of salary and, rising to 3 per cent, so will the company and the taxpayer.'

Compulsory enrolment? 'Yes, but with the freedom to opt out. We shall return every three years to all who have, to try and persuade them to rejoin. So, if we can get millions more people saving that will be all the better for their old age, and will help affordability.'

Meanwhile the coalition stand on the Liberal Democrat 'triple lock' commitment to an earnings link for pensions was 'delivered'. 'The "triple lock" means that from now we look at the increase in earnings, consumer prices and 2.5 per cent. We take the biggest number of those three and raise the pension accordingly. Year on year pensions will rise above inflation.'

Steve Webb was also involved in other decisions of the department such as benefits. 'The difficult job of finding savings, followed by the comprehensive spending review, did bind us together but it is also understood that as the only Liberal Democrat in the village I have a special role. I see IDS's special advisers once a week and I also have to report back to our own parliamentary party.'

The big crunch points were the emergency budget of 2010 and the first comprehensive spending review that followed … the worst time of year was pre-conference when George Osborne, and it was always George Osborne, would come up with some new populist welfare cut. In the end we would trade nasty Tory stuff for nice Lib Dem stuff to talk about at our conference.

… and how it looks now (22 May 2015)

Steve Webb was the only Liberal Democrat minister of state to remain in the same post for the full five years. He is also the longest serving Minister for Pensions ever. In the thirteen years that preceded him there had been ten different ministers. So, although he deeply regrets the loss of his seat, he is 'not yet embittered' because he retains the satisfaction of having achieved change and improvement in office while also earning, he believes, the respect of the pensions industry.

Had he seriously expected what had happened? 'No, I didn't. If I thought people had spent four weeks lying to us I think I would have been rather cross but I don't think they did. There were straws in the wind of what swung them in the end like the SNP and fear of Miliband and we are saw some fragmenting of our vote to Labour and the Greens but afterwards I had a number of them say to me that they would never have done it if they thought the Tories were going to win.' He also believed that some previous Lib Dem voters had voted Conservative because they wanted the coalition but 'they couldn't vote Lib Dem because they didn't like Miliband'.

So the fact of being in coalition was not the principal reason for the catastrophic results? 'Only partially. My view, and I think it probably applies elsewhere too, is that there was a set of Tories prepared to vote Lib Dem in 2001 and 2005 because they did not see Tony Blair as too horrific and the future government of the country was clearly not at stake. In 2010 they began to drift away because they didn't want Gordon Brown and in 2015 they definitely didn't want Ed Miliband. That has got little to do with being

in coalition. Indeed I had quite a lot of people telling me that they liked the coalition and also what I was doing in Pensions.

'Where the coalition had an effect was in the fragmentation of the anti-Tory vote. That is when the 'broken promises', tuition fees and so on began to count. For example, I had a Green standing against me for the first time. The coalition was in favour of fracking. If we had been in opposition we would probably not have been, but I had to argue for it. The Green took away a vital 1,500 of my votes.'

When we met in 2011 he had warned of the difficulties of communicating how coalition worked and the Lib Dem contribution to it. Did the average elector ever manage to absorb what was Lib Dem policy and what was not, and did it actually matter?

'At the margins. A few people knew that we "did the tax spend". And quite a few people told me afterwards that they thought we had been unfairly treated, so there was some recognition that we had done the mature thing and moderated the Tories. But beyond that … It didn't matter a huge amount. There were still things we had to support that we didn't like.'

In his own patch at Pensions, he had managed to achieve Tory acceptance of quite a number of Lib Dem reforms such as the 'triple lock' that had become government policy. Had he or the party been sufficiently credited for that? 'Probably not. In the pensions world perhaps but I was not a Secretary of State … When I won the *Spectator* Minister of the Year award last year, someone wrote on Facebook "Who?" '

He had worked under Iain Duncan-Smith for his five years. Ideologically they must have been very different and yet the good working relationship he had claimed they had in 2011 appeared to have survived well. How was that? He was effusive.

'Partly because he is a gracious, generous and loyal man and partly because he was particularly interested in welfare and not particularly interested in pensions and I was probably more the other way round. He was interested in reform, not just cuts, although they had to be made – reforms that would give extra money to poor people. If I had had to work under a slash-and-burn minister, I would have been gone within six months. As long as IDS felt comfortable with what I was doing he increasingly trusted me to get on with it.'

There had been no quid pro quo between himself and Duncan-Smith in swopping tricky pension concessions for tricky benefit concessions. He clearly felt that most of the 'nasty' decisions about welfare cuts had originated with George Osborne rather than Iain Duncan-Smith. So how much had he himself been involved with welfare decisions in Work and Pensions?

'The big crunch points were the emergency budget of 2010 and the first comprehensive spending review that followed. IDS was keen that all of us in his department should be on board at that early stage. To that extent I was involved, but the worst time of year was pre-conference when George Osborne, and it was always George Osborne, would come up with some new populist welfare cut. In the end we would trade nasty Tory stuff for nice Lib Dem stuff to talk about at our conference.'

How comfortable had he felt about asking some companies in effect to subsidise the state pension by implementing a private, compulsory top-up scheme for young employees which they could later opt out of if they wished to?

'This was a policy with a fifteen-year genesis that included Adair Turner's commission into the future of pensions, which came to the inclusion that 'opt in' was not going to work. Legislation for the first 'opt out' scheme went through in the last government. What we did was improve it and in its present form it has been a stunning success. Over the five years, five million people joined the scheme and 90 per cent of participants have stayed with it, the majority from the younger age groups.'

Pension annuity reform and the right to take lump sums had been another policy implemented under Steve Webb. 'It was a genuine coalition move with a strong Liberal approach. Labour would never have done it. We needed to guarantee the state pension first, which we did, but I had been banging on about annuities for a long time and eventually the Treasury moved. No, we looked into the notion that everyone might blow all their money in one go. For tax reasons we doubted that that is going to happen. The people we are talking about are clearly more frugal than that.'

If the election results had been different he would have been part of the team negotiating any coalition agreement that might have arisen. Would he have been wholehearted about striking a new deal and would he have been willing to be part of it?

'In principle yes I would but, because we would probably have been a smaller party, we would have wanted to exact a pretty big price. A few policies here and there would not have been enough. We would have wanted something that made people go 'Woo' and that might have been a tough ask but, if we had come up with something, I would have been up for it.'

And what would have been his personal priorities in any negotiation? 'The front of our manifesto might not have been entirely my choice of issues but that would have had to be our starting point. I think, for me, the Tory idea that you can ask people down the scale to pay the price of £12 billion worth of welfare cuts while not asking the rich to pay any more in tax would have been one of my red lines.'

In summary he believed the coalition had worked and that it was right to go into it but he also believed that the turnaround on tuition fees had considerably damaged trust in the party. So how did

he now see the future for the Liberal Democrats?

'We had a very nice note from David Steel remembering the days "when there were six of us".

'As a party we do know what it is like to have a rough time. We do have good principles and we are community campaigners. There will always be a need for a Liberal voice. The difficulty for us is the scale of the defeat. We are no longer second in a lot of places and in some not even third. We will need time.'

How much time, I wondered? 'In the past it might have been decades but people are now much more volatile and tribal than they were, so you have to hope that you can catch the public mood.'

Paul Burstow

Minister of State for Health 2010–12; MP for Sutton & Cheam 1997–2015

How it looked to him then … (May 2011)

Now playing a key role in the development of that service most dear to every elector's heart, the National Health Service, he remained remarkably calm about his year to date. The storm of protest over the NHS did not quite match that over tuition fees, but why had Secretary of State Andrew Lansley's original proposals come in for relatively little critical comment from Paul Burstow or Nick Clegg when they were originally published in 2010?'

'There was actually at the time remarkable unanimity about the principles in the White Paper: the idea that we should seek to ensure that the NHS really did place patients and carers at its heart, in deciding not just about their own care but also about how the system ran; the idea that we needed to see more autonomy so that frontline staff could exercise clinical judgments and make decisions about how best to develop services to meet local needs; the idea that we should devolve more power in the system so that there would be more integration across health and social care; or, indeed, the idea that we could have any qualified provider providing services. That was in our own manifesto. So there was a good deal of unanimity.

'The difficulties arose, when the bill set out the proposals in detail.'

Was he happy, for example, with the idea that the management of general practice should be in the hands of GPs and that there should be more competition in the provision of services?

'As a party we had just fought a general election on a clear manifesto commitment to extend the policy of any willing provider. Also we had a very clear view that we wanted to see more frontline autonomy and devolution to frontline staff so the idea that, as long-term devolutionists and advocates of reform, Liberal Democrats should feel uncomfortable with that I think would be surprising.'

But in the event things had not quite turned out as planned. 'What became clear was that in the detail of the bill there were concerns about the drafting of the competition proposals and their implementation. There was a strong view that we had allowed competition to become a goal in itself rather than a means to an end in the interests of patients. I think what Nick and I have managed to get put into the legislation has rebalanced that and put it right.'

Had the Liberal Democrat intervention at the spring conference helped to improve the bill, and if so, how? 'The motion I actually tabled provided the opportunity for members to have their say and the leadership accepted the amendments. That is how it happened although already in the mythology of the party that is beginning to be forgotten. It gave Nick his mandate, as it were, to go back and negotiate changes.'

… and how it looks now (26 May 2015)

Once again I was sadly talking to a Liberal Democrat who had been expected by most people to retain his seat but then didn't. In 'fortress Sutton', that long-standing bastion of Liberalism in London, Tom Brake had survived in Carshalton but in the other constituency Paul Burstow had been defeated. Why was that?

'A combination of reasons. Partly due to the scale and intensity of the Conservative campaign: they were massively better resourced and spent even more in Sutton than they did in Carshalton. But also the fact that our party campaign was positioned as part of the same question that the Conservatives were asking. They were saying "Who should run the country?" based on the message "Be afraid of Ed Miliband and the SNP", while we were saying that we would be the moderating force. That gave people enough reason to vote Conservative.'

Was he then saying that there was an electoral disadvantage in claiming to be the moderating force? 'It reinforced the Tory narrative that you had to vote for them in order to avoid having chaos. In other words it was not a counter to the Tory narrative; it played to it and the response on the doorsteps was that people kept saying they had to think of the national picture. We may have fought the best campaign locally that we have ever fought, but we had been heavily outspent and in the end we could not fight the Tory tsunami.'

Looking back to his long history of successfully fighting the Tories in Sutton had he been concerned or content about the 2010 agreement to go into coalition with the Tories, and how happy was he to be part of it as a minister?'

'My answer to that is that I don't know what the counterfactual would have looked like. If we had opted out of coalition, we would been accused of cowardice for not taking an opportunity to put forward our ideas. No, I supported the decision we took then and was broadly satisfied by the agreement itself, and I welcomed the opportunity to put into law some of the things I believed in and had campaigned about. And that is what I have done.'

As party chief whip he had been privy to the progress of the negotiations at the time. Would he have contemplated a deal to go in with the Labour Party had that possibility been on the table?

'It never was a counterfactual. There was no prospect of a viable deal partly because of the numbers and partly because the Labour Party had no appetite for it even within their own negotiating team.'

When he became Minister for Health it must have been a daunting task being asked to implement the Tory proposals for the NHS that the Tory secretary of state Andrew Lansley had been working on for the previous four or five years. How had he reconciled that?

'That period between May and July 2010 was pretty frenetic as we tried to introduce some of our own proposals such as the scrapping of the SHAs. The civil servants had already done a lot of work on how they would implement Lansley's plans, many of which had been set out in the Tory manifesto. Our own proposals had not been so detailed and the civil servants had done no previous work on implementing or incorporating them within the Tory plans. I would add that at that stage there was also no special adviser support for me in the department. We had to manage on our own.'

He claimed that he got on 'quite well' with Andrew Lansley, revealing that Lansley had been a member of the SDP in the 1980s, although he did not know him at the time. He was 'a man with a mission' but he had left Paul Burstow to get on with his particular responsibilities, which included social care and mental health.

Over the next year some of Lansley's proposals had come in for heavy criticism from a number of quarters. Did he feel that he had been able to make much Liberal Democrat impact on his more controversial plans?

'The proposals changed quite a bit from the way they had first been set out. For example, we won the setting up of the health and wellbeing boards, which brought health and social care together for the first time in one body. We had public health returned to local authorities, a good Liberal Democrat idea. And then we had a series of concessions we brokered as part of the final package of the bill, not least the changing of emphasis on competition so that it should not be an end in itself but one there solely as a servant of the patients' interests. To some extent that whole part of the bill that was about competition was watered down. The legislation was better for that.'

Looking back, he believed that the Liberal Democrat legacy of this time was the health and wellbeing boards, 'which Labour would have kept and built on'; the fact that public health was now seen as a local authority responsibility; and the watering down of competition requirements as a solution to problems. 'But the biggest legacy of all is not the Health & Social Care Act, it is the Care Act of 2014, which is much more a Liberal Democrat measure.'

My personal view was that to prove our point and value as participants in coalition we needed another five years and that, if that possibility arose again, we should not run away from it.

Paul Burstow ceased to be a minister in 2012 but continued to build on his interest in residential care and the development of mental health services. I wondered to what extent his perspective of the coalition had changed after he left office.

'I had stopped being a decision maker so I decided to become an implementer of the things I was most interested in. I set up commissions with groups like Demos and Centre Forum to look at residential care and mental health, and those reports have proved influential on government thinking and wider policy thinking.'

If the election results had proved to be different and he had had the chance to become a minister in another coalition involving the Liberal Democrats, would he have said yes or no? 'I think it is unlikely that I would have been offered Health again, so it would have depended on all sorts of thing. For example how big a party we were and how much influence we were likely to have. My personal view was that to prove our point and value as participants in coalition we needed another five years and that, if that possibility arose again, we should not run away from it.'

So following the electoral disaster that turned out, what lessons should the Liberal Democrats learn and what should they now do to prove their point and relevance? 'We have to focus on rebuilding our local government base where so much of our old strength came from in the early '90s. We also have to look to our colleagues in the Lords to give us effective leadership on all the major issues that are now going to hit them. We need to get back to campaigning on issues that matter to us.'

What had done the most damage to the party in those five years – the fact of going into coalition, or particular issues like tuition fees and NHS reforms, the handling of the coalition, or was it none of these things? 'I think what did the most damage was the fear that there would be some sort of coalition between Labour and Nicola Sturgeon's SNP. That was the determinant. There were some issues like tuition fees which mattered a lot to some people but it was the overarching fear of the possible alternative to the Tories that was the deciding factor.'

So it was fear of the SNP more than anything else, even if they had no MPs outside Scotland? 'Yes. You are not talking rationality here. It is about emotion and not wanting that combination of parties to govern the country.'

Despite all the predictions the electorate had plumped deliberately for a majority Conservative government defying almost every poll finding, including those suggesting that 40 per cent of the electorate actually liked and approved of the coalition. What did that mean for the concept of coalition in the future?

'If it had been possible to vote for the coalition on the ballot paper, I think large numbers might have taken that option. I think strategies that now try to take us away from the coalition would do nothing but damage to our credibility. We should not now start apologising for having had the temerity to go into government. That would do nothing but damage to our

credibility as a party. The Liberal Democrats did a lot of good things and many will be remembered.'

And had he any additional priorities for the party's recovery in London? 'Concentrate on rebuilding our local government base and campaign on issues, particularly in next year's GLA elections where we can increase our share of the vote. By then the Tories will have had to do something about the deficit and will be becoming unpopular. We need to use the areas where we have been strongest in the past to rekindle that sense of grass-roots activism. We also need to make full use of our strength in the Lords.'

I suggested that the two greatest dangers for the country over the next five years were an exit from Europe and the break up of the UK. What should the remaining Liberal Democrat MPs be doing to help to prevent that happening? 'Getting out of parliament and leading the campaign in the country,' was his unhesitating response.

Finally was he optimistic about the party's ability to recover and would he want to be part of that recovery? 'I am old enough to remember that 'dead parrot' period of 1987–89 when we featured in asterisks in opinion polls, and yet two years later, in 1990, we won the Eastbourne by-election and that is when the growth began. As for my future, I shall certainly be helping – but two and a half weeks after 7 May is too soon to decide exactly what I will want to be doing.'

Lynne Featherstone

Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Equalities, Home Office, 2010–12; Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development 2012–14; Minister of State, Home Office 2014–15; MP for Hornsey & Wood Green 2005–15; ennobled, 2015

How it looked to her then … (May 2011)

'I am a Home Office minister as well being Minister for Equalities: I have women, LGBT, the Equality Act and the Equality Commission, but I also have domestic violence, international gender-based violence, hate crime, prostitution, missing people, wheel clamping … I could go on. It's a very extensive portfolio but people know me most for equalities.

'They are issues that you can be passionate about. They are about people's lives.'

Two weeks earlier the Protection of Freedoms Act, which she was closely involved in constructing, received royal assent. Did she feel content with the Act as it had been passed? 'I think it is a great first step. There should be lots of other freedom bills – the more we can roll back on civil liberties and the surveillance society the better, but this Act is a very good start.'

The day after this interview President Obama came out in favour of same-sex marriage, a cause on which she has already spent a lot of time preparing a bill. The consultation process was already in hand. Had it been difficult to get coalition agreement on the principle?

'Funnily enough … (long pause) … no. Of course there was a discussion beforehand but you can't do anything in government without the support of your secretary of state and I have had nothing but support from Theresa May.' And from David Cameron too? 'Yes, the whole cabinet has to sign off, and David Cameron stepped forward at his conference to say that he supported it. It has always been Liberal Democrat policy, but I couldn't be doing if it wasn't backed by the other side of the coalition equally.'

But it was clearly going to meet strong opposition from certain quarters. 'I would defend to the death the right of those who disagree to voice their disagreement, whether from a religious basis or just from people in society who feel it is odd or strange or such a change from tradition; but society moves on. This is a great inequality. Obviously, if we were going to force religious organisations to conduct services against their doctrinal practices, you would understand; but we are not. I respect other people's views too and I think that when two people love each other and are willing to commit publicly in a traditional state marriage we should be able to rejoice with them whether they are gay or straight.'

She was confident that the bill would ultimately go through with support on all sides (and later she proved to be absolutely right). Slightly surprisingly, Lynne did not seem to have been unduly stifled by coalition government and there was plenty more that she wanted to do: for example, banning discrimination against old people in public services, particularly in hospitals and social care.

… and how it looks now (5 June 2015)

Lynne Featherstone was one of only six Liberal Democrat MPs who served as ministers for the full five years of the coalition. At the Home Office, her record on women's and same-sex issues is likely to stand the test of time, as is her record on disability at the Department for International Development (DFID).

When she first stood in Hornsey and Wood Green in 1997 she finished in third place, 26,000 votes behind Labour. In 2000 she managed to find time to redesign the *Journal of Liberal History* for Duncan Brack; her excellent design remains unchanged today. In 2001 she came second in Hornsey and Wood Green, reducing the Labour majority to 10,614. In 2005 she won the seat with a majority of 2,395, retaining it with a majority of 6,875 in 2010. Even with that record and every Liberal Democrat in London rooting for her on 7 May, she was swept away by a Labour majority of 11,058. Did she feel a strong sense of injustice?

'Only in the sense that the voting system is rubbish. Politics is like that. There is an injustice in that the Liberal Democrats were always the good guys in this coalition. If you look at what the coalition delivered and pick out all the bits you like you will find that they were all at Lib Dem instigation. But we did know before we went in that third parties going into coalition get it in the neck. Apart from the eleven who voted against it at the special conference I don't think there was anyone who thought we should not go into coalition. To have the opportunity to have power and not take it and deliver on it would have been insane. The sense of injustice is that we end up with the Tories becoming a majority government and us becoming a very little minority party, but that is the way the voting system works, and that is undoubtedly unjust.'

So if she had to attribute blame for the disaster would it be mostly going into coalition with the Tories or perhaps, in her own area, to Labour's relentless denigration of the Liberal Democrats over the previous five years?

'On the day we went into coalition, all 26,000 of those previous Labour voters who had turned to us over three elections wrote to tell me in no uncertain terms that I was the spawn of the devil and that it was unforgivable of me to have put the Tories into government. Nevertheless many of them continued to love me for what I was doing in government, be it same-sex marriage, international development, female genital mutilation, or disability campaigning. Then many told me that they were voting Labour with a heavy heart because they wanted to keep the Conservatives out. Well, as I told 15,000 of them in my last email after the election, they now have a majority Conservative government instead. If ever there was lesson in voting for what you believe in ….'

A lot of polling had been done locally in the run-up, all showing the Featherstone ratings as high or on a par with Tim Farron and Norman Lamb, but she was facing Labour. Yes, there had been a mantra from Labour about the evils of voting for tuition fees, the Health and Social Care Act, the bedroom tax and zero hours contracts, but they were lightning rods. It was the visceral hatred of the Tories that had been the deciding issue. Why had the Liberal Democrats got so little credit for the good things the party had done in government?

'Obviously the media are not, and never have been, very helpful in getting our message across. Indeed that is probably origin of our long-standing own rule of "If you do something, put it on a leaflet and put it through someone's door" being the best way to get our message across because no one else was going to help us. It is still true today. Just one instance – I went through that whole process of bringing forward the bill on same-sex marriage without *The Guardian* mentioning me once.'

We turned back to those first two years as a minister in the Home Office. What did she think had been her most significant achievement in government during that time?

'Everyone would say same-sex marriage. It wasn't on the agenda. It wasn't in the coalition agreement or the main manifestos. I just did it. Scotland followed and now Ireland has had its own referendum. It's a piece of work of which I am inordinately proud. It makes me very emotional and also gets me invited to a lot of gay weddings. But the campaign to end female genital mutilation (FGM) also ranked very highly because it was not on the agenda. Now it most certainly is, and structurally so, so I am optimistic that it can't be dismissed. Less well known but just as important to me when I went to the Department for International Development was disability in the developing world.'

Four years ago she had told to me that Theresa May and David Cameron had both been supportive of her determined efforts to produce a bill on same-sex marriage. Was that still her recollection?

Initially she was hesitant – 'You will have to wait for my book,' she told me – but she soon conceded briefly that, despite some hostility on the Tory backbenches, they had been supportive. 'Theresa was one of the unsung heroes of same-sex marriage. Without her support it might have been strangled at birth, and the prime minister was helpful as well.' Enough said for the moment.

Before the legislation finally went through, with a wide range of support, she herself had decided to stand down from the Home Office in anticipation of the coming reshuffle. If asked, she wanted to go to DFID. 'I felt I had sewn up the same-sex marriage bill. I had nurtured it mothered it, gone to fight its battles so many times when it very nearly fell from grace. Incidentally I had also introduced, among other things, a highly popular ban on clamping cars on private property. So by the time of the reshuffle, I felt I had done all I could at the Home Office, although I followed the bill all the way through, sitting alongside Maria Miller during the report on the consultation.'

What particularly did she feel she had achieved for women achieved during her time at the Home Office? 'Part of my portfolio was violence against women. During that period I was approached by Nimco Ali, who had set up Daughters of Eve, an anti–FGM campaigning grouping of young girls. Basically she took me by the collar and shook me, soon persuading me that this was an important, equality issue about women's rights. But the Home Office was not really set up to deal with it; DFID was, so, when I went there, I set out to make it a major issue worldwide, and therefore help the UK too.'

Justine Greening was her Tory secretary of state. How had she got on with her? 'I think I managed to put the agenda for women at the top. In 2010 David Cameron had given me the additional role of being the UK's ministerial champion against violence against women. I don't think Justine was necessarily interested in the FMG issue initially, but in so far as it helped to define the government's position, neither she nor David Cameron wanted all the credit for pursuing it to go to the Liberal Democrats, so she became supportive.

'I was left to get on with the issue behind the scenes but I did manage to get Nick Clegg involved and I was particularly grateful to the *London Evening Standard* for helping us to raise the profile.'

I wondered whether the Tory backbenchers, with their normal prejudices about foreigners and the UK spending money overseas, had been obstructive about what DFID was trying to do. She agreed that

On the day we went into coalition, all 26,000 of those previous Labour voters who had turned to us over three elections wrote to tell me in no uncertain terms that I was the spawn of the devil … Nevertheless many of them continued to love me for what I was doing in government, be it same-sex marriage, international development, female genital mutilation, or disability campaigning.

they, and the *Daily Mail*, had grumbled about money being wasted, but all three major parties were committed in their manifestos to a target expenditure of 0.7 per cent and that the argument that, if you didn't want terrorism, you supported economies overseas was a persuasive one. She also gave Greening's predecessor Andrew Mitchell credit for putting DFID on a firmer financial footing.

When she returned to the Home Office in the autumn of 2014 as a minister of state, in place of Norman Baker, Theresa May was 'pleased to see me and gave me a hug.' Although she had taken over Baker's responsibilities, there was now little time left to carry forward his policies on drugs, which some people had found too controversial. In those last six months, crime prevention became her principal concern. 'I think I maintained a Liberal voice on drugs but there was no time for new legislation. I became a safe pair of hands.'

In conclusion I wanted to be quite clear where she thought the main reason for the electoral disaster on 7 May lay. She and Simon Hughes had both been fighting Labour and both had lost, and yet Labour had not become the government overall. Why not?

'London seems to be very different from the rest of the country. Simon and I saw huge Labour surges here in last year's council elections. I have really no idea why Labour did better, although it was partly because the Green surge didn't happen in London and nor did UKIP do particularly well.'

She came back to the 'visceral' hatred of the Tories with which the Liberal Democrats had also become branded by association. In her seat, fear of the SNP had not been a particular factor but the fear of the Tories was. When she supported the coalition originally she knew she might be risking her seat, but there was still a Liberal Democrat base left upon which to build.

'Does the party have a role for the future? Yes, it is a very important role – to put back that ability to vote for a Liberal voice. The challenge is how to combine the passion of Liberalism and its commitment to social justice, human rights, internationalism and the environment with our grass-roots campaigning. If we can get that right we are on the up.'

Sir Danny Alexander

Chief Secretary to the Treasury 2010–15; MP for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch & Strathspey 2005–15

How it looked to him then … (March 2011)

He had not expected to be chief secretary, but he had prepared for and led the coalition negotiations so the notion of coalition had surprised him less than most Liberal Democrats. 'I had always thought a hung parliament was a very real possibility. But likely? Probably not. Moving to the Treasury after just eighteen days was undoubtedly the big change but, having been Nick's chief of staff, it was a process I was familiar with. I had been involved with setting political priorities and had written the manifesto, setting out costs and priorities. The Treasury is full of fantastic officials and high-flying economists. What is needed is ministers who can make the right political judgments.'

The two most significant 'gives and takes' on both sides in the negotiations? 'Our core argument in the election was for firmer action to tackle the deficit than Labour was proposing and we were specific about our cuts, but we also said that timing should be determined by the economic reality. I think that judgment was right and it was one we fully shared.

'The biggest single gain for the Liberal Democrats has been the inclusion of the raising of the tax allowance threshold. That has gone from the front of our manifesto to the front line of the government's tax strategy. The second big gain has been the emphasis on the green economy. For example, in the budget we announced an earlier start and tripling of the funds for the Green Investment Bank.'

He disagreed with George Osborne 'quite a lot' – 'There is plenty of debate between us about detail. That is inevitable, and not for airing in public' – but they were 'completely agreed on the core of the economic strategy and to tackling the deficit quickly and deeply'.

'Delaying would have meant more cuts for more people for longer and wasted more money on interest.

'We never ruled out raising VAT to 20 per cent. None of us wanted to but, when you have to deliver, you have to decide the balance between taxation and spending cuts and, if you decide to raise significant funds, there are only three taxes you can go to – income tax, national insurance and VAT.'

When would he able to say 'We did it. We stuck to our principles. And it worked'?

'In time for the next general election when, I believe, the Liberal Democrat contribution will be properly recognised at the polls, as it was in Scotland in 2003 after an equally turbulent and unpopular first eighteen months in coalition (with Labour).

What I fear most is a lurch towards excessive constraint on government spending. We did what had to be done in the last parliament; there is no doubt more to be done, but the thing I fear is that the Tories will go way beyond what is necessary, and that will affect public services, the welfare system and the schools system, the very things we never would have allowed to happen.

… and how it looks now (7 June 2015)

He had just returned from two weeks' holiday, and I thought he was back in the Highlands on a landline when I rang him at the agreed time. He wasn't. He was on a mobile and walking down Victoria Street in central London – a noisy place and not ideal – but, despite the traffic and then a requested break to talk to Tom McNally whom he had just bumped into, we managed to achieve an interview.

He had obviously been upset by his result but apparently not totally surprised. 'For me defeat was probably less of a surprise than it was for many of my colleagues. I remember saying to Nick (Clegg), two days after we formed the government, 'You realise that you might just have cost me my seat.'

'The Tories were extremely unpopular in Scotland,' he reminded me. 'The idea of a Scottish Liberal Democrat MP going into a senior position in government with them was always going to be hard, and with the later rise of the SNP in Scotland the trend became almost irresistible. In other constituencies in the south with big majorities, like

David Laws in Yeovil, the results must have come as a much bigger shock. I had expected us to hold at least thirty of our seats. I think the opinion pollsters have a lot to answer for. If people had thought that a Tory overall majority was on the cards they would have voted for us.'

I suggested that, after all he had done for the party and the country in helping to restore the economy, he must have felt a sense of unfairness about what had happened.

'I am not sure there is any point in complaining. It is what it is and in a democracy you have to put up with that. I think it is rough justice for the party, given what we contributed, but mainly I feel an immense pride in what we did.'

But what had happened in Scotland, with an almost complete wipe out of Liberal Democrat MPs, must have come as a terrible blow to them all?

'Of course, of course. The fact that we were swept away on an almost invincible national tide was quite different from losing our seats because of indolence or lack of application or whatever.'

I suggested that nobody could have done more than he had to emphasise the Liberal Democrat policies in government, particularly on tax, and yet the electorate had given them almost no obvious credit and the number of Liberal Democrat seats had dropped like a stone. Why was that?

'I don't really know and I am not going to rush to judgement. The truth is, though, that our position was weakened by being in coalition, in the sense that many of those voters who had supported us in the past as protest voters had left us and, when it came to countering the threat of a Labour–SNP combination, we did not have the support to resist that message.'

I reminded him that in 2011 he had expected, a little optimistically I thought at the time, that the party would see electoral reward in 2015 for what it had done, but that hadn't happened.

'No. In the end people's fear of a marauding band of Scottish Nationalists gaining control of a Labour government just proved too much.'

I wondered, looking back over the last five years, whether his feeling was one of satisfaction or frustration.

'Immense pride and satisfaction in what we did, and great frustration that it was not recognised by the electorate. It is quite interesting to see the way people have joined the party since the election almost as though it was an act of remorse.'

Possibly, I suggested, many of them were people who did not vote Liberal Democrat but then felt the need to say they were sorry that they hadn't?

'Yes. I think there was a lot of that, a lot of that. We put our country above our party and it is a better country as a result, and I think that over the next five years people will see how very different a Tory majority is from a coalition.'

Danny Alexander had been a leading member of the Liberal Democrat coalition negotiating team. Why was it that the team appeared not at the time to have recognised that issues like tuition fees and NHS reform were as potentially toxic as they later turned out to be?

'Tuition fees were recognised in the agreement in the sense that there was an opt-out agreed within it allowing Liberal Democrats to abstain in parliament. We hadn't yet had the Browne report. Our position was in effect resolved in discussion of the detail later on. On NHS reform we focused our attention on the issues where differences between our two parties were greatest. That meant that other issues were not perhaps scrutinised as carefully as they might have been, but again many other issues were resolved later between Paul Burstow and Andrew Lansley including the introduction of many of our own ideas.'

He believed that, except in a few constituencies, the issues of tuition fees and the NHS had not in the end played a big part in determining the election result, although the party had perhaps failed to take account of their importance to some voters. So we returned to fear of a Labour–SNP government as the deciding factor in England, even though the SNP had no remit there.

'That was definitely the message that gripped the imagination of people in England, to a much greater extent than I thought it would. I wasn't as aware as perhaps I should have been of the effect of the referendum result in creating fear of the break up of the United Kingdom. The fact that these people might be in charge of the UK was an abomination.'

He then told me that since the election he had not been on 'Osborne watch'. Probably the worst thing he could have done, he believed, was obsess about what others were doing from day to day. But he must have had some residual fears about what the Treasury might be going to do next without any Liberal Democrat presence?

'Yes. I think what I fear most is a lurch towards excessive constraint on government spending. We did what had to be done in the last parliament; there is no doubt more to be done, but the thing I fear is that the Tories will go way beyond what is necessary, and that will affect public services, the welfare system and the schools system, the very things we never would have allowed to happen. And that could also damage the recovery because it abandons economic balance in favour of a myopic, one-golf-club approach.'

The electorate could not have been said to have endorsed coalition in any way and, with the Liberal Democrats now reduced to eight MPs, did he think there was any future for a minority ex-coalition party, or indeed for coalition as a form of government, or even for PR as a reformed electoral system?

'I think there is a great future for our party. Within a catastrophic

result there are many constituencies where we hold strong second places. There are a lot of voters who regret voting for other parties. But I think, more importantly for the country, there is a real need for a Liberal voice whether it is on Europe, human rights or the economy. We have a Conservative government and most of the candidates for the Labour leadership are conservatives with a small 'c'. You hardly ever hear people like Andy Burnham or Yvette Cooper talking about civil liberties or human rights. There is a desperate need to put a Liberal counterpoint to that approach.

'We are not going to see PR in the next five years, but it's impossible to forecast about coalition. Labour doesn't seem capable of winning a majority next time around. I would hope, though, that, if the opportunity for coalition came up for us as party in 2020 or 2025, we would take it again … having, of course, learned the lessons. Liberalism is a philosophy that wants to change things. You can only change things by going into government. If that is not your aim you have no purpose.' Meanwhile he pointed out that the 100 Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords could have a considerable influence on the present government.

On a different note, did he fear for Scotland and the Union and did he plan to do anything about it himself?

'I fear for Scotland because it is extremely unhealthy and illiberal for Scotland to be a one-party state, and that must be changed. I don't actually think that Scotland will ever vote to leave the United Kingdom but you can't be certain, and I shall be doing what I can to make sure it doesn't happen. I won't be standing for the Scottish parliament, and I am also not going to the House of Lords by the way. I am too young for that. But I don't want to close off the possibility of elected office altogether.'

On that encouraging note we closed so that he could get on with catching his train.

Sir Vince Cable

Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills 2010–15; MP for Twickenham 1997–2015

How it looked to him then … (April 2011)

'It is more difficult exchanging forthright freedom of expression in opposition for the frustrations of coalition government, and of course there is a collective discipline to observe, but that is only right. What we are learning is how to maintain our sense of identity within a coherent government. I think a lot of people around the world admire the government for being very determined, particularly over the public finances, but the issue for Liberal Democrats is to signal our own identity and values and that we are making a major input.'

Were some cabinet decisions exasperating? 'That's not the word I would use. I would not have gone into the government if I hadn't accepted that compromises have to be made. For example, there were clearly different perspectives on immigration. I made a very strong case for a liberal approach to people visiting this country on bona fide business or as students. Inevitably there had to be some compromise, but I am able to defend what we have done. And in most areas in which I have been involved in discussion – macro policy, public spending, tax, the growth agenda – I don't feel fundamentally ill at ease with the direction in which we are going.

'I believe cabinet meetings are a constructive forum for debate. People looking in now are pleasantly surprised at what they call the revival of cabinet government. Under Blair and Brown I believe it was much more prime ministerial.'

How did he get on with George Osborne? 'We have a good professional relationship. We are not personal mates and don't aspire to be, but that is not the point. Economically we have the two key departments of government. It's crucial that we work and communicate well together, and we do. It's business-like and professional. No more nor less.'

I quite often met with George Osborne on a one-to-one basis, but part of my problem was that I found I disagreed with Danny more than I disagreed with George Osborne. Danny would always repeat the Treasury line. Osborne was a highly intelligent guy and on occasions was willing to do a trade, as it were.

In 2009 Vince Cable and Nick Clegg had cautioned the Liberal Democrat conference about holding or abolishing tuition fees. Had he had a rather raw deal on the issue?

'It was no secret. I wrote about this. We needed to be realistic. Universities must be properly funded and have fair funding for students. With all the problems of impending cuts, it was clearly not going to be possible to maintain our commitment. It wasn't easy, but I think we now have a realistic policy that ensures properly funded universities … and (in total) actually gives them more money.

'Economic growth is already beginning to come from rebalancing the economy, in practice from the private sector, particularly small-scale companies, and from exports and manufacturing, which in the years under Labour were in decline. We are helping all businesses by investing in apprenticeships, and reducing regulation.'

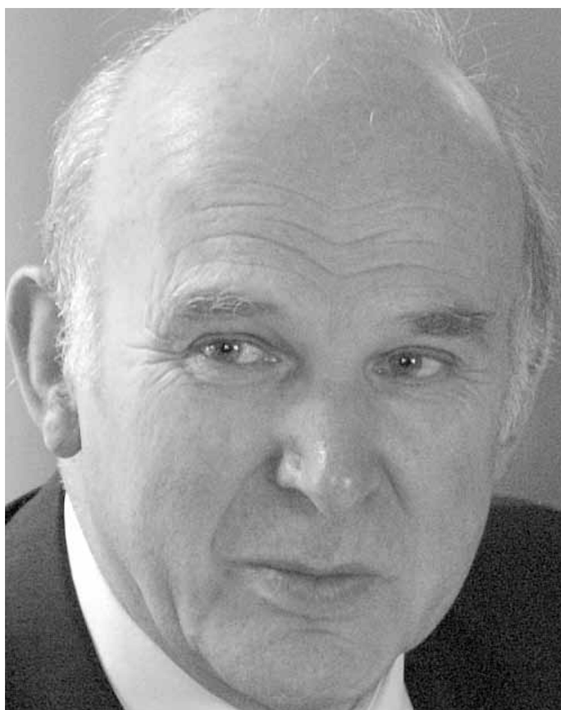
Why hadn't the government done more to regulate and reorganise the banks? 'We've done quite a lot actually. The banking levy, for example, is permanent and is going to raise far more than Labour's one-off bonus tax. Bank regulations, for example on requirements to hold capital, are much tougher than they were … but I don't deny that there are still really serious problems.'

… and how it looks now (11 June 2015)

With such a high national and local reputation behind him Vince Cable had seemed – forgive the pun – invincible. His defeat in Twickenham was one of the biggest surprises of election night. He was obviously thrown by it but also surprisingly philosophical. He had seen the signs in a local poll conducted a year before and he clearly did not think that the Liberal Democrat election campaign had improved his chances.

'I think our national campaign was abysmal. It was embarrassingly bad. Whatever hope we had, expired during those three weeks.'

So had that been the principal reason for the disastrous national results of 7 May? Or was it going into coalition with the Tories, specific issues, or fear of Labour and the SNP?



'There were different elements. We knew from last year's election results and from the survey conducted in our constituency that the party's position locally was quite weak; that the party's approval level was very, very negative, quite toxic in fact; that Nick (Clegg) was extremely unpopular, almost as unpopular as Miliband; and, probably also true of other parts of the country, that as the sitting MP I had a very high recognition and approval rate.

'That was the background. In the run-up to the election I think we had a very poor national campaign with no clear message. The one thing we seemed to be trying to tell people was that there was bound to be a coalition, come what may, which of course was nonsense. We did almost nothing to address the possibility of a Conservative government. Basically all we had was a very good local campaign. I had a certain amount of credibility as an individual but that had to be weighed against a very negative position for the party and the party leader in particular. We could still have won if it hadn't been for a very successful national Tory campaign, not based on the local Tories but on daily targeted personal letters from Cameron on issues, and emails and telephone calls warning of the dangers of Labour and the SNP, if you voted Lib Dem.'

He seemed to be putting as much blame on the Liberal Democrat campaign as on the fear factor of Labour and the SNP. Was that what he meant? 'No, I think the Labour–SNP fear factor was decisive, but the failure of our own campaign was that it didn't answer it.'

He had lost by a relatively small margin, but included in that had been a rise in the Labour vote that he had previously squeezed over a long period. Why did that rise happen?

'We met a lot of it on the doorstep. It was the very predictable "Why did you go into coalition with the Tories?" – tuition fees, bedroom tax, all those things. When you actually talked to people face to face, you could explain all this and they accepted it, but we could never talk to everybody. Even then some of them did not feel the need to vote tactically because we "had a big majority".'

Compared with the resources available to him, was the extra money spent by the Tories locally another deciding factor? 'It was a very big factor. We could have topped up our own campaign by spending money putting out national leaflets which didn't mention the constituency, but that wasn't adding any value. It was just turning people off, whereas the Tories were sending out endless stuff featuring David Cameron, who was seen as a plus factor. Because of the way the spending limits operated they were unconstrained.'

In 2011, when we had last talked, he had clearly understood the constraints and compromises of coalition early on and had believed that many people around the world were actually admiring the government for being determined, particularly as far as public finances were concerned. Did he still feel that was the correct view and that that was how it continued for the five years?

'Yes I do. Even among people who didn't vote for us locally we found a lot of people who liked the coalition and what it had done, but they didn't like Miliband and the SNP so that was why they were going to vote Tory. There was a lot of pro-coalition feedback.'

Again in 2011 he had told me that he and George Osborne, while not being mates, worked well together. Did they continue to do so?

'The relationship became progressively more distant. I think he was grateful for my support during that first year when the government was at its weakest, but as time went on it became clear that our views were very different. I was supporting fiscal austerity because it was an emergency; he was doing it because he wanted a smaller state.'

Had he, George Osborne and Danny Alexander often met together outside cabinet? 'No. I quite often met with George Osborne on a one-to-one basis, but part of my problem was that I found I disagreed with Danny more than I disagreed with George Osborne. Danny would always repeat the Treasury line. Osborne was a highly intelligent guy and on occasions was willing to do a trade, as it were. For example I was able to set up the Business Bank in return for agreeing to his whacky proposal about workers shares for rights, which never actually went anywhere.'

Generally he had been free to get on with his department – 'I think that was David Cameron's style'. He had had to deal with advice from a number of senior civil servants and economists; I wondered whether he had found them helpful or obstructive. His first, preferred reaction was to tell me how well he worked with the five or more Tory ministers he had within his department. Over the five years his single Liberal Democrat ministers had been Ed Davey, followed by Norman Lamb, Jo Swinson and Jenny Willott. And he was proud of all his ministers' achievements.

'We did lots of really big things. The industrial strategy was a big success, as was the setting up of the Business Bank and Green Investment Bank. The science-based catapult network was an important breakthrough in terms of practical support for innovation. We made ourselves a lot of enemies but we reformed university finance in a way that made them now sustainable. We put through a lot of progressive legislation – flexible working, shared parental leave, executive pay, small business lending, women on boards of companies and more. It was a long list and a big record.'

Many of the Vickers Commission recommendations on banking that he strongly favoured in 2011 had also now been implemented. He and George Osborne had both compromised in achieving 'the

biggest structural reform of banking of any major industrial country.' So why was it that during the election there had still been a feeling that not enough had been done about bankers?

'I don't think enough had been done. We had done a fair amount but despite all our efforts it was difficult for small businesses to get lending. We kept on running up against new banking scandals. It gradually became apparent to me – I don't know whether it did to the Tories – that the banking sector was just too big and was rotten to the core.'

Five year ago David Cameron had talked about 'the greenest government ever'. Theoretically a combination in coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats could have been, but even with the Green investment Bank it had seemed to me that the expansion of renewables and reduction of emissions was much slower than it should have been. Was that a wrong impression?

'No doubt more could have been done but I think our record was creditable. As well as the Green Investment Bank, we now have the biggest offshore wind industry in the world, by a very long way. That was done under Chris Huhne and Ed Davey who also reformed the system of electricity pricing that has given a further push to renewables. The reason why the public may have thought progress had been slow is because the government was actually quite divided. There were genuine problems.'

Had he found that majority of senior people in business understood climate change or were they eco-sceptical? 'Most of those who mattered were pretty aware. Indeed some were ahead of the government. For instance, the car industry was planning ten or twenty years ahead for lower emission engines, and the aircraft industry was planning for the use of lighter materials knowing they will be an issue in the future. The people who were quite disappointing were the green companies like Dong. They were happy to set up things like wind farms here but were reluctant to develop the British supply chain.'

I think we were the greenest government ever … but the narrative was not supported by the green side of the media, because we were in with the Tories. And there were some failings … none of the previous governments had been very green, and it was the Liberal Democrats who made this one green. But we had to fight all the way …

We returned to coalition and its future, if there was one. It was certainly unlikely to happen again for some years. And what was the future for an ex-coalition minority party that had been reduced to eight MPs?

'I think coalition has a future. After all this government only has a majority of twelve. We could well be back to minority government in five years time.'

He was reluctant to give his views about the future of the Liberal Democrats but, as a piece of advice, he was willingly to reveal that although he preferred Norman Lamb as an individual he thought what he called 'the Farron approach' of going back to basics of building up the grass roots and getting more councillors was the best way of proceeding. His own 'personal prejudice' was that the party should be trying to work more openly with the Labour Party to make sure the Tories do not entrench their hegemony.

I suggested that the most important issue facing the country over next eighteen months was going to be the referendum on Europe. What role should the Liberal Democrats be playing helping to make sure that the country voted to stay in?

'I don't think we should be too prominent. We are known to be very pro-Europe. There is a slight danger of coming across as Euro-zealots, which will turn people off. I would like to see people like Frances O'Grady and some senior people from business at the forefront of the campaign, but the one person who is critical is Cameron himself. It's his show and having a sceptic saying he is now in favour of staying in will decide the issue.'

Was that the way it would go? 'Yes'.

Edward Davey

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills 2010–12; Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change 2012–15; MP for Kingston & Surbiton 1997–2015

(15 June 2015)

Of course Ed Davey felt aggrieved to have lost his seat after eighteen years but he was far from downcast. We were sitting in the constituency office of the Kingston Liberal Democrats and he felt certain that the Liberal Democrats in Kingston & Surbiton and other key seats had done as much as they possibly could to look after their constituents' interests, and he was equally confident that in the coalition they had done a really good job for the country. They had had to make some compromises but they had stuck to their principles and delivered 'a great deal for their voters and for progressive politics'.

'Clearly that did not come across as much as it should have done', he admitted, 'but these things happen. My biggest worry is not for myself – I will earn more money, work less hard and see my family more – but I came into politics to do things and they are now under threat.'

Why had the Liberal Democrats failed so manifestly to persuade the electors of their value in government? 'There are many parts to that answer. There was the very big picture stuff. For example, some people felt betrayed simply because we had done a deal with the Tories ….'

Had that been a major factor in his constituency? 'No, not huge, but in a slug of the population it was. We had centre-left voters who thought we were left of the Labour Party. We went in with the Tories and they thought we were just beyond the pale. The second factor was that we went in knowing we had to make some tough and unpalatable decisions. Persuading our supporters that they were necessary was never going to be easy, and some of them took them as evidence that we had moved to the right, which wasn't the case but it fed that narrative. And, of course, there was the big-picture issue of tuition fees. For a slug of the population getting over those three things was too difficult. I think we could have handled tuition fees better and probably the overall narrative better, but the other issues I don't think we could have done much more about.'

So it had been a 'triple whammy'? 'Yes. With the benefit

of hindsight – we were all so busy at the time it was difficult to think about everything – we should have recognised all those problems and dealt with them more strategically early on. Instead we relied on having five years to recover from them because we had to "show that the coalition could work". I am sure that Nick and his team were thinking strategically and realised there was a problem, but they thought it would go away and it didn't.'

Ed Davey was an unusual Liberal Democrat minister, and possibly unusually lucky, in that he started off working under a Liberal Democrat secretary of state, Vince Cable, in Business Innovation and Skills, and later taken over from another Liberal Democrat secretary of state, Chris Huhne in Energy and Climate Change. In that sense had he had his own patch all the way through?

'Oh very much so. I was very fortunate. There were a number of ministers in Vince's department, but he gave me first choice as to what I wanted to do and then, because he was busy with tuition fees, banks and other issues, he mostly let me get on with it. My portfolio was actually huge. It covered Royal Mail and post offices, employment legislation, consumer law, competition law, corporate governance and trade policy. In a way it was a portfolio made for me because I was a postgraduate economist who had made a study most of those subjects. I had also worked in business as a consultant specialising in postal industries. People forget that the privatisation of the Royal Mail was the largest ever employee share-ownership deal. That was a Liberal Democrat policy, and it was a battle with the Treasury to get it through. It was critical that employees should have at least a 10 per cent share. Another battle we won was protecting the post offices in people's communities by separating them from Royal Mail.'

To what extent, in that role, had he rubbed up against the Tories? 'In quite a lot of areas we saw eye to eye, but employee legislation was the biggest problem. There was a conflict between things the Liberal Democrats wanted to do, which were in the coalition agreement, and things the Tories wanted to do, which weren't and were mostly very right wing and nasty. For example, there was the Liberal Democrat proposal for getting rid of the default age of retirement at 65, under which employees could be sacked. We managed to win that one. Another was flexible parental leave, a policy I spent eighteen months creating, which was later implemented by Norman Lamb and Jo Swinson.'

As his next step had been to move to the Department of Energy and Climate Change, I wondered how much environmental considerations had featured in his discussions with Vince Cable, and whether there been any disagreements between them.

'No, we almost never disagreed. I was very privileged in that way, The environmental legislation we did deal with was mostly related to accounting and reporting.'

When he took over from Chris Huhne, did he feel in any way constrained by what Chris had initiated or did he feel happy to take over where he had left off?

'Probably the latter. The truth is that, if you take over from a minister, you don't just rip up everything he or she has done. All policies and strategies take time to implement. That is not to say that there were not lots of things still to be decided, particularly on issues such as electricity market reform. Chris had done a great deal, but on my appointment David Cameron said, "You may want to look at all this again." Clearly the Tories didn't like it, but Chris had left me some very good handover notes and we went ahead.'

He had obviously felt uncomfortable about the Green Deal energy efficiency programme and needed to tell me about it. He had calculated from looking at the detail of the proposal he inherited that it would not 'wash its face'. Apart perhaps from being too ebullient about it, that had been the fault not of Chris Huhne but of a junior Tory minister and an overenthusiastic senior civil servant in charge of developing the programme. He went on to explain some of the further detail but he then admitted that he had misjudged the revised version of the deal. 'It was a policy failure on our part.'

A failure which sounded as if it was attributable more to overenthusiasm by civil servants than to obstruction or incompetence. Apparently that was not a pattern across the department. It had varied immensely according to which civil servants were allotted to the policy. For example, he had had to fight the department to get his community energy policy through; he had lost the Swansea tidal lagoon battle; but he had eventually won the argument over electricity demand reduction, aimed at avoiding the need to build more power plants.

Pre-election David Cameron had talked about 'voting blue to go green' and, after the election, 'the greenest government ever'. His earlier ideas combined with Liberal Democrat policies might have made it so and yet, I suggested, five years later there was a slight feeling of failure to deliver all that he and Chris Huhne had hoped for. He disagreed.

'I think we were the greenest government ever, by a country mile, but the narrative was not supported by the green side of the media, because we were in with the Tories. And there were some failings. The reason why we were the greenest government ever was because none of the previous governments had been very green, and it was the Liberal Democrats who made this one green. But we had to fight all the way on, for example, renewables, energy efficiency, railway transport investment and green regulations. Eric Pickles was the worst. He opposed almost everything whether on housing, planning, energy efficiency or whatever. We won most of our

battles in DECC and a few in BIS but elsewhere it was more difficult.'

He cited particularly the successes of more than trebling the output of renewable electricity, leading the world by a long way in offshore wind power and being now in the top ten in solar power. If he had to pick his greatest achievement, what would it be?

'Undoubtedly the European deals I did. In 2008 Blair and Merkel had agreed across the EU to what they called 2020 targets – 20 per cent renewable energy, 20 per cent reduction in carbon emissions and 20 per cent energy efficiency by 2020. We may yet achieve that, but what a lot of us realised was that we had to start thinking about 2030 and beyond very soon. We needed a new agreement but there was no leadership in the EU and some opposition. So over two and a half years I set up a Green Growth Group and spent a lot of time going around talking to other countries in the EU and finally achieving agreement on 2030 targets. This could lead, at the Paris summit later this year, to an international agreement on targets.'

It was good to hear of real achievement in government but the future for the Liberal Democrats in coalition of any kind was less bright. Had the past five years killed off the whole concept of coalition as a good form of government?

'Well it hasn't for me. I think people should think much harder. Is it good for government? I think it is far better than single-party government. It is far more transparent. It prevents any one party going to an extreme. In fact, because every policy has to be agreed it is a much more evidence-based approach, which is a good place for Liberal Democrats.'

I could see the reward for those who were part of a coalition, but what about the credit for a minority party and its support from potential voters? 'Ah that is a different question. The first is "Was it good government?" In this case it was. Undoubtedly. The politics about it is that it has been an electoral disaster for the Liberal Democrats. But we must be careful. It wasn't the coalition that did for us. We always expected to lose some seats. It was the unprecedented phenomenon of the Scots Nats and the fear that they and Labour engendered.'

Chris Huhne

Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change 2010–12; MP for Eastleigh 2005–12

(15 June 2015)

We met in his delightful eighteenth-century flat in the City. He was deliberately the last of my interviewees. With the knowledge of all I had learnt from Nick Clegg and the nine other ex-ministers, I wanted to take advantage of his three years out of Liberal Democrat politics, but it was still right to start with his two as a secretary of state in the coalition. Had that felt like a position of real power or had he felt endlessly constrained by Conservatives or coalition obligations?

'No. I thought we were able to do a lot actually. We got the first energy bill through and the White Paper for the second energy bill. We got the carbon budget approved, we had some success working with European allies on the international climate negotiations, and in general it was the time of the first comprehensive spending review when, apart from those departments that had been deliberately ring-fenced, like the NHS and International Development, we came out best from the process. I think we had a lot of success. There were a lot of battles to fight and I was criticised by a lot of Tories for being too tough. Indeed it was quite amusing that, when I went, a number were quoted in the press as being relieved because they thought things would be easier because I had been so difficult, but course they weren't because in reality they were in coalition and they did not have a majority. So I don't resile in any way from being difficult because we had a lot of negotiating strength.'

He had been a principal member of the Liberal Democrat coalition negotiating team and the obligations and restraints put on the party were those established by the agreement. With hindsight had the agreement been the best they could have achieved at the time and did he think it had worked in practice?

'I think the agreement was pretty good but I think the main problem was that it was only part of what happened. First of all, it was not fully implemented. For example, there was supposed to be a Coalition Committee. It never met and was replaced by the 'Quad', which was not envisaged.

What were they? 'The Committee would have included Vince Cable and me. The 'Quad' didn't!' The four who were members were David Cameron, Nick Clegg, George Osborne and Danny Alexander. He suspected that the idea of having the Quad rather than the committee had come from the leaders, 'because leaders tend to find smaller groups more amenable and easy to manage'.

'But the second, more important issue, was that as well as the agreement, there were the private talks between Cameron and Clegg about personnel – i.e. about ministerial appointments. In the negotiating team we didn't know about those – maybe Danny did but we didn't. So when I was rung up and offered Energy and Climate Change, I asked Nick if he realised that he and Cameron were offering me a poisoned chalice because of the nuclear (power) issue and that by giving Vince BIS they were giving him the equally toxic issue of tuition fees to

deal with. In other words the Tories were offering us the two portfolios most designed to call into question our integrity and ability to deliver.'

This sounded like a conspiracy theory so was he saying that they should not have accepted those responsibilities, when they were both really good jobs? 'No. I am saying that the decisions were not joined up. If I had known during the negotiations that that was the way we were going, we would have been tougher on those issues in the agreement, particularly on tuition fees where so many MPs had signed that petition and waved those placards.'

Looking at the five year span now did he think that the coalition had worked in practice as a government for the UK? 'Yes I do. I think it was the right thing to do at the time and there would have been some potentially very dire outcomes if we hadn't done what we did. Don't forget that the very day after the general election there was the first very serious wobble on the financial markets for the Greeks, and the governor of the Bank of England, Mervyn King, and the permanent secretary of the Treasury, and Gus O'Donnell were all telling us "Could you please finalise your agreement before the markets reopen on Monday morning?" Well, of course, that was ridiculous. In Belgium, for example, forming a coalition sometimes takes weeks or months, including a lot of long lunches. It was absurd. Nevertheless we did achieve it by Tuesday!

'We were very vulnerable. We had a bigger deficit than Greece. It was the right thing to do although I don't think we handled it very well afterwards.'

It had not worked for Liberal Democrats on 7 May 2015, had it? 'No, it hadn't but there were a lot of reasons for that. The problem is that there are too many explanations, not too few. The difficulty is working out which are the most important. In retrospect some of the problems were already apparent in 2010. That was the first election result we had had for many years when our share of the vote went up but our number of seats went down. That was a real warning signal. It was partly a rebellion by our impatient young campaign team against the cautious targeted approach of what I would call "Rennardism".'

I think the agreement was pretty good but … it was only part of what happened. First of all, it was not fully implemented. For example, there was supposed to be a Coalition Committee. It never met and was replaced by the 'Quad', which was not envisaged … The Committee would have included Vince Cable and me. The 'Quad' didn't!

Chris Rennard had understood the risks of fighting on the wide front that had always failed the party in the 1980s and that had done so again in the last two elections. Chris recalled his own early experience of three times failing to win a seat in parliament and claimed that anyone who had had direct experience of what he called 'the cruelty of the electoral system' would have known that the broad approach would not work. In effect he was saying that, whatever the temptations might be, 'fighting the air war' on a broad front, rather than concentrating, might pick up votes but it did not win seats.

Experience in other countries in Europe had also shown that being a minority party in government always led to a loss of seats. He quoted 'half' as being the rule of thumb in Holland. In the UK the Liberal Democrats had lost two-thirds of their seats in 2015.

'I think we ran a very bad campaign,' he continued. 'I remember Nick telling me in 2010 that he thought we had run a great campaign. I don't think we did. It wasn't targeted enough and we had not planned what we should be saying or doing if he won the leader's debate, which of course he did. All we heard afterwards was the hissing of the air leaving the balloon.

'In my view John Sharkey was the wrong person to run that campaign and even more wrong therefore as the choice to run the crown jewels of the agreement, the AV referendum campaign. That was a disaster, but let's come back to 2015. I had warned [*Guardian*, 2014] that, if we had a mushy message in the election, we would come out with sod all. We needed one clear positive message, as we had done in some previous elections – for example "1p on income tax for schools". At least in 2010 we had the tax threshold. You need one clear message to give people a reason to justify voting for you when challenged in the pub. More schools. Something! But what did we have this time?'

Would he not agree that there was one word in frequent use during the election, a word that I remembered describing in *Liberal News* in a similar context of possible coalition in 1974 as 'a bag of feathers'? That word was 'moderation'. This produced a minor explosion.

'What a terrible, terrible message! That's like going into the pub and saying I want the tonic water or the soda water. People don't go in for that. They go in for the gin or the whisky, not the mixer. The best possible gloss on moderation is that it is dilution, moderating the others, but most British elections are basically dominated by fear. Most people who vote Tory do so because they fear Labour and most Labour voters fear the Tories. Put yourself in the shoes of the Labour voter who thinks his benefits are going to be cut. Or the Tory small businessman who thinks he is going to be subjected to his taxes going up. What's our message to them? We are going to cut benefits a little bit less or the tax on his house won't be so much! That is just the mixer in the drink, not the message.'

I warmed to his analysis but what would he have done? Apart from quoting his own literature from Eastleigh in 2010 he was not specific, except to say that it could have been a green message, a message about education – primary schools, class sizes 'or anything as long as it was clear, simple and positive'.

I told him, as almost everyone I had interviewed had told me, that the principal difference between 2015 and previous elections had seemed to be the centrally initiated and precisely targeted bombardment of voters in Liberal Democrat held seats – personal letters from David Cameron, personal emails and direct mail on issues, and endless telephone calls reminding them of the dangers of Labour and the SNP. Local campaigns had seemed to count for almost nothing. How did he see that?

'It is a key point, and it is a form of campaigning that avoids the expenses rule because it does not mention the candidate, but let us remember what we got wrong in the air war. The national campaign had no attractive message and we were not targeting as we should have done. But you are absolutely right. The Tories developed a new technique in this war. It was a bit like the Franco-Prussian war when the Prussians turned up with a new rifle that the French didn't have. Every so often in the history of warfare one side in a war gets a technological advantage. What the Tories did this time was they found a way of using masses of money to

target swing voters ruthlessly. So what has actually happened is that we now have a very small number of marginal seats. This means that under the first past the post system you can reduce the number of people who are uncertain about their vote to an even smaller number and ignore the firm Tory and Labour voters entirely. What the Tories did was a lot of telephone polling beforehand to find out exactly who those swing voters were and what they cared about. Hence all those personal letters about these issues.'

Or, I suggested, the dangers of a Labour–SNP government? He agreed and continued in the same vein for a few minutes, repeating 'They spent a lot of money,' and then adding, 'but this was not a badly resourced election for us and one person particularly deserves credit for that – Ian Wrigglesworth. He raised a lot of money. If we had known how to spend it properly, we could have done the same as the Tories and fought them. Next time we can do that.'

As we neared an end he came up with a gruesome calculation. 'What worries me is that we are down to a minority of people who switched their votes in a small minority of seats which changed hands. That is probably an electorate of no more than 200,000 people. Which is probably what we had at the time of the Great Reform Act.'

Leaping forward nearly a couple of centuries I wanted to know whether, if he had been party leader in the second or third year of a coalition that he had willingly entered, there was any one thing he would have done at that stage to stem the party's decline?

'The two big mistakes we made were in that first year were the handling of tuition fees and the AV referendum. We could have done both so much better. If you accept that we made those mistakes, could we have recovered from them? The first rule in politics is 'Never apologise. Never explain.' On the other hand when you have done something as damaging to your brand as we did with tuition fees, then you have to recover trust ….'

And trust had really been lost? 'Oh yes it was. Remember all parties can compromise and break some promises, but there are also promises so important to your base that you tamper with them at your peril. Let me give you an example. Cameron has broken lots of promises but the one promise he never broke was to say that he would protect old people's universal benefits. He never did and he hasn't.'

On that issue he believed the Liberal Democrats could have been more courageous in insisting on the means testing of those who didn't need benefits and enjoyed free travel and subsidised home heating.

Finally, what did he think was the future for the Liberal Democrats?

He hoped that the party would have some good by-elections in the next two years and do well with them. If so, that would provide the oxygen that could fuel a rebound. But the reverse of that coin was what had killed off David Owen's rump SDP in 1989 – disastrous third or fourth place by-election results and a collapse of credibility. Despite that gloomy prospect he was confident that the new party leader, whoever he was, would be able to avoid the pitfalls of extinction.

Let us hope so.

The two big mistakes we made were in that first year were the handling of tuition fees and the AV referendum. We could have done both so much better.

Conclusion: Adrian Slade

When you and your party have just been through the nearest equivalent to political Armageddon it cannot be easy to be rational about the coalition that appears to have brought about your downfall. And yet, even in retrospect, not one Liberal Democrat ex-coalition minister retracted his or her original support for the decision to take the party into a coalition with the Conservatives; all broadly accepted the terms of the agreement reached between the two parties in May 2010 and, with the one clear exception of Nick Harvey, almost all believed – full-heartedly or rather reluctantly – that the coalition had made a reasonably good job of what it set out to do.

The problem of the pudding carefully put together – and it is still clearly proving extremely difficult to swallow – was in the eating. To continue the analogy for a moment, a few of the Liberal Democrat sanctioned ingredients proved to be undercooked and verging on the toxic and a few were more unpalatable and indigestible, all of which meant that the many better tastes of other ingredients were never recognised. The reaction of the majority of voters on 7 May 2015 was to pour their helping of the pudding into the waste bin for fear of something worse.

The unhelpful issues, or ingredients, almost all the ex-ministers appeared to suggest with varying degrees of anger or distaste, were coalition with the Tories, tuition fees, NHS reform, the mismanaged AV referendum, Liberal Democrat guilt by association with other issues like the bedroom tax and, however necessary they might have been, cuts in public services. For example – in contrast to Nick Harvey – Chris Huhne and even Tom McNally, Nick Clegg, Vince Cable and Danny Alexander did not see tuition fees as having made a crucial difference to the election results except, perhaps in certain seats, and held to the positive view about improved university funding and more access to universities for poorer students. On the other hand, Nick Clegg was as condemnatory as anyone about the lack of an all-party approach to AV.

Inevitably ex-ministerial reactions to coalition were also heavily coloured by the election results that followed. Unsurprisingly stunned by the number of Liberal Democrat seats lost on 7 May 2015, including their own, most of the ex-ministers were very critical of the party's national campaign.

There was a wide divergence of view as to what went wrong. While Nick Clegg, Danny Alexander, Michael Moore and Paul Burstow put the blame on fear of a Labour–SNP government and the Tory local bombardment that went with it, Vince Cable, Nick Harvey and Chris Huhne were particularly scathing about the ineffectiveness of the Liberal Democrat campaign. Comments ranged from a relatively polite 'weak and abysmal' to 'petulant and childish' and 'terrible', and that was despite being better funded than in previous years.

Although he offered no very clear solution to what he and others blamed as a 'lack of message', Chris Huhne may well have been right when he pointed out that, for once, the party was not totally bereft of central funds and that more could have been done to counter the relentless Tory Central Office polling, telephoning, emailing and direct mail targeting of floating voters in Liberal Democrat constituencies. Certainly many of the ministers I talked to felt that this had been one of the key factors in their defeat. They simply could not compete with the scale of this kind of campaigning.

What every MP facing a Tory as his main opponent agreed was that the message of fear of Miliband, the Labour Party and the SNP as a possible government was hammered home so hard that it drove most of the Liberal Democrat voters who had previously assured them of their seats to desert the party for the Tories. No doubt this flight was not helped by the loss of trust over tuition fees or the anger of tactical voters from Labour at collaboration with the Tories, but they were subsidiary to the fear factor.

Ironically, according to Lynne Featherstone, a part reverse was happening to her and Simon Hughes in the two seats in London where Liberal Democrats faced Labour. Although it was undoubtedly abetted by some of the other coalition issues, hate and fear of a Tory majority were enough to overthrow their significant local majorities.

Even then, on the positive side, there was a wide consensus that, despite all these issues and disappointments, the coalition had worked well in a number of respects. On the whole, relations between Liberal Democrat and Conservative ministers in each ministry had been good and much that was Liberal Democrat in origin had been achieved, particularly in the Treasury, Work and Pensions, Business Innovation and Skills, Energy and Climate Change and in the Home Office with Lynne Featherstone's tireless work in bringing about the same-sex marriage bill and her equally important fight in International Development against female genital mutilation. But most of that had appeared to go unnoticed by the public. Credit was in very short supply.

Vince Cable, Nick Harvey and Chris Huhne were particularly scathing about the ineffectiveness of the Liberal Democrat campaign. Comments ranged from a relatively polite 'weak and abysmal' to 'petulant and childish' and 'terrible', and that was despite being better funded than in previous years.

All that said, the truth of the matter almost certainly is, and every poll since 2010 has confirmed it, that the Liberal Democrats starting losing a huge proportion of their normal floating or tactical voters almost from the first moment the party went into coalition with the Tories. The fact that there was no alternative, the fact that Labour had left the country in an economic mess, the fact that Labour had neither the votes nor the inclination to do any kind of deal of rescue with the Liberal Democrats, the fact that Nick Clegg and his party were doing it in a crisis for the good of country – all were ignored by the party's natural supporters and some of its active members. A terrible sin had been committed and the desertion of support quickly began. This was then compounded about two months later by the revelation to some of its core voters – the parents of school children, the teachers and many of those in the public service professions – that, under their agreement with Tories, the precious Liberal Democrat pledge on tuition fees was being abandoned. This 'betrayal' was enough to drive away even more of the 2010 support and, for all the fine achievement of the Liberal Democrats in coalition, trust was lost and it never came back.

In May 2010 Nick Clegg had been caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. All the devil had to offer him was a party opt-out of government which would have made the Liberal Democrats look weak, indecisive and unwilling to be in politics to take any kind of power. So he persuaded his party to plump instead for the deep blue sea of serious talks with the Tories, followed by a fixed five-year term of working with Tories across the board. If the party conference of 2009 had been more willing to listen to Vince Cable and Nick Clegg's warnings about the acute difficulty of delivering on the tuition fee promise, life might have been easier for him but conference decided to dictate that crucial piece of the 2010 manifesto and the MPs chose to sport pledge placards in support of it.

So it was hardly surprising that my most poignant interview was with Nick Clegg. He had had most to gain or lose from the coalition that he and David Cameron had created. It was small comfort for him to have retained his seat when he had lost everything else: his job as Deputy Prime Minister, almost all his fellow MPs, no more opportunity to be in government, and probably also most of the hopes he set out with when he first became party leader in 2008. Inevitably he is now on the rough end of criticism from a few of his ministers, even if most of it is relatively gentle, and probably sharper criticism from some party members; but no minister has reneged on the concept of the coalition or criticised his determination to make it last the full five years. The fact that, during the time of his joint coalition, the UK moved so well from economic crisis to relative stability, on the way also achieving significant changes in many areas of policy, will ultimately be noted by historians and remembered.

Characteristically Nick Clegg has accepted most of the blame for the party's new dilemma. Let us now hope that the Liberal Democrat recovery will ultimately prove that he did not strive in vain.

Acknowledgements and thanks

Nick Clegg, Tom McNally, Nick Harvey, Michael Moore, Steve Webb, Paul Burstow, Lynne Featherstone, Danny Alexander, Vince Cable, Ed Davey, Chris Huhne, Duncan Brack, Mark Pack, Deirdre Razzall, Hilary Muggridge, Sue Slade and all the heads of office, researchers, parliamentary assistants and HQ staff who helped me to arrange and, in difficult circumstances, hold on to the interview times we managed to achieve.

Adrian Slade was the last President of the Liberal Party, from September 1987 to March 1988, and first joint interim President, with Shirley Williams, of the newly merged Social & Liberal Democrats, from March to July 1988. Between 1981 and 1986 he was the Liberal member for Richmond on the Greater London Council and leader of the Liberal/SDP Alliance group. He stood for parliament four times, three times in Putney (1966 and twice in 1974) and once in Wimbledon (1987) polling the highest Liberal (or Liberal Democrat) vote yet to be achieved in either constituency.

WHY DID IT G

Whatever the achievements of Liberal Democrat ministers in the coalition, the experiment ended disastro
John Pugh, **Matthew Huntbach** and **David Howarth** offer their opinions of why it all went so badly w

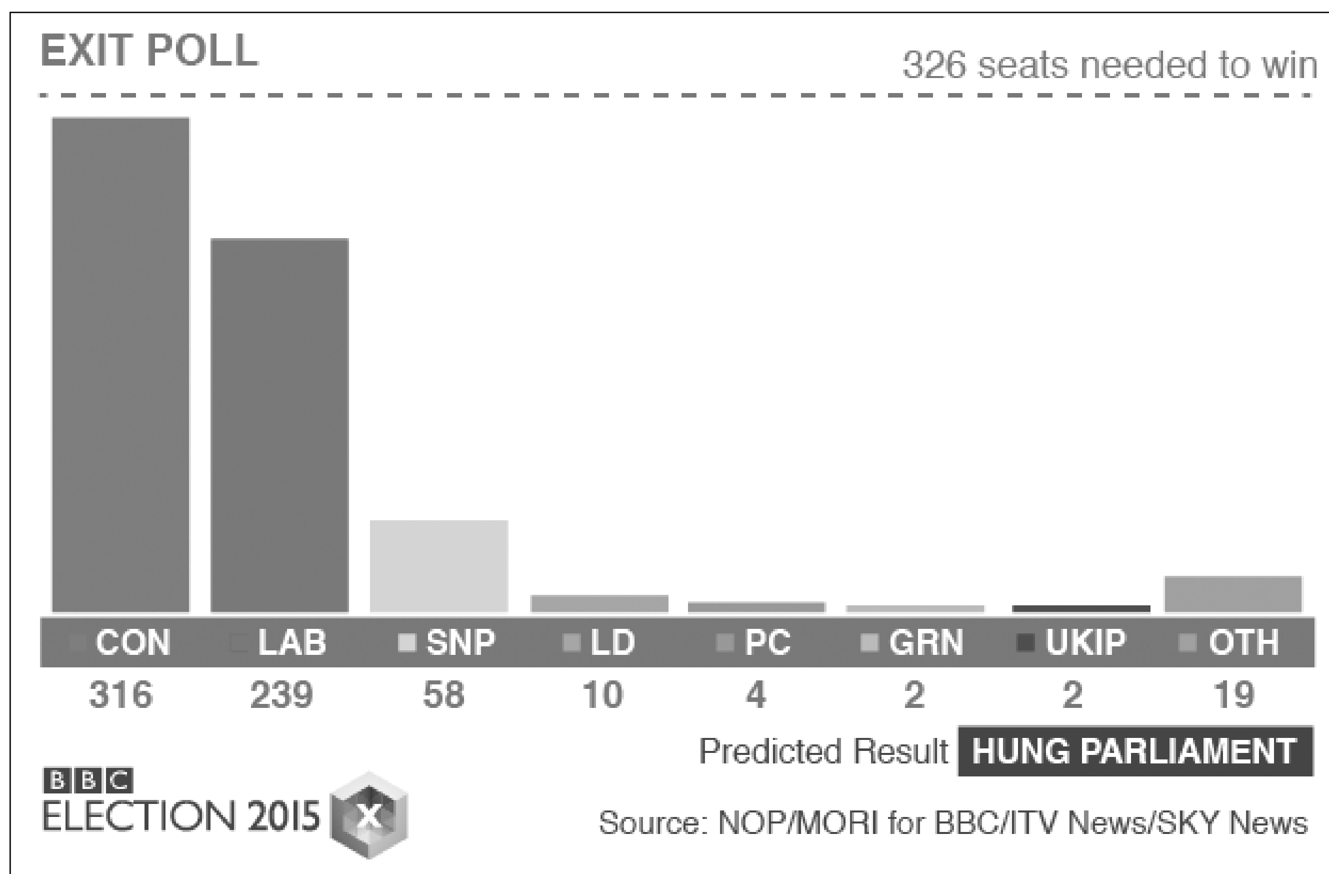
Decline and fall: how coalition killed the Lib Dems (almost)

Stephen Tall

At 10 pm on 7 May 2015, the Lib Dems experienced our very own 'JFK moment' – we all remember where we were – when the BBC exit poll was released showing the party scythed down from fifty-seven to just ten MPs. Some, like our campaign chair Paddy Ashdown, refused to admit the possibility, famously promising David Dimbleby that, if it were accurate, 'I will publicly eat my hat on your programme'. Many more of us had an instant sinking feeling in our guts, recalling how accurately the 2010 poll had predicted that the Lib Dems were destined to lose more seats than at any election since 1970. If anything, the psephologists were over-optimistic this time: in forecasting the party would reach double figures, they inflated our result by 25 per cent.

No one – not even the most pessimistic, coalition-hating, Clegg-allergic, Orange Book-phobic Lib Dem – had thought it would be that bad. The rout of all but one of our Scottish MPs by the SNP was not entirely unexpected. Nor was the loss of our urban English seats where Labour was the challenger. What was quite stunning – utterly, compellingly, breathtakingly unforeseen – was the scale of our defeat at the hands of our Conservative coalition partners in the suburbs and rural areas we had thought were our fortresses. None of us had seen that coming.

Thinking I could detect some kind of 1992-style Tory bounce-back in the final few days of the campaign, I got in touch with a top Lib Dem strategist to ask, 'Should



GO WRONG?

usly for the party, with the catastrophic May 2015 general election. **Stephen Tall**, **Nick Harvey**, wrong.

we be worried that Cameron's schedule is targeting so many Lib-Dem-held seats? Do they actually sniff 300+ seats?' No, I was assured, the Conservatives were 'wasting their time in Twickenham and Yeovil'. Tell that to Vince Cable and David Laws. In one top Lib Dem target, where the party ended up finishing third, I was told by a highly experienced activist that 'our canvassing goes back years. I thought it was robust. I still do. There were absolutely no signs of this, not even on the ground today.'

So how did it happen? What caused the most disastrous election result for the Lib Dems since … well, pretty much since records began?

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The answer is almost too obvious: our decision to enter into a coalition government with the Conservatives during the most severe economic downturn in a century. However, it is worth taking a step back to make another obvious point, but one which is now often forgotten: the Lib Dems had not expected to be in government in 2010. The widespread assumption had been (from the moment Gordon Brown flunked 'the election that never was' in October 2007) that David Cameron's Conservatives would triumph. In April 2010, the *Independent on Sunday* asked eight pollsters to predict the result: all eight forecast an overall Conservative majority. The Lib Dems were widely seen to be on the defensive against this blue tide; after all, the Tories were the nearest challengers in most of the party's held seats.

It is worth taking a step back to make another obvious point, but one which is now often forgotten: the Lib Dems had not expected to be in government in 2010.

Then two things happened. First, the global financial crisis rocked the domestic political scene. Cameron's flimsy platform of compassionate Conservatism – that through 'sharing the proceeds of future growth' it was possible both to cut taxes and protect public services – collapsed, and his party retreated to its right-wing, austerity comfort zone. The public looked on, nervously, at the thought of the untested Cameron and his even younger shadow chancellor, George Osborne, taking the helm at this moment of crisis. The Tories' poll lead narrowed.

Secondly, the first-ever televised leaders' debate between the three main party leaders took place, with the fresh-faced Clegg besting both Cameron and Gordon Brown. The Lib Dem poll surge it sparked proved to be phosphorescently flashy and brief. But even the small ratings boost probably helped deprive the Conservatives of the majority they had expected to be theirs, as well as saving a clutch of Lib Dem seats – eight MPs won with majorities of less than 5 per cent over their Tory challenger – that might otherwise have been lost.

It is intriguing to pose the counterfactual: what if the Conservatives had edged a victory in May 2010 and the coalition had never been formed? Cameron would have had to have tried to keep his rebellious backbenchers in check without the assistance of the hefty majority the Lib Dem bloc of MPs afforded him. Chances are he would have struggled at least as badly as his predecessor Tory prime minister, John Major. Meanwhile Labour, denuded of the instant unity conferred by its misplaced outrage at the 'ConDem' coalition, might well have descended into Miliband v. Miliband civil war. It would have been an ideal scenario for the Lib Dems, the perfect launch pad for further gains from both parties.

This may be just an alternative reality based on nothing more than idle speculation – but the tantalising glimpse of what might have been is worth bearing in mind, not least because it is what the Lib Dem leadership had planned for. One of Nick Clegg's first decisions as party leader at the start of 2008 was to commission what became known as 'The Bones Report' (after its author, Professor Chris Bones, a Lib Dem activist and management expert) into 'how the Liberal Democrats' internal organisation could be built upon to double our number of MPs over the next two general elections'. The implicit assumption was that the party would grow, rapidly but incrementally, for a further decade in opposition.

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As it was, the party was faced, on 7 May 2010, with the Hobson's choice of doing a deal with the Tories. This was the only option available for which the numbers added up to more than the 323 MPs required for a bare majority and so offered a period of stable government. The alternative, most of us assumed (I still think correctly), was a minority Tory administration forcing a

second cut-and-run election within months and a resulting vicious squeeze on the Lib Dems.

However, few of us were under any illusions as to quite how dangerous a Lib–Con pact might be to the party's electoral fortunes. As I wrote on the *Liberal Democrat Voice* website on the Saturday morning after the election:

> … many of our members, and even more of our supporters, would identify themselves as 'progressives', a vague term which can be reasonably translated as 'anti-Tory'. There is a very real risk that by throwing in our lot with Cameron, or even just appearing to, those progressive voters will desert the Lib Dems in favour of Labour, and that may threaten many of the fifty-seven Lib Dem seats we now hold.

Despite these fears, though, it was a collective, almost unanimous, decision. No official count was taken at the special Birmingham conference on 16 May, 2010, which sealed the deal, but estimates in the hall, where about 1,500 Lib Dem members debated the formation of the coalition, suggested only about fifty conference representatives voted against the motion endorsing the agreement: the rest of the hundreds eligible to vote were all in favour.

Initial enthusiasm was understandable. The Lib Dems had been out of government for close on a century, and the prospect of *our* policies, approved by *our* conference, being implemented in government by *our* ministers was a glistening one. What is perhaps more remarkable is that even with the benefit of hindsight, it appears most of us would do it again. When *Liberal Democrat Voice* asked party members in May 2015, 'Knowing all you know now, would you have still gone in to a coalition with the Conservatives back in 2010?', 74 per cent said yes.

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At first glance that enthusiasm appears odd, given we can date the Lib Dems' election catastrophe to that point-of-no-return decision. For many members, though, it was not the signing of the coalition deal which signed the party's death warrant; it was our actions within the coalition. This debate matters because it has big implications for whether the party should consider coalition again. Is there something intrinsic about being a junior party in a Westminster coalition which means you have lost before you have started? Or is your fate in your own hands – is it possible to make a success of it, if handled well?

The biggest single plummet in Lib Dem vote share occurred in those first six months. Entering into the coalition with the Conservatives was a toxic act for many 2010 Lib Dem voters, and our rating plunged from 23 per cent in May, to 13 per cent by the end of the year. The tuition fees U-turn coincided with this, though did not in itself precipitate the collapse. It did, however, do longer-term reputational damage to the party (and, of course, to Nick Clegg, whose infamous 2010 pledge to oppose any increase spectacularly backfired).

What followed was a long-drawn-out decline. This was the period in which the party found itself outnumbered by the Conservatives in government, out-oppositioned by Labour on the centre left, and outflanked by anti-establishment parties untainted by government office with more strikingly populist messages (UKIP's anti-immigration dog whistle, the SNP's pro-nationalism placebo, the Greens' anti-austerity posturing).

Quite simply, we disappeared from view, becoming seen as an irrelevance as our support dwindled: a vicious spiral. By the time of the 2015 general election, and our doomed attempt to fight a first-past-the-post election on the basis of being everyone's second favourite party, we had been ruthlessly squeezed down to just 8 per cent.

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Was it worth it? Let us look at the profit-and-loss account, the debits and credits of our record in government.

The Lib Dems were not short of achievements. There was not a senior Lib Dem who was not able to rehearse, when challenged 'But what have you done?', the line that three of our top four 2010 priorities – tax cuts for low earners, the Pupil Premium, the Green Investment Bank – had been delivered. Or who would not point to other policies – like infant free school meals, or same-sex marriage, or more apprenticeships – which were successfully pushed by the Lib Dems in office. Or who would not highlight Conservative policies, such as hire-and-fire at will or repeal of the Human Rights Act or the proposed 'snoopers' charter', which the Lib Dems had vetoed. It is a creditable litany, especially for a party with just 9 per cent of MPs.

The biggest single plummet in Lib Dem vote share occurred in those first six months. Entering into the coalition with the Conservatives was a toxic act for many 2010 Lib Dem voters, and our rating plunged from 23 per cent in May, to 13 per cent by the end of the year. The tuition fees U-turn coincided with this, though did not in itself precipitate the collapse.

The trouble was that the public did not notice. At least they were even-handed, ignoring not only our triumphs but also our disasters and treating both those imposters just the same. As the British Election Study, which has been examining how and why the public vote as they do in every election since 1964, noted: 'The Lib Dems did not do so badly because they were blamed for the failings of the coalition; rather, the majority of voters simply seem to have felt that they were an irrelevant component of the last government.'

Two examples suffice. Among the 44 per cent of voters who though the economy was getting better, just 19 per cent credited the Lib Dems compared to 73 per cent who thought it was thanks to the Conservatives. Meanwhile, of the two-thirds of voters who thought the NHS had got worse under the coalition, just 19 per cent held the Lib Dems responsible while 69 per cent pinned the blame on the Tories.

Unfair? Mostly, yes. But like sailors complaining about the sea, it is pointless to wag our finger at the voters. Moreover, I do not think I was the only Lib Dem who, as the coalition drew to a close, felt a nagging worry that while our party's successes were things which the Conservatives had little trouble with, the Conservatives' successes (too-tight-too-soon austerity, over-harsh crackdowns on social security such as the 'bedroom tax', Andrew Lansley's pointlessly expensive health reforms) were things we should have had no truck with.

Sure, our ministers did their best, and yes, the coalition was markedly less right wing, and in some areas even quite liberal, compared to full-blown Tory rule. But – let us ask ourselves honestly – did we truly succeed in moving

the country in a sufficiently liberal direction for enough people during our five years in government given the price we ended up paying?

Because it was not just in May 2015 that the Lib Dems were wiped out. That was simply the culmination of five years of humiliating defeats at every level of representative government. In the European parliament, eleven of our twelve MEPs were defeated. In Scotland, we lost twelve of the seventeen seats we were defending. (Wales, where we lost only one of our previous six AMs, was a relative success.) Our local government base was hacked down year after year, from 3,944 councillors in 2010 to just 1,801 in 2015. Today we control six councils, down from twenty-five in 2010. Only in the unelected House of Lords has Lib Dem representation grown.

For five years of restraining the Conservatives at Westminster, plus a handful of policy advances, the Lib Dems sacrificed decades of hard-won gains across the country. The opportunity cost of lost liberal influence has been huge.

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Was there anything the party could have done to staunch the losses we suffered in May 2015? I am doubtful. We were, I believe, destined for heavy defeat the moment we joined the coalition. Too Tory for our progressive voters, not Tory enough for our small-c conservative voters. The voters who remained – pragmatic, rational liberals (many of whom have since swelled the ranks of the party as new members) – are too thinly spread to win us many seats.

Maybe it would be different under proportional representation (our 8 per cent of the vote would yield us around fifty MPs), but first past the post is what the voters chose in 2011. And for as long as we have it, a third party looking to be the moderating force in what seems to be a close election will get flattened by the inevitable pincer movement. Even our MPs' much-vaunted local incumbency is not, it turns out, a magic wand.

The party's campaign itself has been much criticised, in particular for Nick Clegg's mantra that the purpose of the Lib Dems was to 'bring a heart to a Conservative government and a brain to a Labour one'. This kind of split-the-difference positioning was unloved by activists – who labelled it defensive and unambitious – yet it was the only realistic option available. I call it an option, but it was not, not really. It was thrust on us by the voters when they popped the 'Cleggmania' balloon in May 2010 and then torpedoed electoral reform by rejecting the Alternative Vote a year later.

The party's campaign itself has been much criticised, in particular for Nick Clegg's mantra that the purpose of the Lib Dems was to 'bring a heart to a Conservative government and a brain to a Labour one'. This kind of split-the-difference positioning was unloved by activists – who labelled it defensive and unambitious – yet it was the only realistic option available.

Those who denounced the strategy of liberal centrism were hiding from the truth that the party's only route into government was in coalition with one of the two main parties, either the right-leaning Tories or left-leaning Labour. That inevitably meant compromise, pegging the Lib Dems as the party of moderate, fair-minded pragmatism. We may not have wanted to place ourselves in the centre, but that is precisely where our circumstances put us. We had no choice but to make a virtue from necessity. An appeal to radical liberalism – land value tax, proportional representation, a citizen's income! – would merely have invited derision given our necessarily constrained record in coalition and that we would have been unable to explain how such manifesto promises could plausibly be delivered.

Ultimately, the 2015 general election simply was not about us. It was not a change election, but a fear election. The spectre of Prime Minister Miliband in hock to the SNP appears to have persuaded enough voters to put to one side their doubts about the Conservatives, to hold onto nurse for fear of something worse. Former Lib Dem MP Jeremy Browne was surely right when he said: 'If the coalition was on the ballot paper, it would win in May'. But it was not, so the only logical choice for those voters anxious to avoid a change of government was to vote Conservative.

On completing the coalition negotiations in 2010, William Hague is said to have told his wife, Ffion: 'I think I've just killed the Liberal Democrats.'

Well, perhaps. After all, we were just 24,968 votes – the combined majorities of the eight rump Lib Dem MPs – away from being wiped out. And, assuming the Tories now move to implement the long-overdue constituency boundary reforms (blocked by the Lib Dems in 2012 in retaliation for the Tories kiboshing of House of Lords reform), our notional number of seats is a mere four. Just because we feel we have hit rock bottom does not automatically guarantee things will now get better.

But we have 18,000 new party members and we have a new leader, Tim Farron. Which other political force in the next five years will be making the case for being pro-immigration and pro-Europe, for reforming our drugs laws and our political system, for championing civil liberties and the environment, and for opposing inheritance-tax cuts which benefit only the wealthiest and tax-credits cuts which hurt the working poor?

For five years the Lib Dems were the opposition to the Conservatives within the coalition. Now that is done, and with Labour clueless about how to respond to their defeat, it looks like the Lib Dems will be the only effective national opposition to the Conservatives in this parliament as well. We are not dead yet.

Stephen Tall was co-editor of the Liberal Democrat Voice website from 2007 to 2015. He edited the 2013 publication, Coalition and Beyond: Liberal Reforms for the Next Decade *and is a research associate at the think tank Centre Forum. Stephen was a councillor for eight years in Oxford, 2000–08.*

From the Rose Garden to the compost heap

Nick Harvey

The Liberal Democrats' cataclysm on 7 May 2015 demands analysis and reflection, and will be subjected to both for many years. A 'gathering of the fallen' at the start of July – organised by the Whips' Office as a post-mortem exercise and to let people get things off their chest – brought roughly half the defeated MPs together for the first time since the election. There was a unanimous view that we had 'fought the wrong campaign' (but fought

it rather well). But there were as many disparate views of what the 'right campaign' would have been as there were people in the room.

What was striking, however, was that despite our appalling election outcome – following disastrous rounds of local elections, calamitous European elections, and the loss of a third of our membership and two-thirds of our popular support – there also remained a unanimous view that we had done the right thing in the crisis conditions of May 2010 in entering into coalition with the Conservatives.

So where did it all go wrong? Following my involuntary exit from government in September 2012, I wrote a pamphlet, *After the Rose Garden*, later published by the Institute for Government, exploring from a partisan Lib Dem perspective what I perceived had gone wrong from the 'inside' and, drawing on my experiences, aiming to promote a debate about our expectations if we ever engaged in any future coalition negotiation.

Before describing my conclusions, let me offer a view of the election catastrophe. I filled an advisory role on Paddy Ashdown's election 'wheelhouse' – representing the interests of MPs and candidates. I felt throughout – and said to Paddy, Ryan Coetzee and Olly Grender – that they were seeking an organisational solution to a political problem. The party's best political brains spent hours poring over micro-detail of how many doors had been knocked on in which seats; baffling, as this could have been done by good ground organisers.

Our problem was our political platform, congratulating ourselves on our achievements in coalition and producing a worthy but dull manifesto whose message seemed to be 'steady as she goes' and 'more of the same'. My view throughout was that we looked (and indeed were) far too keen to serve in another coalition which, given the damage to our political position that the first had inflicted, seemed positively kamikaze. But questioning this starting point seemed to be perceived as disloyalty to the leadership team, though in truth we had long passed the point of no return on that.

My suggestion was to say: 'Coalition? Nah: been there, done that, got the T-shirt. Now let's tell you about *our* plans for the next five years …' and to have listed four or five distinctive, radical and above all new ideas. I had no magic recipe, but promising five (unspecified) bills sold our environmentalism short; we abandoned our cutting edge on education (Michael Gove had set a shocking agenda – might we not have recovered our initiative, for example in the deplorably underdeveloped space of 14–19 education?); admirable proposals on mental health had a narrow appeal on the NHS; new economic thinking and something striking on either civil liberties or internationalism might have made for a more interesting pitch. And if there *had* been a hung parliament, they would have made a good prospectus for negotiations.

We were far too keen in the early days to show that the world doesn't end if you get a hung parliament and to prove that coalition could work. It was far too cosy and voters perceived that we had sold our souls to the Tories. By contrast, in the final phase, when we were belatedly trying to demonstrate 'clear water', we looked almost childishly petulant …

Perhaps we kidded ourselves all along that the advantages of incumbency could overcome awful poll ratings – after all it hadn't helped longstanding councillors. Then we convinced the media; and then between us, I wonder whether we and the media rattled the pollsters into making some allowance for it in their analyses, if only on the gut instinct that we had bucked headline figures before?

Looking back over the five years, we were far too keen in the early days to show that the world doesn't end if you get a hung parliament and to prove that coalition could work. It was far too cosy and voters perceived that we had sold our souls to the Tories. By contrast, in the final phase, when we were belatedly trying to demonstrate 'clear water', we looked almost childishly petulant, undoing any advantage which serving in government might have done to our fortunes. Like everyone else at the July post-mortem, I still believe that we were right to go into coalition. But much of the political handling – from start to finish – was little short of disastrous, and *that* accounts for our current plight.

Coalition negotiations

Things started to go wrong from before the word 'go', not least because the Conservatives were so much better prepared for the hung parliament scenario than we were. They had foreseen the outcome months ahead and war-gamed the scenarios. The 'big offer' on the Friday lunchtime was far from spontaneous: it had been well rehearsed and was carefully choreographed.

The coalition negotiations in the heady days following the 2010 election were conducted in three parts. Firstly – and most publicly – was policy: two teams, led by William Hague and Danny Alexander, assisted by policy gurus Oliver Letwin and David Laws, spent hours hammering out a policy prospectus for the coalition, which was duly presented to the nation as the foundation block of the new government. On the Lib Dem side there was consultation over its contents and buy-in from parliamentarians, key party committees and even a special party conference. All this served the party leadership well when the going later got rocky, because there was a sense of shared ownership of the decision to go into coalition.

The second part of the negotiation focused on coalition machinery – the way disputes, which would inevitably arise, would be resolved. On our side, Jim Wallace brought to bear his experiences of two coalitions in Scotland and Andrew Stunell contributed his wisdom gained working for the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors and helping council groups to form coalition administrations. The principal idea was a 'Coalition Committee' as the Star Chamber to resolve disputes. Interestingly it rarely met. Instead the more informal 'Quad' (PM, DPM, chancellor and chief secretary to the Treasury) was used for this purpose. It tangled with some thorny issues, but appears to have been largely harmonious, reflecting perhaps some similarities in outlook between the participants. But backbenchers and the wider membership of both coalition parties might question the extent to which it protected wider political equities.

The third part of the negotiation – almost unremarked upon at the time, beyond the fact that the Lib Dems had some cabinet posts – was referred to colloquially as 'bums on seats'. For the Lib Dems this meant which – and how many – government posts would be filled by Liberal Democrats, and who would fill them. This was dealt with entirely on a one-to-one basis between

David Cameron and Nick Clegg. But, as was clear from the moment of Cameron's 'big offer' to the Lib Dems at lunchtime the day after polling, the Tories knew what they wanted from this part of the negotiation far more clearly than did the Lib Dems.

Compounding this difficulty, in contrast to the policy agenda, we Lib Dems had no internal discussion about what we wanted here. This struck me as rather odd. In the British political culture party leaders choose who holds what post, but it was surely a matter of collective interest what number and nature of posts we expected. But it seemed to be thought either unseemly or tempting providence to dare discuss 'bums on seats' and instead we sent Nick Clegg – who had served only one term in the Commons and had very limited familiarity with the Lords – into battle entirely alone, with no support, and no indication from his colleagues as to what we wanted. I was astonished that we had not deployed a heavyweight team to haggle over posts, numbers and operational questions.

Once these mechanical issues had been agreed – at breakneck speed and with inadequate collective forethought – there was really no way of unpicking them. We had waited eighty years for a peacetime coalition but, in a matter of hours or at most days, on critical points the pass had been sold. There was no political incentive for David Cameron to agree later to revisit any of these issues and concede more than we had agreed at the outset. The window of opportunity for fundamental renegotiation had gone for five years. We could only learn from experience and form a much more detailed shopping list for any future negotiation.

With fifty years of political progress reversed in one parliamentary cycle, it looks a daunting task to rebuild our lost political capital to the point that we would be relevant to a hung parliament following any future general election. But if that proves overly pessimistic, then inevitably much of the haggling in the days after the election would again focus on policy. So, establishing well in advance our clear 'demand' over government machinery and positions, then making this demand clearly understood from the outset, would strengthen our position and save valuable time.

Governing with the Conservatives

Many Lib Dems greeted the 2010 negotiation as a triumph – rejoicing that key Lib Dem policies were to be enacted in government, and by Lib Dem ministers, for the first time in eighty years. For myself, I was more sceptical. When our negotiators reported back, my immediate thought was that agreeing to Lib Dem MPs abstaining on student fees and nuclear energy was a hostage to fortune. It was – in practical impact – capitulation, giving to the Conservatives a majority on these issues which they had not won. I also looked at the policy prospectus drawn up and could only see enough to fill the early part of the parliament, and I wondered whether as five years rolled out we would ever again be in so strong a position to bargain. And I looked at the 'bums on seats' in astonishment and dismay. I simply couldn't believe how few posts we had secured: seventeen ministers (one unpaid), three whips in the Commons, and three whips in the Lords (two unpaid). We held just 23 posts out of 122 in the government.

My assumption was that the Conservative starting point would be a divvy-up pro rata to Commons seat numbers (Lib Dems getting roughly one-sixth of the posts), whereas the Lib Dem starting point would be a divvy-up pro rata to votes (Lib Dems getting roughly one-third of the posts), and we would haggle to a midway point – Lib Dems getting roughly one-quarter of the posts. But the Conservatives cannily recognised that over five years, giving a bit of initial ground on policy was a price worth paying for getting plenty of their best bums onto the key seats. Bitter experience proved them right. We must never make this mistake again! In any future negotiation we must demand absolutely that we appoint at least one minister in every department (if the talent pool in the Commons were small, we are blessed with talented peers) and three paid whips in each House. Those seven or eight extra posts would have made a huge difference, as I was to discover to my personal cost two years later. In short, in a two-party coalition where we essential to its viability, we must have roughly a quarter of the posts.

[The Conservatives] drove a hard political agenda and too often we hadn't enough political firepower in the right places to stop them. Some of the time they truly set out to 'shaft' us and took relish in doing so … At other times they just conducted government as though we weren't there and assumed we would go along with it. Too often, we did.

As we lick our wounds and survey the wreckage of our fortunes from the political wilderness, the excitement of forming Britain's first peacetime coalition in almost a century seems a distant memory now. We are all older and wiser. We can take some quiet satisfaction in the progress made in stabilising the economy, reforming aspects of welfare, improving the lot of pensioners and sustaining overseas aid. We can point to our signature achievement of raising the threshold and taking millions out of income tax; stimulating the creation of two million apprenticeships; guaranteeing a healthy annual rise in state pensions; the pupil premium paying extra money to help children from disadvantaged backgrounds; saving the post office network; creating the Green Investment Bank and the Business Bank and other hobby horses.

But being in government with the Conservatives was not the sweetness and harmony suggested by the rose-garden scenes of May 2010. They drove a hard political agenda and too often we hadn't enough political firepower in the right places to stop them. Some of the time they truly set out to 'shaft' us and took relish in doing so (and throughout they were planning a 'stealth' election strategy to destroy us). At other times they just conducted government as though we weren't there and assumed we would go along with it. Too often, we did.

Recommendations for any future coalition

Framing my recommendations in my Institute for Government pamphlet, I was hugely encouraged by the degree of colleagues' support for them: such as each department having a Lib Dem deputy secretary of state armed with a veto – akin to the one Nick Clegg cleverly secured for himself as deputy prime minister. Indeed the big wins of the 2010 coalition must be consolidated – in particular that 'DPM veto' (receiving contemporaneously, and having to approve, prime ministerial papers); the balanced 'Quad'; the

deputy prime minister's chairing of the Home [domestic] Affairs cabinet committee; and a Lib Dem chief secretary to the Treasury.

Secondly, we must have a minister at *every* department (twenty-two in the current structure of government, though we favour merging departments), plus three government whips in each House. Add a couple of junior ministers to support Lib Dem secretaries of state, and we would still only total thirty: roughly a quarter of the government. This is entirely reasonable in a two-party coalition if our participation makes the whole thing viable, and peers can always fill posts if Commons numbers are limited.

We shouldn't accept backwater cabinet posts. We can reasonably demand one great office of state (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, Treasury or Home Office); one of the politically sexy 'hot potato' departments (Education, Health, or Work & Pensions), and fight to the death to get it; one 'hard-edged' department (Business, Innovation & Skills; Defence; Energy; Communities & Local Government); and one 'softer' service department (Environment, Food & Rural Affairs; Transport; Culture, Media & Sport; Justice; International Development). The final Lib Dem cabinet minister pretty much has to be chief secretary to the Treasury.

The coalition party not heading any department must get first choice of the next portfolio in it. And in every department, whichever party does not have the secretary of state should provide the deputy secretary of state – Lib Dems should make this a deal-breaker in any future negotiation.

Further recommendations include:

- Every Lib Dem minister must have a special adviser to support them, and cabinet ministers at least two.
- The Lib Dem minister in every department must be able to: serve on the department's board; bring in chosen outsiders to conduct reviews and fill appointments; and commission work from officials on their own policy initiatives across the department's work.
- A completely new approach to Short and Cranborne funding is needed: perhaps backbench funds for all parties, and front-bench funds only for those in opposition.
- We must move beyond the nonsense of one party's press team trying to gag the other party: the solution is for Lib Dem ministers to answer to the DPM press team and not to Number Ten's.
- The Coalition Committee should actually meet regularly and handle routine tensions inevitable in any partnership – only referring up to the 'Quad' intractable problems they are unable to resolve.
- The smaller party in a coalition must not be silenced in parliament on the basis that the larger partner 'speaks for' it. If ministers from the smaller party wish to make a separate front-bench statement, transparency demands that they must always be able to do so.
- Any future coalition should focus on running the country well, implementing policy, dialogue with parliament and nation, devolving power, and so reducing the flow of new legislation.

Politically, the greatest lesson Liberal Democrats must learn is to …'just say no'. It is difficult for the smaller party in a coalition to make the larger one do things it doesn't want to. But the reverse should not be true: it should be relatively simple to stop them doing things we don't want them to do.

Conclusion

Politically, the greatest lesson Liberal Democrats must learn is to heed the words of Nancy Reagan and 'just say no'. It is difficult for the smaller party in a coalition to make the larger one do things it doesn't want to. But the reverse should not be true: it should be relatively simple to stop them doing things we don't want them to do. They need our votes to get anything through parliament. With proper working arrangements, they also need our assent to all significant executive actions.

Of course, deals have to be struck which will sometimes result in one or other party going through the lobbies holding their noses. The larger party will inevitably get its way more; its greater numbers mean it will set the agenda more of the time. Lib Dems must accept that, and the underlying democratic legitimacy derived from winning more votes.

Willingness to serve in any coalition entails willingness to compromise in the national interest, and an acceptance that we will not get our own way all of the time. But we must ensure that we have reliable machinery to provide an effective veto on all occasions. We must be ready to use it on a daily basis. And we must have greater collective ownership of that veto.

And all Lib Dem MPs and peers, prominent frontbencher or loyal foot soldier, must be able to look themselves in the mirror as they brush their teeth before bed, confident that the sound sleep of the righteous awaits them because nothing they have been asked to do that day has been an abandonment of the liberal and democratic values that drew them into public service in the first place.

Nick Harvey was Liberal Democrat MP for North Devon from 1992 to 2015 and Minister of State for Defence from 2010 to 2012. He served as party defence spokesman from 2006, having previously covered Transport, Trade & Industry, Health, and Culture Media & Sport.

Coalition history – our follies and our fortune

John Pugh

There is a scene in *The Godfather* where Michael Corleone, calm and collected at the christening of his nephew, waits to hear the news that his plans have worked. Across the country in various places, rivals and erstwhile colleagues are being gunned down and eliminated on his orders. At a gathering of Conservatives after the 2015 election, Greg Hands, inheritor of Danny Alexander's job at the Treasury, compared David Cameron awaiting the results to Michael Corleone, as one by one his former coalition allies were wiped off the electoral map.

Shortly after the election, at Lib Dem HQ, I attended a post-mortem to hear from defeated colleagues about what went wrong. Good points were made about the

nightmare scenario we had faced – the polls showing a stalemate between Miliband and Cameron, the fear of Scottish leverage, the resource and intelligence of the Tory ground and air war, the weakness of ours, etc. Any change in any of those variables and the result would not have been so bad.

However, one thing the defeated MPs omitted to mention was that we had not just started to lose in 2015. We had lost badly – very badly – and consistently throughout the coalition years. Without the Scottish factor, an appalling night might perhaps just have been a very bad night. But with our poll ratings at their worst level for decades, it was perhaps odd that MPs thought they might somehow be immune from the decline in support that had affected our MEPs, our councillors, our by-election candidates – the rest of the party.

Perhaps, trapped in the Westminster bubble, we could not see the tsunami coming, consoled by the trappings of power, errant party polling and irrational optimism. Lured in by the courtesies of the House, many did not see their 'honourable friends' (for so we were taught to refer to our Tory coalition colleagues) as their mortal enemies – parts of the most successful political killing machine the country has seen. The Corleone analogy works here.

It is said that, after the coalition negotiations were concluded, William Hague went home and told his wife he had just killed off the Liberals. I do not know if he did say that, but I do not think he was correct. The coalition per se was not the cause of the electoral disaster that overtook us. That resulted for the greater part because the parliamentary party made a succession of strategic blunders which, looking back now, still appear staggeringly naïve – almost reckless – in their disregard of mature political calculation.

It is often said that heroically we sacrificed party interest in order to secure the good of the country – and that is how the coalition parliamentary party would like to be remembered. The coalition government was not a bad government and was, in its own terms, successful; but practically none of the strategic blunders we made that so badly damaged the party had anything to do with the major achievements or goals of the coalition. The blunders we made were utterly de trop and born of political inexperience and hubris.

This was manifest from the very beginning, when people with previous experience of coalitions and pacts within a British context (Steel, Williams, etc.), whether at parliamentary level, regional level or council level, were either ignored or kept on the margins and advice sought instead from selected continental sources and special advisors.

Insufficient challenge was built into the new system. Had it been there, it might have been pointed out that, given the tribalism of British politics, the choreography of coalition had to look right. It had to look like a business arrangement not a rose garden 'love in'. It might have been noticed that encumbering so many of our small parliamentary party with junior ministerial positions is a great way of tying up some of our best talent in the minutiae of government – while ensuring good behaviour from those hoping for ministerial preferment.

The Tories, in offering us so many baubles of office, made our party more manageable and potentially acquiescent. It suited the Tories to inveigle us into the tribal politics of Westminster, to embrace us, to school us in the old ways of government – and before long, colleagues were jumping up and down in the chamber asking on-message whips' questions, ignoring sane amendments from opposition sources, and churning out centrally drafted press releases of depressing vacuity.

In a nutshell we needed to show from the word go that coalition was a new way of doing politics and we did not. We failed. It was as though traditional Westminster politics was temporarily being led by a new political-amalgam party. Politics in Westminster was still tribal; we had just gone off and aligned with the Tory side. It suited the Tories. It suited Labour. It did not suit us, however, but we guilelessly let it happen.

Having got the ground rules in place, the Tories' next move was to undermine elements of our core vote and our biggest asset, which at that stage was Nick Clegg.

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Knowing the strength of support we had off the back of our resolute defence of public services, they immediately brought forward legislation on educational and health services that was designed to antagonise many of those who worked within them and possibly alarm those who used them. They very consciously acted, as Oliver Letwin put it, before their political capital was used up. In luring us into the health and social care bill (never in the coalition agreement) and creating misconceived havoc in our most cherished British institution, they successfully cemented an image of the Lib Dems as Tory-lite. We let them, and initially, to some sections of the party, associating the party with pro-market health 'reforms' did not seem to be a problem.

Forcing an early response to the Browne review of university funding – a move which in the end made a negligible contribution to deficit reduction – Osborne, through pressure on Alexander and others, invited us to trash our own reputation. We took up the invitation. Much has been made of the 'foolishness' of our tuition fees pledge but, having made it and had our leader iconically filmed on Westminster Bridge berating previous politicians for broken promises, it is hard to find a better instance of kamikaze politics. Post-2009 and the expenses saga, where trust was simply the major political issue, we chose to appear faithless rather than stand up to Osborne.

That the AV referendum shortly after became a plebiscite on Clegg and coalition fell nicely for the Tories, as did the sheer ineptitude of the Yes campaign and the people chosen to run it.

By that time, too, we had agreed to prioritise oddly the inevitable cuts in spending, by reducing capital expenditure and foolishly making sure that local government working over-rigidly on an annual financial cycle bore the major brunt of the first tranche of cuts. With some sleight-of-hand redistribution to largely Tory areas mixed in, we allowed a narrative of unfairness to blossom and ensured our rapid demise in many cities.

Casually we dismissed the resulting wipeouts in Liverpool and Manchester – the undoing of decades of graft – as mid-term

blues and moved on, unfazed. Our relative failure in council elections compared even with the Tories was deemed inevitable. After all, everything was as normal in Westminster – save that a party once routinely graced with by-election victors was instead shored up with knighthoods and privy counsellors. As the Lib Dem benches came more and more to resemble Camelot, hard political realities receded. Belatedly we recognised our potential clout and embraced differentiation as something more than the odd spat in cabinet, but by then people inside and outside the party had a very unclear sense of what the party was about.

Given this, our campaign pose as the honest broker for the next government looked doomed and even risible as a campaign strategy. Ryan Coetzee, whose gifts turned out to be sub-Napoleonic, had schooled us to ram home our mantra of 'a stronger economy – fairer society'. There is, however, scarcely a political party in the world that claims to campaign for the opposite. We could not get people to 'get' anymore who we were.

They may when they see Tory rule untrammelled. They may when they count and begin to appreciate some of the blessings of coalition government. They may when we rediscover our voice.

From a historian's point of view it would be only fair to say that I struggle to be dispassionate. As a philosopher, I have concerns anyway about the objectivity of history; perhaps there are only ever 'histories'. Whenever I look back I feel again the anger and bewilderment I felt over some of the crass decision-making in the first two years – the decisions that wounded the party without improving the economy. Damage was inflicted which was wholly and utterly unnecessary.

In my more charitable moments I tend to see such errors as stemming from inexperience, too trusting a nature, overconfidence in the rationality and fairness of the great British public. In darker moods I see hubris, the influence of 'class', a clumsy misguided attempt by the party leadership to remould a party they could not love and barely understood. But I still gasp at the thought that, after five years in government, we as a party of reform – but for the intervention of the Lords – nearly went into the election with our only constitutional gains being individual voter registration and boundary changes that helped the Tories.

Much has been made of the 'foolishness' of our tuition fees pledge but, having made it and had our leader iconically filmed on Westminster Bridge berating previous politicians for broken promises, it is hard to find a better instance of kamikaze politics … we chose to appear faithless rather than stand up to Osborne.

History is supposed to be written by the victors but there are not many victors left in the party to contest the narrative. I cannot prove that, but for the follies of the early coalition years, outcomes in 2015 would have been different. What I can do is to defy anyone to explain how such blindingly obvious errors could possibly have helped and to gently point out that the alternative accounts that conclude by telling us that it was electorate that got it all wrong are more likely to be delusionary.

John Pugh was leader of the Lib Dem group on the hung Sefton Council before entering parliament in 2001. He led that group through successive elections, turning them from the smallest group to the largest. He was elected to parliament to join the largest post-war cohort of Liberal Democrat MPs and now survives as a member of the smallest group. He was backbench co-chair on health during the coalition, but resigned as result of differences over policy. He is currently the party's education spokesman.

Coalition: a difficult situation made worse

Matthew Huntbach

The February 1974 general election marks the point at which it could no longer be assumed that British politics was purely Labour versus Conservative. Although the electoral system savagely discriminated against the Liberal Party, its huge growth in votes meant it could not be written off as a historical relic and established it as the main opposition to the Conservatives in a significant proportion of the country. It was also the election where the Ulster Unionists formally broke their links with the Conservative Party and the SNP and Plaid Cymru won enough seats that they could no longer be dismissed as fringe elements.

Ever since then the possibility of a 'hung parliament' has been a topic for discussion in general elections. It was usually discussed as if the Liberal Party, or Liberal Democrats as it became, would have a powerful position as 'kingmaker', free to choose with which of the two main parties it would form a coalition (often vulgarly put as 'jump into bed with'), and able to dictate the terms of that coalition. So the Liberal Democrat leader would be subject to questions on which party he preferred and what conditions he would ask for, but that was almost never balanced by the Labour and Conservative leaders being asked about their willingness to form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats and the terms they would demand. The impression was given that, if a general election ever did leave the Liberal Democrats holding the balance of power, they would have effectively 'won' the election.

This is counter to the experience both of Liberal Democrats in local government in the UK and third parties in other countries. Holding the balance of power often turns out to be a miserable experience, in which you get the blame for anything unpleasant but none of the credit for anything that works well. A good example is the Green Party in Ireland which formed a coalition with Fianna Fáil in 2007 and was almost wiped out in the 2009 local elections and 2011 general election. The collapse in support for the New Zealand First party in the 1999 New Zealand general election was similar.

Small parties which are able to do well in balance-of-power situations tend to be those with committed supporters who have a narrow interest in certain issues. They do well because their supporters are unlikely to desert them and are easily satisfied so long as their particular interests are dealt with. The classic example was the National Religious Party in Israel. The UK Liberal Democrats are the opposite of that sort of party, with much transient support and very few voting for it on strict ideological grounds or because of support for a particular policy issue.

A junior coalition partner always faces the problem that when it agrees with the senior partner its contribution is ignored. When it disagrees and tries to force through its own ideas, there are two possibilities. If it alone supports an idea, it faces being denounced for playing politics – causing damage to force through something which has little popular support. If the idea is supported by the opposition, it needs to look for moral support from the opposition to prove it is not acting irresponsibly or selfishly. However, the opposition is more likely to want to draw supporters of that policy to itself and profit from the small party being unable to succeed, and so to denounce it rather than offer support. The obvious example is the Liberal Democrats' position on tuition fees. There was no way the Conservatives would have agreed to the tax increases necessary to pay for the Liberal Democrats' original policy, yet the Liberal Democrats were denounced for 'breaking their pledge' on it. Here, as with most issues they received no outside support or acknowledgement for the compromise they reached, which saved universities from the large-scale cuts endured by further education colleges with a system which, in terms of money passing through hands, was little different from a graduate tax.

Following the 2010 general election the Liberal Democrats were in just about the worst situation a small party could be in. After a big rise in the opinion polls attributed to 'Cleggmania', the party did unexpectedly badly in its actual vote share. The situation seen in previous general elections, where its support had steadily risen as the campaign progressed, had not happened. Instead its support peaked early then declined, with (as seen again in 2015) an embarrassing 'I'll eat my hat if that's true' response from senior figures when the first exit polls came out. If the party had done unexpectedly well, it could have used the threat of doing better in an ensuing early general election to force its way. It was clear, however, that it had failed to meet expectations and would most likely be the biggest loser in an early general election, even if it could afford to campaign properly in one, which it could not. The economic situation meant it would be denounced as irresponsible if it had not allowed a stable government to be formed, and Labour and Conservative would have joined forces in the election, as they did in the 2011 Alternative Vote referendum, urging voters to denounce the Liberal Democrats for the crime of existing and so denying the country a stable two-party system.

Most of all, the presence of MPs from other small parties and the distortion of the electoral system meant a coalition with the Conservatives was the only viable option, a Labour–Lib Dem coalition would not have had a majority. From Labour's point of view, allowing the Conservative–Lib Dem coalition to happen and then benefitting from the inevitable collapse of Liberal Democrat support was a far better option than attempting to form an unstable coalition with the Liberal Democrats, especially as they knew the economic situation meant that any incoming government would have to make unpopular decisions. The distortions of the electoral system, which gave the Conservatives over five times as many MPs as the Liberal Democrats even though they had barely one and a half times as many votes, meant that the resulting government was bound to be Conservative in its main thrust. The Liberal Democrats had no effective power they could use to get their way. Under these circumstances, they needed to take an extremely defensive position. The party's national leadership made sure it did the opposite.

By overemphasising and exaggerating the power the party had in the coalition, its leadership and national image-makers caused it huge damage. The reality is that the Liberal Democrats' influence in the coalition would be no more than a swinging of the balance towards the more moderate wing of the Conservatives. And that was relative given that in many ways the Conservatives had become far more right wing than when they were last in government, with the extinction of the old Tory 'wets'. Yet the image that was put out was that the coalition was almost an equal partnership. The Liberal Democrats needed to provide assurance that the coalition government would be stable; but publically acknowledging that their weakness meant it would be a government mostly Conservative in policy would have done this just as well, if not better.

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As with many things, what happened at the start dominated how people saw it for ever afterwards. The 'Rose Garden' image of David Clegg and Nick Cameron holding hands was what stuck in people's minds. For a while, the Liberal Democrats appeared to push the idea that the coalition was not just half but actually three-quarters Liberal Democrat. The inaccuracies here are deliberate; the point is that human memory often constructs false images to fit in with conclusions it has already drawn. The '75 per cent of our manifesto implemented' message was well meant, but few saw that it did not mean the same as '75 per cent of the government's policies are ours'. People saw it as the Liberal Democrats supporting the coalition not out of necessity but out of direct support for its mostly Conservative policies. It was damaging also to trumpet the 75 per cent figure, which arose from one brief analysis, when another analysis gave 40 per cent.

Given that having a coalition was a novelty, and the coalition existed only because of the Liberal Democrats, and only the Liberal Democrats talked about it positively (Conservatives, of course, resenting it for denying them a majority), it was hardly surprising that people identified the word 'coalition' primarily with the Liberal Democrats, so assumed that what came out of the coalition government was essentially what the Liberal Democrats were about. Opponents of the government assiduously used the word 'coalition' where previously they would have used 'government' and took delight in using the phrase 'coalition policies' to describe policies which the Liberal Democrats would have fought against internally and accepted only reluctantly as part of the general compromise. The emphasis that the Liberal Democrat leadership put on boasting about being 'in government' helped support this notion.

By exaggerating and boasting about the power and influence they had in a government whose policies

very much reflected its five-to-one Conservative–LibDem balance, the Liberal Democrats gave the impression that either they were much more right wing than their supporters supposed, or that they were rather pathetic, overawed and so too easily satisfied by the minor concessions they were given by the Conservatives.

People who had voted Liberal Democrat because they were against what the Conservatives stood for, and saw the Liberal Democrats as the main opposition to the Conservatives where they lived, felt betrayed. People who voted Liberal Democrat because they were against what the Conservatives stood for, but lived in a Labour-dominated area and felt that Labour had become tired and complacent and the Liberal Democrats offered a fresh way forward, felt betrayed.

A common line among some who had gained influence in the Liberal Democrats was that this did not matter. Was it not bad that the Liberal Democrats were over-reliant on those voting for it as a 'protest party', and would it not be better if the Liberal Democrats had more voting for it because they supported its ideology? Those pushing this line tended to have an ideology they thought the Liberal Democrats should adopt, or that it was always the underlying ideology (hence they liked to call it something like 'classical liberalism' or 'nineteenth-century liberalism') of the Liberal Democrats and needed to be enforced to make the party more distinctive. It was a 'small state' ideology, incorporating much of what the previous generation of Liberal Democrats called 'Thatcherism'. This was a turnaround from times in the past when it tended to be those on the left of the Liberal Party who argued for a more distinctive ideological approach, and those on the right who argued for pragmatism.

The coalition was not the time to engage in factional argument in the party. Activists who tended to the left would be the most discomfited by the fact of the coalition and the policies that were emerging from it, and so needed reassurance that there was still a place for them in the party. The message from the top was often the opposite. The idea was put across that the party had fundamentally changed in becoming a 'party of government', with this meaning a shift to the economic right. The most eloquent case for this was an article in the *New Statesman* written by Richard Reeves on the eve of the 2012 party conference.[1] He dismissed many of those who had voted previously for the Liberal Democrats as 'borrowed from Labour' and suggested that the party should abandon them and seek new voters. Reeves had worked as 'director of strategy' for Nick Clegg for two years prior to writing the article. Clegg made no effort to disassociate himself from its sentiments, and made disparaging remarks about those unhappy with this direction in an interview in *The Independent* newspaper at that time. Reeves' remarks were deeply insulting to those who had spent decades building up support for the party, with many of those votes 'borrowed from Labour' deriving from activity as long ago as the 1970s Liberal revival and remaining there since, not won over in 2010 as he claimed.

Given that having a coalition was a novelty, and the coalition existed only because of the Liberal Democrats, and only the Liberal Democrats talked about it positively … it was hardly surprising that people identified the word 'coalition' primarily with the Liberal Democrats, so assumed that what came out of the coalition government was essentially what the Liberal Democrats were about.

Activists who might have been willing to defend as necessary compromises the positions taken by the party in government that were upsetting long-term supporters were undermined by a leadership unwilling to join in with that defence. The notion that they were what those leading the party secretly wanted in the first place was allowed to grow. Again, the tuition fees policy is an example. Instead of putting out the message that the compromise reached was because the Conservatives would not agree to the Liberal Democrats' ideal, the leadership suggested it was a 'mistake' to have adopted our original policy and hinted that it was all the fault of naïve party members for pushing it. This boosted the party's attackers who argued that the Liberal Democrats were untrustworthy because they had campaigned on a policy they never really believed in. Attempting to put the blame on party members ignored the fact that it was a decision of the party's leadership to highlight this policy in the election campaign, and it was this highlighting with a 'pledge' to vote against tuition fee rises which made it particularly difficult when the party had to compromise on it.

An important role of the Liberal Party in its twentieth-century revival was to be a voice for the voiceless. Starting with its historical survival in remote parts of the UK whose population felt neither the Conservative Party nor the Labour Party knew or cared about their particular issues, it built support among the less-well-off in southern, small-town and rural England who might once have been Labour voters but felt alienated from a Labour Party which seemed completely urban based. It then achieved success in urban areas, where Labour had been dominant, among people who felt Labour had taken their support for granted. This bedrock of support for the Liberal Democrats was thrown away during the time of the coalition in the belief that there was an untapped source of support from people who liked the economics of the Conservative Party, but wanted something with a little more of a liberal attitude on social issues, and had hitherto disregarded the Liberal Democrats as 'not serious'. However, if there was such a source, joining the coalition and promoting the image of the Liberal Democrats as this sort of party did not tap it.

The underlying theme in the 2015 general election was dissatisfaction with British politics. The SNP was successful in tapping this in Scotland; the obvious inadequacies of UKIP and the Green Party meant they were not so successful in England. Most parties of protest are not liberal in instinct – that is often why they fail, and it is why it is best that they do. A liberal party of protest is a rare thing. Protest means challenging established power, which in the twenty-first century has moved from the state to big corporate business. The survival of the Liberal Party as a relic of the old pre-socialist left revived by local enthusiasts meant it was well placed to take on this challenge. Yet the Liberal Democrats during the time of the coalition seemed determined to throw away that role as well.

Much of the rhetoric coming from the top of the party during the time of the coalition put across the idea that it was ashamed of its old role of being a party of protest. It ignored the fact that the electoral system meant that local activists had passed through a brutal 'survival of the fittest' process. Far

from being unrealistic dreamers as was sometimes suggested, those who had survived and prospered were those who had a good feel for what works to win votes. Tempering feelings of protest and detachment from conventional politics into support for a party which was pragmatic on policy and humble in accepting that it had no right to anyone's vote (a big distinguishing factor from Labour) was their job and they were good at it.

This pragmatism meant that most active members could understand the argument for forming the coalition in 2010, so there was little outright opposition to it within the party. However, the overselling of the coalition, the attempt to use it to push a permanent shift to the economic right by some who had plenty of funding but little practical political experience, and the domination of the party's national image and strategy by a leadership which was disconnected from the party's activist base led to many serious mistakes being made in party tactics and presentation. Failing to understand how some of the lines used would be misinterpreted, and failing to learn the lessons from Ireland and New Zealand on how small parties are often damaged by coalitions, suggested a considerable naivety among those directing the party's public relations at the top. The coalition was always going to be a difficult situation for the Liberal Democrats, but this made it much worse.

(Note, it has been suggested that the author of this article is making these points in 'hindsight'. In fact these are points he was making throughout the time of the coalition in comments on *Liberal Democrat Voice*. See, for example, http://www.libdemvoice.org/opinion-agreeing-with-nick-25352.html#comment-184883 where the main point made here was made at the time of the 2011 Liberal Democrat party conference.)

Matthew Huntbach joined the Liberal Party as a university student in the 1970s. He was an active campaigner in various parts of the country, standing for local elections first in his home county of Sussex, and later in the London Borough of Lewisham where he was a Liberal Democrat councillor 1994–2006, and leader of the council opposition 1998–2004. He is an academic in computer science at Queen Mary University of London and at Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications.

1 Richard Reeves, 'The Case for a Truly Liberal Party', *New Statesman*, 19 Sept. 2012.

The Liberal Democrats in coalition: owners of all and nothing

Anthony Seldon and Mike Finn (eds.), *The Coalition Effect 2010–2015* (Cambridge University Press, 2015)

Review by **David Howarth**

Only when a historical period is over can we truly understand it. The Owl of Minerva, as Hegel said, takes flight only at dusk. And so any attempt to understand recent political events, events whose consequences are still being worked through, is inevitably not so much an exercise in history as an intervention in the politics it describes. That applies without qualification to the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition of 2010–2015, whose effects on every party in British politics, and indeed on the political existence of 'Britain' itself, are still very much in train. One perhaps paradoxical merit, however, of *The Coalition Effect 2010–2015*, a collection of essays organised and edited by Anthony Seldon and Mike Finn, is that it was completed and published just before the end of events it describes, which means that its assessments are free from any of the dubious benefits of hindsight. It stands as a document of what a group of eminent scholars and commentators thought were the important features of the coalition era just before the general election of 2015, the result of which presumably surprised them as much as it surprised its victors.

Finn suggests that … Liberal Democrat secretaries of state could have been deployed in departments better suited to promoting the distinctiveness of the party … The problem with that suggestion, however, was not just that Clegg was too little interested in distinctiveness, but also that he was uninterested in civil liberties and constitutional issues …

The book is divided into three parts. The first examines the constitutional and institutional aspects of the coalition; the second looks thematically at a number of policy areas; and the third encompasses its political effects, principally on the main parties but also on the media and includes a very useful contribution from John Curtice on elections and referendums.

For students of Liberal history, the central chapters will be two by Mike Finn himself, on the coalition agreement in the institutional part of the book and, especially, on the consequences for the Liberal Democrats in the political part. Some of the other contributions are distinctly less useful, since they seem to forget that the government was indeed a coalition rather than a Conservative administration. One can, however, gain much from, for example, Howard Glennerster's clear account of the coalition's health reforms and Nicholas Timmins' admirable chapter on social security and pensions policy. Peter Riddell's chapter on 'The coalition and the executive' is notably well informed (and notably positive about how the coalition functioned within Whitehall).

Much is also to be learned, in a different way, from Martin Loughlin and Cal Viney's chapter on 'The coalition and the constitution'. It gives an account of unremitting hostility to the Liberal Democrats' attempts at constitutional reform, which the authors characterise as an illegitimate attempt by a minority party to impose its agenda on an unwilling nation. Admittedly, the AV referendum and House of Lords reform were total failures, but their assessment of the one Liberal Democrat success, the Fixed Term Parliaments Act, is based on a misunderstanding. They adopt Vernon Bogdanor's criticism that, contrary to the populist spirit of the age, the Act introduces a system under which parliaments make new governments rather than the electorate in general elections. But that fails to understand both the arrangements before the Act and those under it. During the twentieth century, the political composition of the British government changed several times in the course of a parliamentary

term. Whether the new government called an election was not automatic but entirely a matter for them. In 1940, for obvious reasons, no election ensued, but even in 1931 an internal debate raged about whether to call an election – a debate that caused the first of that decade's many Liberal splits. The difference under the Fixed Term Parliaments Act is that the decision whether to call a new election lies not with the government but with parliament.

The failures over AV and the House of Lords also feature in Mike Finn's chapter on the coalition and the Liberal Democrats. He makes it the centrepiece of what he calls the government's second phase, from 2011 to 2013. He pays more attention, however, to the catastrophic first phase, 2010 to 2011, concentrating in particular on the tuition fees debacle. Finn points out that the party never recovered from the loss of support it suffered in 2010–11 and that subsequent policy successes in taxation, schools policy and even economic policy failed to offset the loss of trust and credibility that happened early on. He argues convincingly that although the party hierarchy might claim that the party's manifesto had stressed promises the party in the end kept, such as the pupil premium and raising the income tax threshold, the party had let the public down on what its own voters regarded as its unique selling points, in particular abolishing tuition fees.

One might question, however, whether Finn is right on a related point. He identifies as crucial the U-turn on nuclear power. It seems unlikely that nuclear power was anywhere near as significant for the Liberal Democrat electorate as fees. At the time Chris Huhne, the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, expressed surprise at how just little resistance or objection it had generated. One can make a case instead, looking at the detail of the party's opinion poll rating decline in 2010, for saying that the issue that almost rivalled tuition fees in its negative effect was economic fairness, from the point at which Nick Clegg was seen to slap George Osborne on the back after a budget that reduced income tax for the wealthy and cut benefits for the poor.

More generally Finn argues that Nick Clegg's central mistake was to give very low priority in the early years to maintaining the party's distinctiveness, preferring instead to show that 'coalition works' by 'owning' every coalition policy. Once the public had fixed in its mind that the Liberal Democrats were merely an appendage to the Conservatives, later attempts at differentiation looked insincere or contrived. Consequently, even policies that really were distinctively Liberal Democrat, such as the increase in the income tax threshold, could not be convincingly claimed for the party. By 'owning' everything it ended up 'owning' nothing.

Finn suggests, as others have, that the party might have done better had it chosen to dominate specific ministries rather than dotting single ministers around many departments. But he adds that, even within that strategy, Liberal Democrat secretaries of state could have been deployed in departments better suited to promoting the distinctiveness of the party. That might be unfair in the case of the Department of Energy and Climate Change, where Liberal Democrats USPs were at stake, but it is certainly a plausible idea that the party's liberalism would have emerged much more clearly had it taken the Home Office or the Ministry of Justice. The problem with that suggestion, however, was not just that Clegg was too little interested in distinctiveness, but also that he was uninterested in civil liberties and constitutional issues, habitually referring in this reviewer's hearing to the former as 'traditional' – as if preserving them was similar to supporting Morris Dancing – and to the latter as 'legal niceties'.

Finn also identifies as a serious problem the growing distance between the party in government, particularly Clegg, and the party in the country. Finn explains the process by which, as he puts it, Clegg came to despise his own party. Of course, for much of the party that feeling was mutual, with serious consequences for the party's capacity to campaign. The biggest puzzle, however, is how Clegg survived as leader. His failure was complete at the point the AV referendum was lost in 2011, but no challenge to his leadership occurred until 2014, at which point the failure of the parliamentary party to act doomed the attempt almost as soon as it started. Finn's explanation for the failure of the 2014 coup was lack of a convincing new leader – Vince Cable was implicated in the fees debacle and Tim Farron was unwilling at that stage to move – together with a prevailing mood of fatalism both in the parliamentary party and in the party at large. Finn is right that both factors were important. The parliamentary party failed to act because no one would lead it into action and those who might have led it feared that if they tried no one would follow them; and the degree of fatalism was so great that in some quarters it amounted to a feeling that the party needed to do penance for its sins. But one wonders what new information will come to light in the coming years about other possible factors affecting the parliamentary party, including the power of patronage, especially promises of peerages, and gullibility, particularly about private polling arranged to make the position of sitting MPs look far better than it really was.

Finn's conclusion (for which he relies on a recent article in this

journal by the current reviewer) is that Clegg's desire to present the Liberal Democrats as a reliable coalition partner and thus as a 'party of government' undermined the party's definition of itself as a party built above all on values. He describes the 'coalition effect' on the Liberal Democrats as 'devastating'. That looked right in April 2015 when this book came out. It looks even more right now. Whether it will still look right when the Owl of Minerva at last takes off remains to be seen, but the old bird's wings are already twitching.

David Howarth is Professor of Law and Public Policy at the University of Cambridge and served as Liberal Democrat MP for Cambridge from 2005 to 2010.

Which Way Back? The Liberal Democrats and the 2015 election in its historical context

One-day conference, Birmingham, Saturday 28 November

10.00am – 4.00pm
University of Birmingham Campus B15 2TT (accessible from the University train station)

The Liberal Democrat–Conservative coalition government of 2010–15 was the first peacetime British coalition since the 1930s. Whatever the Liberal Democrats may have achieved in government, their electoral reward was the most catastrophic in the history of the party or its predecessors.

This one-day conference, organised by the *Journal of Liberal History* and the University of Birmingham, will examine the key issues the Liberal Democrats faced as partners in the coalition government and the party's performance during the 2015 general election.

The conference will feature opening and concluding addresses and three panel sessions, looking at:

- Campaigning – what messages were the Liberal Democrats trying to communicate during their period in office and during the general election; how was this done and how effectively?
- Policy and ideological direction – getting Liberal Democrat policy implemented in government, the relationship with the Conservatives and how this played during the election.
- Parliamentary strategy – keeping the parliamentary party together, 2010–15; how the Liberal Democrat presence at Westminster was used to reinforce the wider messages the party was seeking to promote to the public and inside the government.

Confirmed speakers include Martin Horwood (MP for Cheltenham, 2005–15), Peter Sloman (author of *The Liberal Party and the Economy 1929–64*) and Andy Denham.

Registration £20 (students and unwaged £15). Payment will be taken on the day, but please register in advance – send your details to:
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134 Haunch Lane, Birmingham B13 0PY
m.r.cole@bham.ac.uk; 07762 176 035

MANAGING TI

How did the coalition work as a government? **Robert Hazell** and **Peter Waller** review its internal work Democrats functioned as part of it, and **Matthew Hanney** analyses how the party itself was managed.

The Lib Dems and the workings of government: success or failure?

Professor Robert Hazell and Peter Waller

The Constitution Unit at UCL carries out research into a wide range of political issues, largely focused on Westminster and Whitehall and the links between the two. Immediately after the 2010 election, we were given permission by the then cabinet secretary to interview in depth a wide range of Whitehall officials, ministers and special advisers to consider how the coalition was operating in practice. We were very well placed, therefore, to look in detail not so much at the political success – or otherwise – of the coalition but at how it was operating in practice.[1]

So what did we learn from that research? The first thing to say is that the vast majority of those we interviewed thought that the coalition was working well. This was the general verdict not only of ministers from both coalition parties but also from Whitehall officials and various third parties. One comment from a senior official was typical:

> I was not at all sure how the coalition would work or even whether it would work. But it has been far better than anyone would have expected.

One Tory minister commented to us:

> Team work is stronger because of the coalition. The fact that we had to discuss what we wanted to do, what the other party wished to do – or indeed

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ings and effectiveness, while **Jonathan Oates** and **William Wallace** reflect on aspects of how Liberal

> whether there were other options – made it much better.

And a Lib Dem minister told us:

> The team of ministers in our department works together well on a day-to-day basis in a constructive spirit … the good relationship is at the heart of how it is all working.

As we dug deeper into the reasons why the story was so positive, we isolated a number of factors:

- Prior expectations – especially from civil servants – of the coalition were that it would be unstable, fractious and constantly slowed down by internal disputes. Many officials had lived through the infighting of the Labour government, especially between the Blairites and the Brownites, and assumed a coalition would be even worse. The fact that it was harmonious came as an enormous relief.
- Both political partners felt proud of their role in forming the coalition and were determined to make it a success. The Tories were delighted to have found a way back into government even though they lacked a majority; and were clearly patting themselves on the back at their magnanimity in sharing power. The Lib Dems were delighted simply to be in government, and they were determined to show that a coalition was a perfectly viable basis for exercising political power. Both parties could claim with good cause that they were putting the national interest before their narrow party interests.
- The fact that there was a coalition meant that Whitehall had to change many of its internal rules and practices – and in practice this meant moving back towards a more rational form of decision-making. Sofa government and pre-cooked deals were replaced by more formal committee discussions and much bending over backwards to ensure that the perspectives of both parties in the coalition were recognised. The fact that the programme for government was a detailed, practical document and had replaced the woolly aspirations of the typical party manifestos, gave Whitehall much greater clarity from the new government than they had been used to. Special machinery was set up to resolve disputes between the parties but in practice seldom had to be used.
- The coalition felt, both in Whitehall and Westminster, more 'grown-up' in that it was impossible to claim, as single-party governments often do, that there was only one possible answer to any question. The principle of collective responsibility remained so that decisions, once taken, were supported by both parties. But no one was pretending that there had not had to be compromises in reaching an agreed position.

One aspect of that which has been little commented on – but which stands to the Liberal Democrats' credit – is the fact that the Lib Dem ministers, and cabinet ministers in particular, were clearly of equal calibre to their Tory partners.

Our research was concluded at the beginning of 2012, less than two years into the new government. So writing now in 2015, in the aftermath of a nightmare election for the Lib Dems, it is tempting to think that we must have been deceiving ourselves in painting such a positive picture of the coalition's first twenty months. But we do not think that we were deceived. The first two years of the coalition were by any standards a period of considerable success. The programme for government – which our work suggested contained more Lib Dem manifesto commitments than were drawn from the Tory manifesto – was a very ambitious document but almost all its proposals had been implemented by 2012. Government was as crisis-free as governments ever can be and there was a good degree of respect amongst both parties for each other and their role in making the coalition work. The fact that the 2015 voters re-elected the majority coalition partner to govern on its own suggested they were far from dissatisfied with the performance of the government in the preceding five years.

One aspect of that which has been little commented on – but which stands to the Liberal Democrats' credit – is the fact that the Lib Dem ministers, and cabinet ministers in particular, were clearly of equal calibre to their Tory partners. Yet this was certainly not a given. As in most professions – and politics is a legitimate profession in this context – the cream tends to rise to the top so it might be expected that the most capable and ambitious politicians would be found in the parties most likely to be in government. For a small party to have people of sufficient calibre to fill twenty-three ministerial posts, including five cabinet ministers, was thus a genuine stretch. But at no point in the five

years of the coalition was it argued in Whitehall, the media or elsewhere that the Lib Dems lacked the necessary talent. Looking back, it seems already that a team including Clegg, Cable, Huhne, Davey, Alexander, Laws and Webb will be seen as something of a golden age for the party.

So starting from that benign picture at the end of 2011, why did it all go so horribly wrong in 2015, with all but Clegg of that generation of leaders swept away by the electorate? Well, from the admittedly narrow perspective of our focus on Whitehall, it arguably never did go wrong. Against so many of the expectations of the political commentariat in 2010, the coalition survived for a full five-year term, and would have done so even without the backing of the Fixed Term Parliaments Act of 2011. There were no great stories of chaos in Whitehall or of the ministerial corridors degenerating into trench warfare. Liberal Democrat ministers maintained commendable discipline. When there were stories of ministerial splits, they were mainly 'blue on blue', as demonstrated by the tensions between Ken Clarke and Theresa May, or later the very public spat between Theresa May and Michael Gove.

So most of the explanations of the 2015 election result lie elsewhere. The most obvious Whitehall-focused example, which we did cover to a degree in our research, was the great student fees disaster, which led one of our interviewees to say:

> Whether or not it was the right decision we came to in the end is almost irrelevant. You know, we broke a pledge, we're hated for it.

But, as the comment makes clear, it was the pre-election pledge that did the damage, not the handling of the issue when in government – though the Lib Dem failure to identify and stick to a single narrative for the final decision undoubtedly exacerbated the position.[2]

But there are two Whitehall-focused questions which it is worth raising in relation to the internal workings of the coalition as they might have had some impact on the 2015 outcome even if marginal.

First, was the original decision to spread the Lib Dem ministerial allocation thinly the right one? Conventional academic wisdom from across many democracies is that the junior coalition partner does badly in the subsequent election. But could the Lib Dems' chances of success have been improved by taking all the ministerial seats in a limited number of departments, rather than having a single minister in almost all departments? Under this scenario Nick Clegg might have become Home Secretary or Education Secretary, and the department clearly identified as a Lib Dem department. The Lib Dems would have been able to point to achievements in that area as clear Lib Dem achievements, making it harder for the Tories in 2015 to present most successful Lib Dem ideas as Tory achievements.

Second, did the Lib Dems give up on government – and start campaigning for 2015 – too soon? It was certainly predictable from day one of the coalition that at some point the two parties involved would move from emphasising their ability to cooperate constructively towards wanting to demonstrate to the electorate the issues on which they disagreed. So there was bound to come a point where the two parties would be reluctant to make decisions unless they were unavoidable, preferring to use points of disagreement as potential distinguishing features between them in an election campaign.

With the benefit of hindsight, however, that point arrived much earlier in the parliament than we had anticipated. By 2011–12, the programme for government had largely been implemented and it was expected that there would be another negotiation and a new programme announced for the second half of the parliament, sometime in 2012. Some attempts were made in that direction, but the two parties never managed to recreate the momentum that had been given by the original programme for government. Instead both parties began increasingly to focus on their points of difference more than their common ground.

The problem that created for the Lib Dems, however, was that they came increasingly to be seen as 'in office but not in power'.[3] The Tories rather successfully presented themselves as still being very much in power but on many fronts being held back by a failure by the Lib Dems to agree to anything they were proposing. The obvious Lib Dem successes seemed to date back to much earlier in the parliament, and there was no similar sense of a Lib Dem agenda being obstructed by the Tories – apart from the high-profile examples of the AV referendum defeat, and withdrawal of the plans for Lords reform following a major rebellion by Tory backbenchers.

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But generating new policy ideas in government is never easy, and it was particularly difficult for the Lib Dems, given how thinly stretched they were across all government departments. Outnumbered by the Tories by a ratio of five to one, they were forced to devote far more of their time and energy to blocking or modifying Tory policies than to generating their own. There is a long list of Tory policies that they managed to moderate, but which inevitably remained hidden from the electorate; and it is very difficult to claim credit for something that has not happened.

Moreover, the Lib Dems were arguably a victim of the coalition's overall success. By 2015, the perception – at least in England – was that the country had been effectively managed by the government and was recovering steadily from the earlier recession. There was no sense of the chaos and constant crisis that had characterised the final few years of the previous Labour government, during which Gordon Brown had been repeatedly attacked by his own cabinet colleagues and ministers. The Lib Dems might ironically have done better in the 2015 election if there had been more internal strife in government so that the country was much keener for a change of government overall and the Tories more vulnerable as a result.

This leads to our final assessment. In 2010, the Lib Dems had in reality only two choices, first to form a coalition with the Tories and second to let the Tories form a minority government and to seek to bring it down at a later point. (We continue to believe that a Labour–Lib Dem coalition was never a credible option at the time.)

It was entirely predictable – and was of course widely predicted – that the decision to enter the coalition would lead to a bad result for the party in 2015, even if no one quite predicted how bad that outcome might be. But there is little point in a serious political party not seeking power and little reason to think that the long-term outcome for the party would have been any better had they declined Cameron's offer and waited for another opportunity.

So the decision to enter the coalition was entirely justified even if the result was to reduce the party to a level of Westminster representation they have not had for fifty years. The Lib Dems were part of five years of a coherent and competent government and can point to achievements that were distinctively Lib Dem achievements. The judgement of the electorate was harsh; the judgement of history may prove kinder.

Professor Robert Hazell is Professor of Government and the Constitution at University College London, and Director of the Constitution Unit in the School of Public Policy. The Unit has published detailed reports on every aspect of Britain's constitutional reform programme. In 2011 he led a research team, including Peter Waller and Ben Yong, to study how the UK's new coalition government worked. Their book, The Politics of Coalition *(Hart Publishing), was published in June 2012. The same team then produced* Special Advisers: Who they are, what they do, and why they matter *in 2014.*

Peter Waller left the civil service in 2008, having worked on a wide range of economic issues over thirty years, largely at the DTI. Peter was heavily involved in the coalition government project, and the project on special advisers, both of which led to published books to which he was a significant contributor.

1 Our research was published in a book, *The Politics of Coalition*, by Robert Hazell and Ben Yong (Hart Publishing, 2012): http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/constitution-unit-news/080612
2 Though a single narrative would never have been easy when the party MPs managed to vote in three different blocks in the Commons vote.
3 A quote originally from Norman Lamont about the Major government.

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Imbalances of power: building a functioning coalition

Jonathan Oates

On Tuesday 12 May 2010, Nick Clegg and David Cameron posed on the doorstep of No. 10, co-leaders of the first peacetime coalition in seventy years. For the first time in half a century the government's majority was dependent on two leaders in government, not one. Notwithstanding the disparity in parliamentary representation – 307 Conservative seats versus 57 Liberal Democrat, the government's majority was now a binary matter. If either of the parties did not agree to a policy, the government did not have a majority for it.

Yet behind the famous black door of No. 10, the institutions of government seemed almost oblivious to this fact or to the respective strength of support for the parties in the country, where – of the total votes cast for the coalition parties – the Liberal Democrats had attracted 40 per cent and the Conservatives 60 per cent.

Despite briefings to the national media about the preparedness of Whitehall for a hung parliament, no real thought had been given even to such a mundane matter as where the Deputy Prime Minister would be located, let alone how his office would be staffed or how the machinery of government would adapt. The truth is that for much of the civil service (but by no means all), the view seemed to be – as little as possible.

As the door was pulled shut behind the two party leaders, the No. 10 operation hummed efficiently and immediately into action in support of the leader of the Conservative Party. Meanwhile, his coalition counterpart was hastily ushered upstairs to one of the Downing Street staterooms; with him, his then chief of staff (soon to be Scotland Secretary), Danny Alexander and a few members of party staff. There were no telephones, no computers, no support whatsoever – just a cup of tea and a polite but bewildered welcome.

Perhaps the problem was that, prior to 2010, the term 'Deputy Prime Minister' had been used in a wholly different context. The civil service had dealt with 'Deputy Prime Ministers' before – most recently John Prescott and Michael Heseltine: they had been departmental ministers and the title 'Deputy Prime Minister' a mere (if politically important) courtesy. The role of Deputy Prime Minister in a coalition was a different affair. Every significant decision over the next five years would have to be jointly agreed by both leaders. Yet there was a staggering failure to understand this, represented most starkly by the huge disparity in official and political fire power in their respective offices.

Later that day, or the following, the DPM got his first civil servant. Sir Gus O'Donnell, then cabinet secretary, seconded his principal private secretary to head up the then non-existent Deputy Prime Minister's Office. He was a highly able and dedicated civil servant, who over the next few years worked with exceptional professionalism and determination to support the Deputy Prime Minister, but he was in his early thirties and massively outranked by his No. 10 counterpart, the 50-year-old Jeremy Heywood. Jeremy held permanent secretary rank in the Prime Minister's Office and was a notable survivor of the inner circle of previous administrations. He had been Gordon Brown's permanent secretary before taking on the role for Cameron. He had also been principal private secretary to Prime Minister Tony Blair and before that to Tory chancellors of the exchequer, Norman Lamont and Kenneth Clarke. He was (of course) to go on to be cabinet secretary – in short he was the Whitehall insiders' insider. You did not have to be an expert in the politics of the civil service to know that this imbalance between the PM and the DPM's offices was massively to the DPM's disadvantage and that of effective coalition working.

Over the next few months we became increasingly frustrated by the lack of institutional support for the DPM, which left our small team of special advisers not only covering the whole gamut of government departments but also

having to do the jobs of officials who had not yet been appointed.

It is worth remembering that at this stage the Deputy Prime Minister's Office had a total of four special advisers responsible for policy, who had to cover decisions across every government department, as well as supporting the DPM with his specific responsibilities on constitutional reform. Despite the deluge of media attention, at the outset, the DPM had no civil service media team, no visits staff, and only one special adviser supporting him directly on media. No. 10 had a whole press office that answered to the PM.

These problems were only compounded by the fact that the Liberal Democrats immediately lost their 'Short money' allocation, which had provided substantial financial support for the party's parliamentary policy team. Consequently, we were stuck between a rock and a hard place, shut out of access to the funds available to opposition parties and denied proper political support and access to civil service information.

By the time I became Nick Clegg's chief of staff in August, a modest civil service staff had been assembled. That it was too small for the task was obvious but by no means the biggest problem. It had become clear by then that large parts of the civil service had hardly adapted to coalition at all and showed no signs of ever doing so. Some senior civil servants appeared incapable of understanding that if a decision did not have clearance from both parties in government it was not a decision. Some departments sought to obstruct access to information, sometimes with the support of their secretaries of state. Decisions were announced that had not been cleared. On one memorable occasion, while discussing the infamous Beecroft 'fire-at-will' proposals, a senior civil servant responded to my suggestion that we drop further discussion – given there was no prospect of the proposal being agreed by the Deputy Prime Minister – by saying: 'Quite frankly the Deputy Prime Minister does not have a veto'. I had to point out to him gently that this Deputy Prime Minister very definitely did.

It was clear to us early on that we urgently needed to strengthen the official and political side of our office if the coalition was to function effectively. The most urgent requirement was to appoint a senior Whitehall insider to head up Nick's operation. We needed an operator who could command not only the respect of Whitehall departments but also, where necessary, their fear and who would have the weight to win the staff resources we needed. Securing agreement to this appointment and a broader strengthening of the operation was a painful and drawn-out process that ran through to the late autumn. One of the early challenges was that no one would ever say no to a proposal – it took me a short while to realise that this did not mean yes. But before long I had appreciated that if I was to get anything done I had to understand the TV programme *Yes Minister* as a documentary rather than a comedy.

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Inevitably, the pressure on both political and permanent civil servants caused by the lack of staff resource, coupled with the desire amongst some of the senior civil service to avoid 'a rival to No. 10', created the worst possible circumstances in which to take the critical decisions required at the start of the coalition. The special advisers and permanent civil servants who manned Nick's office, did an amazing job and it is only due to their huge dedication and the absurdly long hours that they worked, that the coalition was able to function at all.

By January of 2011, we had substantially strengthened the DPMO with a widely respected director general appointed to oversee the operation, a beefed up and highly able private office in place and the establishment of a research and analysis unit and a media team. Our political staff, however remained highly stretched and it was not until October of 2011, after a Herculean struggle aided by a very helpful report from the Institute for Government, that we gained agreement for the appointment of a number of multi-departmental special advisers. Whilst this eased the burden a little, by then, the political die had probably been cast.

Of course, even with a properly resourced office and a political staff who were not stretched beyond the laws of physics, there is no guarantee that we would have made better or even different decisions in the first year of the coalition. The responsibility for those decisions is entirely with those of us who were involved in making them. What is clear, however, is that the environment in which they were taken could hardly have been less auspicious.

It is difficult to know why the civil service was so insufficiently prepared for the operation of a coalition government. We took advantage of the knowledge and experience of Jim Wallace, the former Liberal Democrat deputy first minister of Scotland (later advocate general and deputy leader of the House of Lords) who provided invaluable insight to our team prior to the formation of the coalition and as a minister throughout the government. Whitehall could also have learnt much about coalitions from their counterparts in Edinburgh and Cardiff, but such experience was, it seems, rather airily and sometimes disparagingly dismissed. Instead the preparation for the post-election period was focused on the role the civil service would play in coalition negotiations (a job that the parties rightly decided was one for them). As a result the actual job of the civil service – how it would support an elected coalition administration – was damagingly neglected and never really resolved.

All this is not intended as a criticism of individual civil servants. With a very few exceptions, the vast majority of people I worked with were not only highly able, but also extraordinarily hard working and committed to delivering for the coalition. I do not write that to spare anyone's blushes or to soften the criticism. I do so because it is true and because, in the main, the failure was one of institutional inertia and conservatism not of individual will. The more I came to see of the institution of the civil service, the more I realised how much less it was than the sum of its parts.

I hope that the lessons of the last parliament lead to much better support for any future coalition from its outset. But whether in support of a coalition or a single party administration, it is also critical that the senior civil service (often aided by ministers) stops resisting necessary, radical and much overdue reform. Only when it embraces reform will the institution become as excellent, effective and innovative as so

many of the brilliant individuals it employs.

Jonathan Oates was chief of staff to the Deputy Prime Minister from August 2010 to May 2015. He was previously deputy director of communications at 10 Downing Street and prior to that the Liberal Democrats' director of election communications for the 2010 general election. He was ennobled in the 2015 dissolution honours.

A view from the edge: managing coalition in departments without full ministerial representation

William Wallace

Lords ministers play secondary roles in any government; 'ministers in the Lords Whips Office', who act as spokesmen for two to three departments and are formally also whips, risk being marginal to policy-making, even in a single-party government. So my view of coalition was from the edge of government, working my way in by demonstrating to senior Conservatives that disputes could be settled by talking to me more easily than by carrying everything up to the 'Quad'. I started in 2010 in the Foreign Office, my field of professional expertise, where I was treated as a member of the ministerial team from the outset; but I also covered the Ministry of Defence and, after a brief attachment to Education, the police and counter-terrorism aspects of the Home Office (the 'national security agenda'). When the mid-term reshuffle came in 2012, I had just been made Lords spokesman for the Cabinet Office – the only peer attending their ministerial meetings, so responsible for managing all the CO's business (civil service management, the third sector, and political and constitutional reform) through the Lords. Nick Clegg complimented me on how well I was coping, and asked me to carry on without a Commons minister from now on in either the FCO or the MoD. I said I could in no way manage to be the only Liberal Democrat presence in three departments effectively, and recommended that Sue Garden succeed me in Defence, given her familiarity with forces' welfare and RAF issues.

Government is high-pressure, seven days a week; and coalition government increases the pressure. I have never worked as hard in my life as I did between 2010 and 2015. When you have got your head round the statement you have to make at twenty-four hours' notice, and the draft paper you received on Friday afternoon and have to negotiate with Conservative colleagues on Monday morning, there's the journalist who phones you late at night and the outraged Lib Dem activist (and old friend) who demands that you explain why you have conceded to a Conservative proposal. In opposition you can think; in government, you cope.

Since managing coalition means extra work and extra meetings, it became clear to Lindsay Northover and me, after a few weeks in office, that we could not cope with the pressures of Lords business, learning our briefs, trying to get upstream in the policy-making process in the departments to which we were attached, and keeping in touch with our Liberal ministerial colleagues and the rest of our peers' group. We asked for an additional two spokesmen, and gained one in Sue Garden. Coalition formation had put Commons appointments first, so the three of us were unpaid, as were several of our Conservative Lords colleagues.

The best immediate decision our Lords group took was to maintain our separate whips' office when we lost our opposition funding; many of us made voluntary contributions to keep it going in the early months, before we shaped a system of monthly contributions from group members to fund it. The Conservatives closed their party whips office and relied on the Government Whips Office for support – but discovered that they had to struggle over weekends to keep in contact with their backbenchers at the same time as reading through papers, and lost their ability to strike a balance between coalition and Conservative messages. We wrestled with that balance, of course, having to ask Lib Dem peers to support compromises that we had struck, painfully, behind the scenes. We also maintained the same party whips from our time in opposition, to hold our independently minded group together; the Conservatives imitated us two years later, as they discovered the difficulties of explaining coalition compromises to partisan peers.

It had become clear by then that large parts of the civil service had hardly adapted to coalition at all and showed no signs of ever doing so. Some senior civil servants appeared incapable of understanding that if a decision did not have clearance from both parties in government it was not a decision.

Neither Westminster nor Whitehall adapted at all willingly to coalition. In the Lords the Labour group was aggressively tribal, bitterly convinced throughout the first year that we could not hold together, doing their utmost to prevent us from deviating an inch from the duty 'to speak for the government' as a whole, and protesting on any occasion that a distinct Liberal Democrat perspective was spelt out alongside the Conservative view. We managed to develop a dual system, with Liberal Democrat ministers giving the government line and nominated backbench spokesmen giving a differentiated party line. Backbench rebellions were a tactic we could use occasionally – at the risk of provoking Conservative rebellions against measures we had won; though of course there was no way we could control our backbenchers in the last resort! I learned over time how to modulate the way I put the coalition line across when at the despatch box or on the media, to convey different degrees of enthusiasm or reservation.

Learning coalition inside government was also painful, within a structure unused to institutional compromises. Whitehall expected most incoming Liberal Democrats to behave as junior ministers under their secretaries of state – and most secretaries of state wanted to take credit for everything positive that came out of their department. Nick Harvey in Defence was clear from the outset that he was the Lib Dem minister, and fought to be shown departmental papers across the board. Jeremy Browne accepted his role as a junior FCO minister without understanding that his role was also to safeguard Lib Dem interests, plunged into visits to Latin America and Asia, and did not follow

papers on Europe and the Middle East – the two most contentious areas between the parties on foreign policy. It took me, as a marginal player of uncertain status without an FCO private office, several months to gain access to the drafts on the proposed EU bill, by which time they were already in a shape that was difficult to challenge. Chris Huhne had nominated me for the Cabinet Sub-Committee on EU Affairs, which helped my credibility and standing with officials and Conservative ministers; an early visit to Brussels, during which the president of the Commission addressed me as 'Professor Wallace' in front of several Conservative ministers, also helped (I had taught him twenty years earlier). It helped me further within the FCO that Helen, my wife, had trained many of its senior officials when they first entered the civil service, had taught senior politicians and officials in several other EU countries, and was recognised as one of the leading experts on European politics; there was one wonderful occasion when I was asked to phone the Finnish prime minister (whom we had both taught) on behalf of No. 10. Nick Clegg strengthened my position further by taking me with him on visits to Paris and Berlin.

William Hague was a collegiate secretary of state, who conducted his weekly meetings as an open discussion, in which I could flag up areas that our party found difficult. Theresa May was a tougher minister to deal with, but open to argument. I learned to place myself in her meetings directly in her line of sight, so that I could catch her eye easily when I wanted to disagree; Lynne Featherstone often sat out of view at the side. Liam Fox was far easier to deal with than Philip Hammond, his MoD successor, a loner who treated all his junior ministers with disdain; when Sue Garden succeeded me as Lords spokesman, it took her nearly two months to get in to meet him. When he transferred to the FCO he cancelled the weekly ministerial meetings, to the dismay of Conservatives as well as myself; I met him only three times in his nine months as Foreign Secretary, though I continued to meet David Lidington, the Europe minister, every week, and other junior ministers frequently. The unstable coalition that is the Conservative Party, with the Prime Minister wavering in the middle, was both a problem and an opportunity. With some Conservative ministers we could work and exchange information easily, even establish relations of friendship and mutual trust. With others, active suspicion of their intentions was the only sensible approach, even when (like Michael Gove) personally charming; Lindsay Northover warned us all from the outset to be wary of attempts to charm us while pressing forward with initiatives which we could not accept.

Coalition also requires active coordination. We failed to achieve this throughout the first year, with only occasional meetings of Liberal Democrat ministers. I went into one cabinet committee meeting with a clear sense of what our 'side' wanted to get across, only to have that position undermined by a Lib Dem colleague uncritically reading out the departmental brief. After a year we instituted regular weekly meetings – the cost of yet another hour blocked out in our calendars more than compensated for by the chance to compare notes and share tactics. We also learned in the first year how crucial our Spads were: glancing through papers that might not have crossed our desks, alerting us to policy initiatives before we had heard about them, marking their Conservative opposite numbers as they advised *their* ministers. We needed more than the handful who, like the three of us as Lords spokesmen, were stretched across two to three departments each – and gained useful reinforcements in the 2012 reshuffle.

Cameron's mishandling of the European Council meeting in December 2011 was a major crisis within the coalition – not only because Europe was one of the most sensitive sources of disagreement. The Prime Minister represents the UK at these; but in a coalition he should have the wit to consult, and the diplomatic skills to avoid excessively irritating his continental counterparts. Monica Allen, our international affairs Spad, briefed me initially; Nick Clegg then persuaded me, against my initial inclinations as a bitterly displeased but junior player, to go on television to voice our unease with Cameron's behaviour; and Helen and I ended the weekend with Danny Alexander sitting round our kitchen table in Wandsworth discussing how we prevent such a fiasco happening again. I learned from this that using the media to signal to your partners can be helpful; a Conservative colleague phoned me shortly after I had been on TV, to discuss how to get out of the hole the PM had dug. It didn't hurt that he and other Conservatives learned that I had come close to resigning over this – only a marginal resignation, but nevertheless one that they understood would have registered Liberal Democrat disapproval of the PM's behaviour.

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The coalition agreement had included, at Conservative insistence, a commitment to examine the 'balance of competences' between the UK and the EU, across a wide range of policy areas. They expected that a call for evidence from businesses, professional associations and other stakeholders would provide an agenda for repatriating powers from Brussels to Westminster. I was the Liberal Democrat, with two Conservative colleagues, on the 'Ministerial Star Chamber' that oversaw a process that produced some thirty-two papers, in four groups, over two years. The evidence that flowed in was overwhelmingly in favour of maintaining the current balance, even in a few cases of giving Brussels greater powers. No. 10 responded by doing its best to bury the exercise, delaying the publication of each group until the day after parliament had risen for the summer or for Christmas, and doing its best to stop any of us briefing the domestic press.

The officials who supported us were effectively professional and neutral throughout a politically charged process, in which the paper on the free movement of people was delayed by over six months as we fought Theresa May's Spads to allow the document to reflect the evidence, and the first draft of the paper on civil justice attempted a strong Eurosceptic tone unsupported by any of the legal authorities who had contributed. Lib Dem Spads watched my back in other departments effectively, and Helen provided expert advice; I circulated a critical memo around Whitehall before each negotiating meeting, at the cost of several lost weekends, to spell out the areas where drafts

were not following the evidence submitted. So the Conservatives were left without an agenda for repatriation. But the Liberal Democrats did not attempt to counter Conservative efforts to keep the outcome out of the press; it was not until the middle of the election campaign that *The Observer* devoted a full page to the story.

There was no such formal process to manage differences on Middle Eastern policy. William Hague was robust on Israel–Palestine, spelling out that the spread of settlements across the West Bank would soon make a two-state negotiation impossible. His colleagues pursued closer political and commercial relations with the Sunni Gulf states, pushing arms sales and inviting further investment in the UK. The National Security Council spent more time in the coalition's first three years discussing 'Gulf strategy' than European strategy. Nick Clegg asked an informal group of MPs and peers to review policy towards Iran to provide him with advice; we met a range of outside experts, and recommended that we should press for a more positive approach. Cameron later moved policy towards a more Israel-friendly approach, while maintaining an uncritical alliance with the Gulf monarchies, accepting the Bahraini offer to pay for the expansion of the British naval base and agreeing to investigate (and potentially ban) the British affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood in response to a request from a Gulf prince. Saeeda Warsi's resignation was a response to that shift. But for Liberal Democrats, without a minister in Defence and with only myself monitoring developments from within the FCO, our influence was limited.

Could we have done more? Undoubtedly we could have played harder on occasions, and briefed the press more aggressively. I cultivated some journalists for background briefings; but most weren't interested in the arcane policy areas I worked in. The balance between keeping the coalition together and demonstrating our distinctiveness was never easy to strike; both press and Labour were always looking for signs that the coalition might fail. I also tried to brief Miliband's advisers from time to time about coalition policies on Europe and on defence, in particular on the Trident review. That was a dispiriting experience: I met with indecision and unwillingness to play multi-party politics. 'We're still discussing that', or 'the shadow cabinet can't agree' were two of the responses I got to suggestions that Labour might like to give support to positions Liberal Democrats were pressing.

We should have been spelling out the distinctiveness of the Liberal Democrat philosophy that lay behind the policies we were pressing – but that's not easy to do in government, outside of party conference speeches. Cameron himself, and his No. 10 office, gave the coalition little sense of direction. He seemed to be concerned with party management, letting others compete in defining the direction of policy. The hard truth may be the message that we heard from our continental Liberal counterparts, when after the first year we were invited to a seminar on how, as the junior partner in a coalition, to avoid getting most of the blame and little of the credit. What they told us was how difficult it is for the smaller partner in a coalition to avoid that fate. In the fifth year we should have paid more attention to spelling out the underlying differences between the coalition partners – in the hope that a largely hostile media might help us to get that message across. We were locked in for too long to the mindset that we had to prove that coalition can work, rather than demonstrating how two different parties can negotiate. But the weight of scepticism from so much of the media, as well as the Labour opposition, even after four years of coalition, still held us back.

William Wallace (Lord Wallace of Saltaire) was a government whip and spokesman in the Lords from 2010 to 2015; from 2012 to 2015 he was the only Liberal Democrat in the FCO and dealing with the departmental business of the Cabinet Office. He was professor on international relations at the London School of Economics until 2005; and had earlier led the manifesto drafting group for both the 1979 and 1997 general elections.

Cameron himself, and his No. 10 office, gave the coalition little sense of direction. He seemed to be concerned with party management, letting others compete in defining the direction of policy.

How did the Liberal Democrats remain united in the 2010–2015 parliament? And were they right to?

Matthew Hanney

When the Liberal Democrats entered the coalition government in May 2015 predictions abounded that the party would not, and indeed could not, last the course.[1] Many expected the party to split, or at least see a wave of high profile defections. The precedents of 1886, 1916 and 1931 offered historical ballast to this expectation. In short, the expected strains of delivering significant austerity in conjunction with the pressures junior parties in coalition inevitably face, especially in FPTP electoral systems, threatened to pull the party asunder.

Yet the Liberal Democrats entered the 2015 general election as a united party. Over the five years no parliamentarian had defected to another party;[2] and whilst membership fell in the first few years of the parliament, it increased for the final eight consecutive quarters.[3] Aside from the occasional squall from semi-detached peers, and the ham-fisted and short-lived attempted coup against Nick Clegg's leadership after the 2014 elections, there was little open dissent across the party over the five years. Despite consistently poor mid-term election results, there was no serious attempt to suggest leaving the coalition, and staying in the government remained the clear view of the party throughout.[4] There were five main reasons this happened: the collective nature of the decision to enter government, the economic circumstances of 2010, the policy achievements in government, the belief during the parliament that the 2015 election could see a successful defence of a majority of the constituencies, and Nick Clegg's leadership style.

The first, and most significant factor, was the collective decision-making process that the party engaged in before it entered the coalition. As leader and party president, Nick Clegg and Ros Scott ensured that this process not only adhered to the party's then agreed procedure – the so called 'triple-lock' – but went beyond it.

The background to this lay with the choice of the negotiating team of Danny Alexander, David Laws, Andrew Stunell and Chris Huhne. Whilst they regrettably lacked demographic diversity, they did represent a cross-section of the party's ideological spectrum. They also had between them experience of negotiating the Labour–Liberal Democrat coalition in Scotland, numerous local government agreements and extensive private-sector negotiating experience. Despite the eccentric suggestion from David Steel that this team were 'new and younger colleagues who he [Clegg] could dominate',[5] this was not the case. It was a negotiating team selected with careful consideration given to ensuring it would be credible to the wider party.

As David Laws has narrated in *22 Days in May,* over the course of the five days after the 2010 general election the party leadership and negotiating team met extensively not just with MPs and the Federal Executive, but also with peers and representatives of the parliamentary parties in Scotland, Wales and Europe. The views expressed in these meetings were listened to carefully and, where possible, woven into the coalition agreement. And indeed, as David Laws articulates, the need to secure the support of the wider party was used as leverage during negotiations, most notably in relation to electoral reform.

The result of this extensive internal conversation was that when the proposed agreement was put to a vote, only one member of the FE, David Rendel, voted against, and no MP did (though a few, including Charles Kennedy, abstained.) Under the 'triple-lock' procedure this was more than sufficient a mandate. However there was consensus amongst the collective leadership of the party – the officers of the Federal Conference Committee, the FE and both Ros Scott and Nick Clegg – that it would be wise to have a special conference anyway.

This was a crucial decision. And one for which those who pushed for it should take a considerable amount of credit. Equally important was the decision that conference debate the coalition agreement on a take it or leave it basis with tricky issues, most notably tuition fees, being addressed in amendments to the motion for debate rather than the agreement itself.[6] After a full debate, with opponents of the agreement given a fair chance to make their case – with rather memorable props in Linda Jack's case[7] – the special conference gave an overwhelming endorsement[8] of the coalition agreement. This represented a collective 'dipping of the hands in the blood'. The party had collectively agreed to enter the government with all the inevitable challenges, trials and tribulations that would follow. This meant that over the following five years, nobody could sensibly or legitimately suggest that the decision had been imposed from on high. It had not and the party knew that.

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The party also, albeit perhaps less overwhelmingly, accepted the argument that the country faced an economic crisis which required a stable government overseeing a programme of fiscal consolidation. The brief version of this argument was that the books needed balancing and needed balancing as fairly as possible, and the Liberal Democrats being – and remaining – in government was the best way to guarantee this. The strong grip the executive holds versus the legislature on the budgetary process in the UK[9] meant that the influence Liberal Democrats wielded through the so-called 'quad' budget negotiation process was keenly felt, and significantly greater than anything that could have been achieved via confidence and supply.

That the wider party was willing to agree to the tough choices that implementing austerity entailed would not have surprised any student of Liberal Democrats in local government. In authorities across the country, from London boroughs such as Islington, Camden, Brent, Lambeth and Southwark, to cities such as Liverpool, Leeds, Newcastle, Sheffield and Birmingham, Liberal Democrats had taken power, sometimes also in coalition with the Conservatives, from Labour and had taken difficult and often unpopular decisions to clear up the financial mess their Labour predecessors left.

The party's support for the fiscal mandate was tested twice at conference. The first time was at autumn conference 2012 when an amendment calling for the party to quit the coalition's agreed fiscal mandate was overwhelmingly defeated.[10] The second time was a more closely contested vote with Nick Clegg himself summating a motion and seeing off amendments from the Social Liberal Forum which sought to unpick, albeit it with more nuance than the amendment a year earlier, the fiscal mandate. The vote was closer than previously, but still represented a clear win for the leadership.[11]

So when this issue was put to the test at conference the result was clear. The reasons for this can be debated elsewhere, but the coalition was notably more flexible in its approach to the fiscal mandate than either its supporters or critics would allow at the time – and this was probably most evident in the reversing of cuts to infrastructure spending. Whatever the reason for its support, as long as the party believed that the coalition government's economic and fiscal policy was broadly correct (whilst acknowledging that it could never inevitably be purely Liberal Democrat) it would make little sense for the party to fracture, or to seek new leadership.

Throughout the five years of the coalition government there were clear and identifiable Liberal Democrat policy wins. It can be argued that these were outweighed by obviously objectionable policies, especially on welfare, but the policy wins were indisputably happening. Some, such as increasing the tax threshold and delivering the pupil premium, were flagship policies which went from the front page of the party's manifesto to become government policy. These policies benefited millions across the country: to paraphrase an old slogan, everybody knew somebody who benefited from the tax threshold change. And every school governor, doubtless well-represented in Liberal Democrat ranks, knew the difference the pupil premium made to their own school.[12] Liberal

Democrats could, and did, take pride in these policies.

And just as important was delivering on issues that might, perhaps unfairly, be described as more niche issues, such as equal marriage, ending child detention for immigration purposes, and legislating for 0.7 per cent of GDP to be spent on international development. Knowing that Liberal Democrats were making a difference in areas that the party had campaigned on for decades persuaded many that remaining in government was worth it. And, importantly, this remained true throughout the parliament. An exit from the government after the 2014 elections would have seen Jo Swinson's important work on shared parental leave stopped by Conservative ministers who fought tooth and nail against it.

In short, this might be described as the Alex Cole-Hamilton explanation. He said after his defeat in the 2011 Scottish parliament elections that 'if my defeat tonight is part payment so that no child will spend another night in a detention centre then I accept it, with all my heart.'[13] So compelling an argument was this that Nick Clegg quoted it in his 2011 autumn conference speech[14] and again in his 2015 resignation speech, framing the wider argument as 'we will never know how many lives we changed for the better because we had the courage to step up at a time of crisis. But we have done something that cannot be undone. Because there can be no doubt that we leave government with Britain a far stronger, fairer, greener and more liberal country than it was five years ago.'[15] An often overlooked element to policy wins for the Liberal Democrats, at least in regards to the continued support that the leadership and government enjoyed from MPs, were constituency-specific wins that the coalition delivered. Both Nick Clegg and Danny Alexander were diligent, especially in the second half of the parliament, in trying to meet these. The most obvious of these were road projects such as the A303, A1 and Kingerswell bypass. It would be easy, and understandable, to deride these as 'pork barrelling'. But when you have been campaigning for years[16] for a policy that would improve the lives of those you represent, then being able to make it happen by talking directly to a party colleague who is the responsible minister is of considerable importance.

Inevitably, and reasonably, given the result of the 2015 general election, there has been no shortage of critics of the campaign the party ran. However, in the years running up to the election, MPs, key-seat candidates and their teams, and indeed the media, believed that the strategy constructed and implemented by Ryan Coetzee and Paddy Ashdown gave the party a decent shot of being strongly competitive in forty to fifty seats and of holding approximately thirty seats – and with them, potentially the balance of power nationally. Polling by both the party and Lord Ashcroft broadly bore this view out, as did, crucially, both the Eastleigh by-election and local elections in those constituencies.

Ultimately, this belief was incorrect, and the results and polls gave the party false hope. However, it is reasonable to suggest that without the dramatic change in the political landscape – on both sides of the border – brought about by the Scottish referendum, the party's strategy might have proved relatively successful. This of course can never be proved either way. The key point remains that the party's candidates in the seats where there was a reasonable prospect of success bought into the plan that Ryan Coetzee, Paddy Ashdown and the 'wheelhouse' proposed and implemented.[17] They may have been wrong to do so, but that they did was a huge factor in keeping the party united.

Whilst Lib Dem HQ did have some control of finances, which may have encouraged such buy in, this was relatively limited and the support most candidates gave was largely genuine rather than feigned or bought. This was also certainly true for the campaign run for the European elections in 2014 when the idea, if not the precise execution, of running an aggressively pro-European campaign was generally very positively received by candidates and the wider party.

Only a few of the critics of the electoral strategy can honestly claim to have expressed their concerns before polling day. The fact remains that, had there not been a reasonable degree of confidence that the line could be held, then there would have been a more determined attempt to rock the boat. After all, self-preservation is the most powerful of both human and political instincts.

Throughout the five years of the coalition government there were clear and identifiable Liberal Democrat policy wins. It can be argued that these were outweighed by obviously objectionable policies, especially on welfare, but the policy wins were indisputably happening.

Perhaps the most overlooked reason why the Liberal Democrats remained together is the leadership and party management skills of Nick Clegg. Whilst he doubtless made mistakes – perhaps the greatest was on the so-called 'secret courts' issue – he also got a lot right. He committed significantly more time to party management than any other party leader in government. This is as it absolutely should be in a party with such strong internal democracy as the Liberal Democrats, but nonetheless the list of his engagements is impressive. He was one of the most regular attendees at the Commons parliamentary party meetings, went regularly to the Lords parliamentary party meetings, held monthly conference calls with fellow leaders in Scotland, Wales, Europe and London, spoke at countless conference fringes and receptions and spoke at numerous fundraising events for key-seat candidates, as well as more ad hoc personal touches such as many hand-written letters to members on appropriate occasions and congratulatory calls to council by-election winners.

After the disastrous local election results of 2011, he was particularly assiduous in his communications with party's local government base. He went to the annual local government conference and met often with the Liberal Democrat LGA executive; indeed, so regular were his trips to Local Government House that the Conservative leader of the LGA found it easier to speak with him than with David Cameron. A similar pattern emerged in the devolved administrations where Conservative representatives suffered the repeated frustration of finding their Liberal Democrat counterparts better informed on the actions of the UK government, even in areas with Conservative ministers.

The scale of this commitment would have been in vain if it were a set of tick box exercises, but Nick Clegg was adroit at listening – with his customary good humour – to what members across the party said and then acting on it.[18]

Numerous changes to government policy, and the presentation of it, stemmed from such conversations. These actions helped pull the party together by ensuring it had a stake in government, as well as generating goodwill that could be called upon in tougher times.

Perhaps the most overlooked reason why the Liberal Democrats remained together is the leadership and party management skills of Nick Clegg. Whilst he doubtless made mistakes – perhaps the greatest was on the so-called 'secret courts' issue – he also got a lot right. He committed significantly more time to party management than any other party leader in government.

Were the Liberal Democrats right to have been so united?

This is an infinitely harder question to answer, especially for those intimately involved with the coalition government. But given the 2015 general election result, it is a question that merits examination. The facile answer is that the result could not have been worse, so any alternative strategy – be it a change of leader or exit from the government – could hardly have delivered an inferior result. This is an easy position to take, but for three reasons it is incorrect.

The first is that there is no clear evidence that, once the collective decision to enter government had been taken and the subsequent policy choices made, anything else would have made a significant improvement to the party's electoral standing. Nick Clegg was widely thought to have run a competent election campaign, performed well in the debates and indeed secured endorsements of one form or another from almost every national newspaper. However, the electoral consequences of the unholy alliance of Scottish and English nationalism, stoked by the SNP and Tories, was liable to sweep away any Liberal Democrat leader, campaign and message.[19]

The second is that for the survival of political parties – especially smaller liberal parties – it is division, defections and splits which can prove fatal rather than poor electoral results per se.[20] The Liberal Democrats in the aftermath of the 2015 general election are proving a robust, and indeed growing, party which held a relatively amicable leadership contest (certainly compared with Labour's!) and showed a willingness to collectively retain ownership of its record in government. Tim Farron has taken office without the stain of disloyalty and inherits a party that knows it can hang together in the toughest of times. The lack of bloodletting in the last parliament means that the hard questions and conversations that need to happen are free to be held in good faith and without rancour.

Finally, it is important to consider that the electorate view political parties over the long term, not just one electoral cycle. For many years the Liberal Democrats, and its predecessor parties, were viewed, however unfairly, as not really being up to the tough job of governing. Fine to be given control of local authorities, but not to play in the Westminster big league (as many voters saw it.) Such a view of the Liberal Democrats provided an inevitable glass ceiling on electoral performance in general elections.

The competency test that the electorate applies might be more that of Justice Stewart's 'I know it when I see it' rather than a scientific formula. But it is a hugely important test. After the last five years the Liberal Democrats are now equipped to pass it. Had the party broken ranks and turned in on itself then the public may well have taken an extremely dim view, not just in 2015 but in any future general elections when it looked possible we might form part of the next administration.

So, perhaps not surprisingly, I am in no doubt the party made the right collective choice to hold its nerve for five years. It was not easy and the price certainly was a high one, higher than almost anybody expected and higher than the party deserved. It is wrong to suggest there was no alternative; there was, but it was not one that would have served the party well.

Matthew Hanney was an adviser to Nick Clegg between 2006 and 2015.

1. Inter alia, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/may/03/lib-dem-tory-coalition.
2. Matthew Oakeshott left the party 2014 to describe himself as a 'non-party Social Democrat'; perhaps the most senior Liberal Democrat to defect directly to another party was Richard Grayson (former Director of Policy under Charles Kennedy and parliamentary candidate), who defected to Labour in 2013.
3. http://www.libdemvoice.org/45455-45435.html.
4. The best, though imperfect measure of this, being the regular *Liberal Democrat Voice* members' polling, which consistently showed very strong support for remaining in coalition: http://www.libdemvoice.org/category/ldv-members-poll.
5. http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/11/nick-clegg-liberal-democrats-disaster-coalition.
6. The text of the motion the Special Conference passed is here: http://www.libdems.org.uk/special_conference_passes_building_a_fairer_britain_in_government.
7. Pink handcuffs!
8. Estimates vary as there was no need for a count, but of the approximately 1,500 in the hall certainly no more than 50, and quite possibly fewer than 20, voted against the agreement.
9. Especially compared to say the US for example, for more see here: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/budgeting-in-the-uk-is-highly-transparent-but-that-does-not-mean-that-budget-decisions-are-carefully-scrutinized-nor-that-the-right-policy-judgements-are-made/.
10. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-19699655.
11. http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/sep/16/nick-clegg-lib-dems-austerity.
12. In England, and Kirsty Williams and her team also forced Labour in budget negotiations to deliver an equivalent in Wales.
13. https://twitter.com/Alex4Central/status/663367149390479936.
14. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/liberaldemocrats/8778863/Lib-Dem-conference-2011-Nick-Cleggs-speech-in-full.html.
15. http://www.libdems.org.uk/a-message-from-nick-clegg-to-liberal-democrat-members.
16. Or, as an extreme example, Alan Beith's forty-year campaign to improve the A1 which finally came to fruition under the coalition.
17. For more on this, see http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/feb/17/inside-nick-clegg-lib-dem-general-election-campaign.
18. For example, on tax incremental financing, the need for city deals not to be contingent on directly elected mayors and the timing of police and crime commissioner elections.
19. As argued further by Ryan Coetzee here, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/22/liberal-democrats-opposition-labour-government.
20. For example recently the Australian Democrats, Irish Progressive Democrats, and historically the splits in the Liberal Party of 1916 and 1931.

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.

Dadabhai Naoroji

Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917) was an Indian nationalist and Liberal member for Central Finsbury, 1892–95 – the first Asian to be elected to the House of Commons. This research for a PhD at Harvard aims to produce both a biography of Naoroji and a volume of his selected correspondence, to be published by OUP India in 2013. The current phase concentrates on Naoroji's links with a range of British progressive organisations and individuals, particularly in his later career. Suggestions for archival sources very welcome. *Dinyar Patel; dinyar.patel@gmail.com or 07775 753 724.*

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.*

Charles Day Rose (1847–1913)

Charles Day Rose, a partner in the City banking firm of Morton Rose, was Liberal MP for Newmarket 1903–10 and 1910–13. Living at Hardwick House on the banks of the Thames in Oxfordshire, he may have been the model for Mr Toad in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. Rose died just before the First World War after being taken up for a spin in an aeroplane, leading the coroner to observe that' airoplaning' should clearly be left to 'the young, the vigorous and the robust'. Any documentary information bearing on any aspect of his multifarious life would be of interest. *Dr Michael Redley, 10 Norman Avenue, Henley on Thames, Oxfordshire, RG9 1SG; michael.redley@appleinter.net.*

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 Colllege, Birmingham; i.cawood@newman.ac.uk.*

Sir Edward Grey (1862–1933)

I am currently writing a biography of Sir Edward Grey, and I am keen to discover any letters or other documents relating to him that may be in private hands. *Thomas Otte, University of East Anglia; T.Otte@uea.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 Liberal Party in Wales, 1966–1988

Aims to follow the development of the party from the general election of 1966 to the time of the merger with the SDP. PhD research at Cardiff University. *Nick Alderton; nickalito@hotmail.com.*

Policy position and leadership strategy within the Liberal Democrats

This thesis will be a study of the political positioning and leadership strategy of the Liberal Democrats. Consideration of the role of equidistance; development of policy from the point of merger; the influence and leadership strategies of each leader from Ashdown to Clegg; and electoral strategy from 1988 to 2015 will form the basis of the work. Any material relating to leadership election campaigns, election campaigns, internal party groups (for example the Social Liberal Forum) or policy documents from 1987 and merger talks onwards would be greatly welcomed. Personal insights and recollections also sought. *Samuel Barratt; pt10seb@leeds.ac.uk.*

THE IMPACTS

What were the impacts of coalition on the Liberal Democrats? **Craig Johnson** analyses Liberal Democrat
on the Liberal Democrats in Scotland.

Nick Clegg speaking to Liberal Democrat activists after the 2012 Budget announcement (photo: Liberal Democrats)

The coalition and Liberal Democrat members

Craig Johnson

Party members and activists are vital to a political party's functions, and what party members think about key political issues is important for understanding political parties more broadly. More specifically, members and activists have particular importance for the Liberal Democrats, both in terms of campaigning and contributing to party policy.[1]

The Liberal Democrats' experience since 2010 has been a turbulent one. On the one hand, they have implemented their policies in national government. On the other, they have lost many of their elected representatives, including forty-nine MPs and over 1,000 local councillors. Given the importance of members and activists to the Liberal Democrats, this raises an important question: what did party members make of the coalition government's record and the Liberal Democrats' role within it? To answer this question, this article first highlights the importance of members and activists to the Liberal Democrats, and then presents survey data from Liberal Democrat members. It concludes with a brief assessment of membership attitudes, and what this might mean for future support for Liberal Democrat involvement in coalition with other parties.

The importance of members and activists

It was formerly commonplace to discuss political party members and activists as if they were irrelevancies. The argument was that the local context was not as important as it once was, and instead attention should be focused predominantly on the national campaigns and analysis of the parties in that context. There is good reason for such a view. Although the Liberal Democrats have enjoyed a bump in their membership since the 2015 general election, more generally party membership has been falling in representative democracies for quite some time.[2] It could be asked why national party elites should pay any attention to members and activists at all. After all, it can be expensive to maintain a national network of local parties; and members and

OF COALITION

members’ attitudes to the coalition government, and **Caron Lindsay** considers the impacts of coalition

activists might hold more radical views than you wish to present to the electorate.[3] Time and money could be better spent elsewhere than keeping them happy.

However, in recent years this analysis has been repeatedly challenged by a revisionist literature. In short, the argument runs that party members provide candidates for local, sub-national and national elections, they provide democratic legitimacy to parties in communities, and they provide parties with the resources and labour to actually win elections.[4] Each of these points applies strongly to the Liberal Democrats. In the absence of national media attention, winning votes and seats in local campaigns has been essential to the party’s electoral advance and to establishing itself as a credible political party. Whilst the party has professionalised in recent years,[5] members and activists continue to influence party policy and strategy more than in the Labour and Conservative parties.

Particularly in the 2015 campaign, the Liberal Democrats’ targeted electoral strategy relied on the long hours and hard work of members and activists, as well as non-member volunteers.[6] Without them, the dismal return of eight MPs might have been even fewer. That they campaigned so vigorously seems to denote resilience and a commitment to the party. However, a declining membership and a fall in local electoral representation suggests otherwise. This raises an important question. What did Liberal Democrat members and activists make of the coalition?

Membership attitudes to the coalition

The decision to enter government in coalition with the Conservatives was easily passed by the Liberal Democrat special conference that convened after the 2010 general election. This is not so surprising. A Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition was the only realistic outcome that delivered a working majority in the House of Commons, and it allowed the Liberal Democrats, for the first time since the party’s inception, to implement nationally a series of policies long argued for by its membership. For example, at the time of writing there are fixed-term parliaments, increased thresholds for paying income tax, a Green Investment Bank, and same-sex marriage. At the same time, the Liberal Democrats were able to scrap or prevent changes in legislation. The Human Rights Act remains, whilst identity cards are gone and the maximum detention without trial has been halved.[7] Liberal Democrat members have been able to influence government policy more than ever before, and at the same time the party has contributed to showing that coalition government in Britain can function.

No matter how difficult the party’s prospects became, following the change of policy on tuition fees, local election defeats or European parliament election defeats, members appear to have supported the party’s participation in coalition throughout.

However, the decision to enter coalition was not an easy one for members and activists to support. Many had spent their political life opposing what the Conservatives stood for. And whatever the Liberal Democrats’ achievements in government once in coalition, they failed to make an impact on voters’ perceptions. The party’s internal polling showed that fewer than 3 per cent of voters credited them with delivering ‘a lot’ of their policies.[8] Between 2010 and 2014 the party’s membership fell by 35 per cent, and coincided with the loss of over 1,000 local councillors.[9] Whilst this could have been a lot worse, it represents a stark decline in membership. This had the effect not only of damaging the Liberal Democrats’ reputation nationally, but also of leaving the party without its former breadth and depth of activism and financial contributions from its members.

The most comprehensive collection of data on Liberal Democrat members’ attitudes has been by the website, *Liberal Democrat Voice*. As well as being independent of the party, it is the most accessed website specifically about the Liberal Democrats. They conduct surveys of their Liberal Democrat member readership on a regular basis. Whilst the surveys are not wholly representative, participants are checked against the Liberal Democrats’ database to ensure that non-party members cannot take part. Of course, this means that the surveys ignore any former members who have left the party, and who would potentially have more negative opinions. It is also possible, and perhaps likely, that respondents are overwhelmingly made up of committed activists, rather than the broader membership. However, the surveys’ good response rates and regularity make them a very useful resource for getting a broad understanding of Liberal Democrat membership opinion.[10]

Figure 1 shows Liberal Democrat members’ attitudes to coalition with the Conservatives. Throughout the entire coalition, support was never lower than 74 per cent (in October 2012 following the blocking of House of Lords reform) and generally hovered around 80 per cent. No matter how difficult the party’s prospects became, following the change of policy on tuition fees, local election defeats or European parliament election defeats, members appear to have supported the party’s participation in coalition throughout.

Support was also found for the coalition government’s record

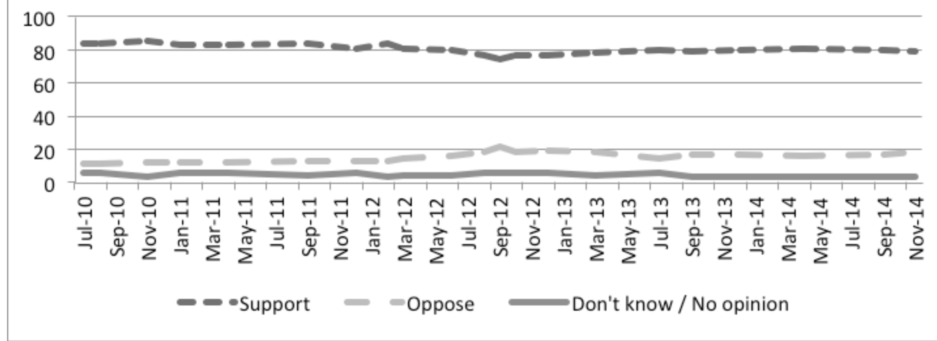

Fig. 1: Lib Dem members' attitudes to coalition with the Conservatives

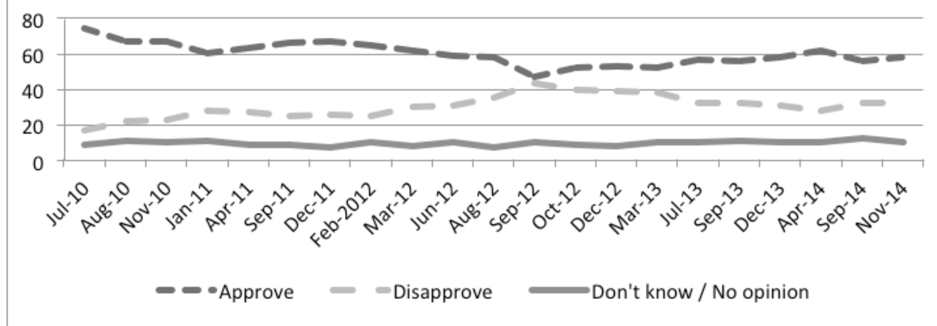

Fig 2: Lib Dem members' attitudes to the coalition government's record

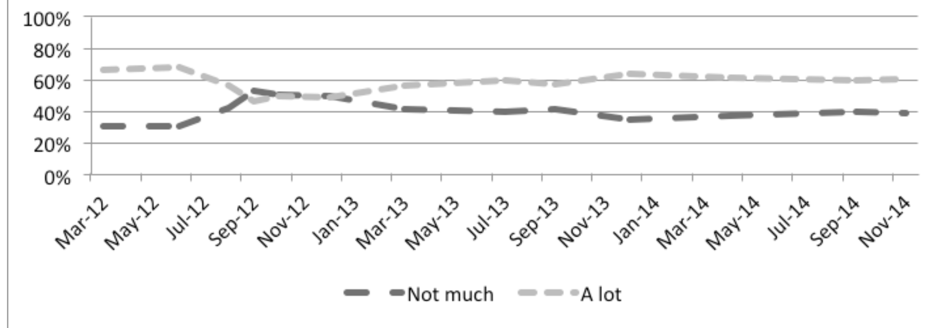

Fig. 3: How much influence do Lib Dem members think their party had in government?

(see Figure 2), although this did see a decline over the course of the parliament. Again, support fell as House of Lords reform was blocked by the Conservatives. And the Liberal Democrats' naive handling of the Alternative Vote referendum was another blow to political reform that appeared to cause unrest in the membership. More broadly, if Liberal Democrat members are suggesting disapproval of the government's record, it is not surprising that the electorate's opinion was disapproving as well.

This is shown in more detail in Figure 3, where there was clear disagreement amongst party members over whether the Liberal Democrats had influence in government. During the second half of 2012 (once again, when House of Lords reform was blocked), respondents that felt that the Liberal Democrats lacked influence in government were in the majority. Having influence was a difficult task for the Liberal Democrats. Throughout the course of the parliament, the party needed to find a balance between unity and distinctiveness.[11] Whilst this is the case for coalitions in any democracy, the Liberal Democrats were in a particularly tricky position. Participating in the first full Westminster coalition in the post-war period, the party needed to show that coalition need not lead to political instability. It can be argued they did this successfully.

However, in doing so they struggled to then present themselves as an entity distinct from the Conservatives. The coalition agreement document provided little of electoral value to the Liberal Democrats. As Tim Bale observes in a quote that should be repeated to any smaller coalition party in a future hung parliament, the coalition agreement shows 'what happens when vegetarians negotiate with carnivores'.[12] Where the Liberal Democrats tried to differentiate from the Conservatives on policy, such as on the bedroom tax, it looked not like distinctiveness but hypocrisy. On a number of issues, they left themselves open to the question of 'where was this at the start of the parliament'? More broadly, the party in government became known for what it was against rather than what it was for.

Finally, what are the thoughts of the Liberal Democrat membership on future coalitions? Should the party sufficiently recover its electoral position in the future, it will need membership support to join in any coalition. *Liberal Democrat Voice* also conducted a survey of party members after the 2015 general election. Seventy-four per cent still thought it the right decision for the Liberal Democrats to go into coalition. This gives hope to the party leadership that, should they get back into a position to enter coalition at some point in the future, they may still be able to rely on their membership for support.

Conclusion

Members and activists form the foundation of the Liberal Democrats. Without them, policy is not formed, elections are not won, and the party loses any presence it has in communities. The Liberal

Democrats now face a mammoth task to rebuild their support across the country, and members and activists will be vital if they are to have any chance of succeeding. This article suggests that the party elite still have the party membership generally on side. Throughout the parliament, Liberal Democrat members proved to be remarkably resilient, maintaining their commitment to the party's participation in coalition, despite successive electoral defeats and criticism from all sides. However, their support for the coalition's record and its party's influence within it is more debatable, and provides clues to where the party struggled with the electorate more broadly.

Craig Johnson is an ESRC-supported PhD student in Politics at Newcastle University. His PhD focuses on competition and cooperation between the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties.

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[Liberal Democrat members'] support for the coalition's record and its party's influence within it is more debatable, and provides clues to where the party struggled with the electorate more broadly.

The impact of coalition on the Scottish party

Caron Lindsay

A few weeks ago, in the wake of our catastrophic election defeat, someone who is not a Liberal Democrat pointed out to me the irony that there was now a consensus around many Liberal Democrat ideas at the same time as we had suffered our biggest defeat in half a century. Why were we not reaping the benefits?

It is certainly true that the Smith Commission's recommendations, drawn up after the independence referendum, if implemented properly, lay the foundations for a federal state and that this was one of the things that Michael Moore in particular contributed to the process as one of the Liberal Democrat representatives. Full federalism of course requires the cooperation of the other countries in the United Kingdom but this is a step forward.

It was not just that we were making the weather in establishing the consensus on the constitution; at Holyrood and Westminster, the Liberal Democrats were setting the agenda. At UK level our ideas on mental health, education and childcare were highly regarded. In Scotland, with just five MSPs, the Scottish Liberal Democrats had persuaded an SNP government with an overall majority to change policy by increasing college places, and providing free school meals and childcare for the poorest children. In the current Scottish parliament, our record of delivery on civil liberties has been particularly strong with justice spokesperson Alison McInnes forcing policy U-turns on stop and search and armed police. The party is now campaigning against SNP plans for a hugely intrusive ID database.

While Liberal Democrat ideas are being enacted, the Scottish Liberal Democrats are at their lowest ever ebb. The comparison between 2010 and 2015 is painful. We have gone from eleven MPs to one, wiped out in our Borders and Highlands heartlands, and are left hanging on to our stronghold in Orkney & Shetland by fewer than 1,000 votes. We are in second place in just nine seats. It is important to note, though, that in several seats, most notably East Dunbartonshire and Gordon, the party attracted more votes than in 2010.

The general election result was just the latest in a series of defeats that have reduced the party's capacity. The disaster started in 2011 when we lost two-thirds of our MSPs. This was followed by our local government base being more than halved in the following year. We went into that 2012 council election with 152 councillors and in administration in places such as Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, Edinburgh, East Dunbartonshire, Fife, East Lothian, Dundee, Perth and Kinross, the Borders, and Highland; we emerged with just seventy councillors. In 2014, we lost our MEP, George Lyon.

The die appears to have been cast in the first year of the coalition. Working with the Conservatives, still not forgiven for the havoc they wrought in Scotland in the 1980s, was always going to be a risk. The Rose Garden scenes, aimed at showing a deeply sceptical country that coalition government could work, looked far too cosy. In 1999, when the Scottish Liberal Democrats went into coalition with Labour, Jim Wallace and Donald Dewar acted with more professionalism and less exuberance, backed up with solid protocols to cover

issues not in the coalition agreement. In 2015, the fact that the Scottish Liberal Democrats had prevented the introduction of tuition fees in Scotland counted for nothing as the party was punished for not keeping the promise it had made on the same issue south of the border. The rise in VAT, which we had campaigned against, and immediate cuts, only reinforced the 'betrayal' narrative used against us so effectively by our opponents.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats were acutely aware of the challenges raised by the coalition. Then-leader, Tavish Scott, was barely able to contain his impatience with the decisions being taken south of the border. A bad-tempered interview with the *Sunday Herald*'s Tom Gordon, during the run up to the Scottish parliament election in 2011, hit the nail on the head:

> But his fate is not his own; Nick Clegg has determined it for him by joining the Tories and performing a brazen U-turn on tuition fees.
>
> In this election, Scott is trying to convince voters Lib Dems here are different from those in England because of his party's structure. 'It's all we can do. What else can I do on it?' he says. 'It's tough. It's difficult.'[1]

It was not just that the SNP took nine of our eleven constituencies in 2011 and that we had lost two of our five list seats, it is that we were wiped out everywhere else. In my home seat of Livingston (which became Almond Valley for 2011), fourth place in 2007 meant a relatively comfortable holding of our deposit. Four years later, we could barely manage 2 per cent. The number of seats in which we were in second place fell and we even came fourth in Argyll & Bute, a seat we then held at Westminster and had held until 2007 at Holyrood. This means that rebuilding our parliamentary strength could take longer, with no capacity even to build up list votes in these former areas of strength. The contraction of the party and its ability to fight future elections was profoundly affected by the loss of so many MSPs.

The SNP won an overall majority of four in that 2011 election and had a mandate for a referendum on independence which dominated Scottish politics for the following three years. Had the Liberal Democrats and Labour been able to save just four seats between them, that referendum would most likely not have happened. You could be forgiven for thinking that our catastrophic result in 2011 might have been avoided if we had not been in coalition at Westminster. I am not so sure.

In 1999, when the Scottish Liberal Democrats went into coalition with Labour, Jim Wallace and Donald Dewar acted with more professionalism and less exuberance, backed up with solid protocols to cover issues not in the coalition agreement.

Our star had been waning for some time. We had gone into the 2007 election campaign with a manifesto containing some radical and reforming ideas on climate change, young people and the economy; yet our campaign seemed to concentrate on opposing a referendum on independence at all costs, and, other than that, all the media covered was our plan for extra PE lessons in school. We then gave the appearance of not even trying to enter coalition negotiations with the SNP, which many in the party saw as an opportunity missed.

Our voice during the 2007–11 parliament was not distinctive enough. Being the third voice saying 'No' to the SNP did not help our image and identity. We were often seen as truculent and intransigent, opposing the government for the sake of it. One particular issue was on minimum alcohol pricing where we did not follow the evidence when we had the opportunity to show that we could be both constructive and original. Likewise, when the SNP government released the Lockerbie bomber Abdelbasset Ali al-Megrahi, we could have supported them. There was certainly a significant view in the party that we should have done. By 2011, people had forgotten that we were responsible for such landmark policies as free university tuition, free personal care and free eye and dental checks between 1999 and 2007. There was not enough residual good will towards us to insulate us from the inevitable hit we would take on entering coalition with the Tories.

Coupled with that, the party had failed to articulate a compelling narrative behind our policies. There are so many lessons the national party could and should have learned from the experience of the Scottish Liberal Democrats but this was the most important: if people do not know what you stand for and what your values are, why should they vote for you? Both Liberal Democrats and Labour have suffered from a lack of connection and clarity on that point and this explains the situation in which both parties find themselves. Back in 2008, Ross Finnie identified this during his leadership campaign:

> My concern, however, is that, against the background of a fatally wounded New Labour Government, a SNP Government failing to deliver on key promises and the Conservatives showing little sign of a Cameron bounce, the Liberal Democrats are not making progress in electoral terms ….
>
> The party has made a number of effective attacks on the SNP Government but we have failed to connect with the voters as to why they should turn to the Liberal Democrats.[2]

Had we taken Ross's advice in 2008, we may not have found ourselves quite so vulnerable in 2011. Instead, we repeated this mistake in this year's general election, and must not in next year's Holyrood election. We have to have that strong narrative which shows what we are for: if we cannot inspire with that, we will find it harder to get people to listen to the bass notes, where we hold the SNP to account for its many failings.

If we had not gone into coalition with the Conservatives at UK level, we may have held our own in 2011 in Scotland and, had a minority Conservative government called a second election in 2010, would have done comparatively well in Scotland where Conservative arguments about stable and strong government would not have had as much traction. I still think that Labour would have been as badly hit at Holyrood, and the SNP would have gained seats from them. They may not have had a majority, though. Denying the SNP a referendum for the second parliament in succession in those circumstances may well have seen us punished this year, but not to the same brutal extent. However, if a second general election in 2010 had resulted in a Conservative majority government, which was the most likely

outcome, demand for a referendum may have reached fever pitch by this year.

The Scottish political landscape has been transformed in the past five years, but that is not all the fault of the coalition. 'Yes' may have lost the referendum, but they captured a lot of hearts while doing so. The future of the United Kingdom has never looked so bleak. Part of our party's demise was due, not to the coalition, but to the fact that our distinctive, much more optimistic voice just was not heard. The Liberal Democrats were never really welcome in the 'Better Together' campaign and were increasingly marginalised as the referendum approached. While 'Yes' was all about emotion, 'Better Together' was all about facts with nothing to grab the heartstrings at all. A better pro-UK campaign should have pushed the 'Yes' vote well under 40 per cent.

The decision, in October 2013, to bring in Alistair Carmichael to replace Michael Moore as Secretary of State for Scotland was presented as a response to the need for more of a political bruiser to deal with the rough and tumble of the campaign. Moore had spent three years being a much-needed voice of moderation and reason and had even been compared to James Bond and praised as the saviour of the union by John Rentoul:

> Salmond has been underestimated before, although support for independence in opinion polls has rarely exceeded one-third of the electorate. But he may have met his match in Moore, as skilful in judging the politics of Whitehall as he is the mood of Scotland. It may be that, after the referendum, Moore will be counted the most successful Liberal Democrat in the Cabinet, and, even, the man who saved the United Kingdom.[3]

Carmichael's impact was never as strong. He never fully recovered after an early debate loss to Nicola Sturgeon and it was noticeable that the secretary of state was not as visible as he should have been during the referendum. In fact, it was Danny Alexander who seemed to be the most prominent Liberal Democrat. Given how fractious, factionalising and febrile the debate and political atmosphere became, Moore's reasoned, moderate tone and forensic grasp of detail would have been a definite asset.

The catastrophe of 2011 was repeated and intensified in this year's general election. Outside the eleven formerly held seats, we failed to retain a single deposit. In Edinburgh South, a seat where we had come within 316 votes of winning in 2010, we managed a paltry 3.7 per cent and fifth place behind the Greens. However, there is a big contrast between the results for the Liberal Democrats and Labour.

It had become abundantly clear during the referendum that, in those seats in central Scotland where Labour had altitude-sickness-inducing majorities that they did not have to work for, they had no campaign infrastructure. Those MPs were swept away and replaced by SNP MPs with equally high majorities, won on the back of a stellar-quality air war. The message discipline of the SNP was rock solid. Even though Nicola Sturgeon struggled on specific policies in leaders' debates, it did not seen to matter as her 'Stronger Scotland' message galvanised those who had voted Yes while the fragmented No vote did not. However, in contrast, the Liberal Democrats remain relatively close seconds in most of our formerly held seats, but particularly in places like Edinburgh West and East Dunbartonshire, because of the strength of their local campaigns and infrastructure.

These footholds are helpful, but in the Holyrood elections, we have to maximise our core vote everywhere. The advent of almost 1,000 new members all over the country will help with that, but we should be under no illusions about the massive task we have ahead of us.

Frustration with the coalition meant that our membership fell from around 4,500 around the time of the 2010 general election to just over 4,165 by the end of 2010, and then to a nadir of just 2,700. We had a modest recovery from 2013, but the influx of new members since the general election leaves us with just under 4,000 members at the end of June 2015. However, their geographic spread means that we will be able to revive local parties in some derelict areas. It has been a long time since there has been a packed Liberal Democrat meeting in Coatbridge, but that is exactly what happened recently at a manifesto roadshow, part of Willie Rennie's 'democratic listening exercise'.[4]

The party had failed to articulate a compelling narrative behind our policies. There are so many lessons the national party could and should have learned from the experience of the Scottish Liberal Democrats but this was the most important: if people do not know what you stand for and what your values are, why should they vote for you?

The judgement of the electorate on the Scottish Liberal Democrats has been severe in recent years. The coalition was always going to have a major impact on our fortunes. Even if you give the Scottish parliament an unprecedented level of power and do lots of good things, the very act of working with the Tories is never going to go down well in Scotland. We made some major strategic errors early on which cost us dearly. However, we were vulnerable even before the coalition. We were already meandering backwards. The coalition accelerated and intensified that process.

The Sunday after the election, 200 Liberal Democrat members met in an Edinburgh hotel to discuss what had happened. It could have been an angry, bitter meeting, but, in fact, everyone was determined and up for the fight. If we can articulate a gut-grabbing message of good old-fashioned liberal hope, we should be able to recover. A new federal leader who specialises in gut-grabbing will help. The first test is less than eight months away.

Caron Lindsay joined the SDP at the age of 16 in 1983. She is now Editor of Liberal Democrat Voice and Treasurer of the Scottish Liberal Democrats.

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THE 2015 ELECTION CAM

The result of the 2015 election was a catastrophe for the Liberal Democrats: a collapse from 23.0 per cent o
analyse the results in detail, while **Mark Pack** looks at what happened to the Liberal Democrats' campaig

The Liberal Democrats and the 2015 election

John Curtice

The portents had not been encouraging for a long time. No sooner was the ink dry on the coalition agreement than support for the party began to fall away in the polls – only to drop further as it became apparent in the autumn of 2010 that the party was to do an about-turn on its policy of abolishing university tuition fees. Even a subsequent apology from Nick Clegg for that decision failed to bring about any reversal of fortune. Rather, support fell back yet further in the spring of 2014 after Mr Clegg took on the UKIP leader, Nigel Farage, in broadcast debate – and was widely judged by the audience to have lost.

Nevertheless, the party remained hopeful. After all, many of its MPs had only ever been elected in the first place because of their personal popularity and that of the party locally, and not because of the party's national message and appeal. So whatever these MPs' voters may have thought of the party's role and performance in the coalition, there was every reason to anticipate that they would remain loyal to their local MP, and thereby enable many of those MPs to defend their seat against the tide. Indeed the party had already managed to retain its seat in Eastleigh in a by-election fought in rather difficult circumstances. Meanwhile, the economy was looking up, the tax cuts that the party had promised had been made, and that surely would eventually persuade some voters that the party did not deserve a kicking after all.

7 May 2015: Vince Cable loses his seat in Twickenham, one of 48 Liberal Democrat losses on the night

Yet there was always reason to believe that these hopes rested on weak foundations. There was after all a very simple arithmetical problem with the suggestion that the party's vote would hold up better where it was already strong. The 8 per cent of the Britain-wide vote to which the polls were pointing as the election campaign approached represented as much as a 16-point drop in the party's support as compared with what it had achieved 2010. But in no fewer than 170 constituencies the party did not win as much as 16 per cent of the vote five years ago – and thus it was impossible that the party's vote could fall by as much as 16 points in these constituencies. Consequently, somewhere the party's vote must be falling by more than 16 points – and that

PAIGN AND ITS OUTCOME

f the vote and 57 MPs in 2010 to just 7.9 per cent and 8 MPs in 2015. **John Curtice** and **Michael Steed** ning machine.

somewhere had to be places where the party's vote was relatively strong. Meanwhile, as regards the possibility of an increase in that 8 per cent vote, there was an obvious risk that, however much the party tried to persuade voters otherwise, any credit for economic improvement and tax cuts would be given to the Conservatives rather than their junior coalition partners. The Conservatives had, after all, long been associated in voters' minds with a wish to put more money in voters' pockets, whereas for the Liberal Democrats it was a relatively recent rallying cry.

In the event, 8 per cent was indeed all that the party was found to have achieved when the ballot boxes were opened. This represented its lowest share of the vote at any general election since 1970 – that is, at any time since the party had re-established itself (in 1974) as a party capable of fighting more or less every seat in the country and in so doing consistently win around a fifth or so of the vote. Leaving aside the unusual circumstances created by the electoral pacts and party divisions at the 1918 and 1931 general elections, the drop in the party's share of the vote was the biggest ever to have been suffered by any party at a UK election. The retreat was almost as much in evidence in Scotland (7.6 per cent of the vote, down 11 points on 2010) as it was in England and Wales (8.1 per cent, down 16 points), making it the only party to experience much the same fate on both sides of the border. At the same time, the party lost to UKIP the position as the third most popular party in British politics. Such an outcome can only be regarded as a calamitous reverse.

And it was one in which there was apparently no silver lining when it came to the party's ability to win seats. Hopes that the local popularity of individual MPs might mean that there would be still be twenty, maybe even thirty Liberal Democrat parliamentarians, in the new House of Commons came to naught. The party was left with just eight – again the lowest tally since 1970. While this was perhaps just enough to avoid a revival of the old jibe that all of its MPs could be fitted into one taxi, it is not enough to require the payment of more than two fares. The tally was certainly insufficient to stop the party also being displaced for the first time as the third party in seats, albeit not to UKIP but to the Scottish National Party, who, following a dramatic advance north of the border, secured no less than fifty-six of Scotland's fifty-nine seats. In short, just one short stint as a party of power had not only cost the party all the fruits of nearly forty years of electoral progress, but also its hitherto undisputed position as the third party of British politics.

Leaving aside the unusual circumstances created by the electoral pacts and party divisions at the 1918 and 1931 general elections, the drop in the party's share of the vote was the biggest ever to have been suffered by any party at a UK election.

Not least of the reasons for the failure to retain more than a handful of seats was that arithmetical problem that the party had steadfastly ignored. As Table 1 shows, the stronger the Liberal Democrats were locally, the more the party's vote fell. On average the party's vote only fell by 10.4 points in those 170 seats where the party won less than 16 per cent of the vote in 2010. Indeed, it fell a little less than average in those seats where the party won less than 22 per cent last time around. In contrast, although proportionately a somewhat smaller drop,[1] at nearly 20 points the drop was well above average in those seats where the party had won over 28 per cent of the vote in 2010.[2]

Not that the local popularity of those Liberal Democrat MPs who were trying to defend their seats did not make any difference. Of the fifty-seven incumbents, forty-six were standing again, while the remaining eleven had opted to leave the Commons voluntarily (or in one case had been expelled from the party). In those forty-six seats, the party's share of the vote fell on average by 14.3 points, a little less than the average nationwide drop. Elsewhere, where the party had previously won over 28 per cent of the vote, the party's vote fell on average by no less than 22.1 points – with the average drop in the eleven seats where the incumbent stood down (21.8 points) little different from the drop in those seats where the party had performed relatively well in 2010 but had not come first (22.1 points). In short, all that the undoubted local popularity of incumbent Liberal Democrat MPs did was to compensate them for the otherwise remorseless tendency for the party's vote to fall more heavily where it had previously been strongest. Still, in the absence of that pattern, at least four of the eight MPs who did manage to retain their seats would have failed to do so.

So the party had not been wrong to put some faith in the popularity of their incumbent MPs. It was just that it badly overestimated the likely dividend it would bring at a time when support for the party nationally was leeching away. Furthermore, it was, as we might anticipate, a somewhat variable dividend. At one end of the spectrum, in eleven of the seats being defended by a Liberal Democrat MP, the party's vote fell by less than 10 points; at the other end, in seven seats, it fell by more than 20 points.

Table 1. Change in Liberal Democrat share of the vote since 2010 by Liberal Democrat share of the vote in 2010

Liberal Democrat % share of the vote 2010	*Mean change in Liberal Democrat % share of the vote 2010–15*	*(No. of constituencies)*
Less than 16%	–10.4	(170)
16–22%	–14.4	(179)
22–28%	–17.8	(121)
More than 28%	–19.8	(161)
All seats	–15.4	(631)

Such wide variation suggests that some MPs were a lot more personally popular locally than others.

One consideration though that we should bear in mind is that some incumbent MPs had been in Parliament for longer than others and thus had had longer to develop a personal vote.[3] Indeed, those who were first elected in 2010 would not have previously had the opportunity at all to enhance their personal popularity by demonstrating that they were an effective local MP. However, these new MPs may have been able to develop a new personal vote during the last five years, in which case we would expect the drop in their support to be especially low. That is indeed what we find. The eight MPs who were defending their seats for the first time saw their vote fall on average by just 9.0 points, well below the average drop of –15.4 points suffered by their more long-standing colleagues.[4]

However, the fate of these newer MPs also appears to have reflected how closely they were associated with the coalition. The four who were relatively frequent rebels in the division lobbies on average experienced a remarkably small drop in support of just 4.4 points; in contrast, the four who were more loyal to the coalition saw their vote fall on average by as much as 13.7 points, only a little less than that suffered by those MPs who had been in the Commons before 2010.[5] That said, being a regular rebel proved less helpful to more long-standing MPs, though the drop in support amongst those who had been backbenchers throughout the 2010–15 parliament and who had been a regular rebel (–14.2 points) was rather less than suffered on average by those MPs who had at some point at least served in the coalition as a minister (–16.1 points). (The 2.4 point drop suffered by Jo Swinson in East Dunbartonshire, the lowest drop anywhere in the country, was a marked exception to this tendency.) In short, even when it comes to the ability of individual MPs to withstand the outgoing tide, voters' largely adverse reactions to the party's role in the coalition still sometimes seems to have made a difference.

Still, that role might have been expected to be beneficial in some circumstances at least – where the party was trying to fend off a challenge locally from Labour. In these circumstances, third-placed Conservative supporters might now be expected to be more willing than they had been previously to vote tactically for the local Liberal Democrat incumbent in order to try and keep Labour out. Of this there is indeed some sign. On average Conservative support fell by 5.8 points in seats being defended by an incumbent Liberal Democrat MP against a Labour challenge,[6] a far worse performance than the Conservative average of a 1.0 point increase in support, or indeed the 0.6 point average increase in Tory support seats where a Liberal Democrat incumbent was trying to hold their seat against a second-placed Conservative challenger. In contrast, the average increase in Labour's vote in these Liberal Democrat/Labour contests was, at 1.4 points, in line with the 1.5 point increase in Labour's share of the vote overall, and only a little below the 3.1 average increase it secured where a Liberal Democrat incumbent was under challenge locally from the Conservatives.[7] Thanks to this apparent tactical switching by third-placed Conservative supporters, on average Liberal Democrat incumbents facing a Labour challenge endured a somewhat smaller drop in their support (–12.8) than did those facing a Conservative one (–15.3),[8] even though in other seats where the Liberal Democrats had previously been relatively strong (that is winning over 28 per cent of the vote but either not coming first or where the incumbent was not standing again), the party's support fell more heavily where its principal competitor (that is the party that won the seat in 2010) was Labour (–24.4) rather than the Conservatives (–21.2).[9] So the coalition did deliver a bit of a dividend in some seats at least.

In fact, it was not just third-placed Conservative supporters who appear to have voted tactically. So also, seemingly, did a few in seats where their party had been second in 2010, but where in each case the Conservatives' hold on second place was relatively tenuous. In four seats being defended by a Liberal Democrat incumbent in which a second-placed Conservative had been less than 10 points ahead of Labour in 2010, Conservative support fell on average by no less than 9.2 points, while the Liberal Democrat tally fell by just 8.0 points. The decision to vote tactically in these seats seems to have been an astute one. In the three of these four located in England, Labour mounted an unusually strong challenge locally, increasing its vote on average by no less than 13.5 points, though in the fourth constituency (Argyll), it was the SNP that moved strongly ahead, in line with the dramatic movement to the nationalists throughout Scotland. And while in the event it is not clear that tactical voting by third-placed Conservative supporters enabled the Liberal Democrats to retain any seats they would otherwise have lost, it did help save two (Leeds North West and Nick Clegg's seat in Sheffield Hallam) of the four seats in which previously second-placed Conservatives appear to have voted tactically.[10]

But if the formation of the coalition with the Conservatives opened up the prospect of winning tactical support from Conservative supporters, it also seemingly potentially put at risk the not insubstantial support that the party had previously garnered from third-placed Labour supporters in many a seat in recent years. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, there is little sign that this tactical support unwound. If it had done we

should find that Labour did particularly well in seats where it was previously placed third. Yet, as we have already noted, in those seats being defended by a Liberal Democrat incumbent where Labour started off in third place, the average increase in Labour support (3.1 points) was only a little above that across Britain as a whole (1.5 points). Equally, if we look at those seats where the Liberal Democrats won 28 per cent or more of the vote in 2010 but still came second to the Conservatives, that is seats where typically the party's vote fell especially heavily in 2015, Labour again did not do especially well. True, at 4.3 points the average increase in Labour support in such seats was nearly 3 points above the Britain-wide average (though only a point above that for England and Wales alone). But the 3.8 point average increase in Conservative support was also nearly 3 points above that party's Britain-wide average (+1.0) – and 2.6 points above the England and Wales average of 1.2 points. In other words, Labour did no better in these seats than the Conservatives. It appears that despite five years of coalition with the Conservatives, some voters were still willing to back the Liberal Democrats as a means of trying to ensure that the Conservatives did not win locally.

In the event, however, this time around it was usually the Conservatives who did win locally. The Liberal Democrats lost no less than twenty-seven seats to their coalition partners, compared with just twelve to Labour, a pattern that doubtless made the pill of catastrophic defeat particularly bitter to swallow. Indeed, winning those twenty-seven seats was vital to the Conservatives' ability to secure an overall majority this time around and thereby avoid the need to form a second coalition. However, these losses to the Conservatives were simply the remorseless consequence of the fact that the Conservatives started off second in most Liberal Democrat seats and were thus well placed to profit from the collapse in Liberal Democrat support. Despite the fact that the Conservatives focused much of their campaigning effort in Liberal Democrat seats in particular, the party did not do especially well in such seats. On average, Conservative support increased by 2.1 points in those seats that were being defended by a Liberal Democrat incumbent and where the Conservatives themselves started off second to the Liberal Democrats and more than 10 points ahead of Labour – that is just a point or so above the national average increase in Conservative support. The one exception to this observation is the south-west, where the Conservative increase in support in such seats averaged no less than 4.0 points. However, the Liberal Democrats might well still have suffered what was a notable wipeout in what had long been one of the party's areas of traditional strength (it had not been unrepresented in the region since the 1958 Torrington by-election) even if the Conservative challenge had not been rather stronger there than elsewhere.

The Conservatives did not only take many a previously Liberal Democrat seat, but they also appear to have taken most of the credit for the economic recovery. Certainly the Conservative performance was stronger the more buoyant the economy locally. Conservative support increased on average by 2.8 points in those seats where the unemployment count represented less than 1 per cent of the electorate, whereas it fell back by 1.1 points where it represented more than 2.5 per cent of all those registered to vote. In contrast, Liberal Democrat support fell away rather more in places with relatively low unemployment (–17.4) than where there was relatively high unemployment (–14.2). True, this inverse relationship disappears once we take into account the strength of the Liberal Democrats locally – unemployment was typically low in places where the Liberal Democrats had previously been strong – but the party's apparent inability to claim the credit for a locally buoyant economy certainly did nothing to help it defend its existing seats. Mind you, the party also did not especially take the blame for the impact of the public spending cuts either. Whereas Conservative performance was typically weaker in constituencies with a relatively large public sector workforce, the size of the public sector seems to have made little or no difference to Liberal Democrat fortunes. In short, there is little sign that the party was associated in voters' minds with the fiscal and economic record of the coalition; for most that was simply Conservative territory.

The fate of these newer MPs also appears to have reflected how closely they were associated with the coalition. The four who were relatively frequent rebels in the division lobbies on average experienced a remarkably small drop in support of just 4.4 points; in contrast, the four who were more loyal to the coalition saw their vote fall on average by as much as 13.7 points …

On the other hand, the one coalition decision that did appear to be associated with the Liberal Democrats in the public mind is, of course, the decision to allow tuition fees to increase to up to £9,000. That decision might have been expected to have caused the party particular difficulty in seats with relatively large numbers of students. Of this there is some sign, at least in those seats where the party had previously been relatively strong, and thus where it may well have been particularly successful in winning support from students. Amongst those seats where the party won over 28 per cent of the vote in 2010 and which were not being defended by an incumbent MP, the party's vote fell on average by 24.0 points in seats where more than 9 per cent of 16–74 years olds were recorded by the 2011 census as being in full-time education – compared with 20.6 points where that proportion was less than 6 per cent. A similar, though smaller gap (a drop of 17.7 points versus one of 19.3 points) is also evident in those seats where the party won between 22 per cent and 28 per cent of the vote last time. Not that having a large student population necessarily made it impossible for an incumbent Liberal Democrat MP to do relatively well – indeed on average the drop in party support in seats with relatively large numbers of students that were being defended by an incumbent was, at –14.0 points, slightly less than that in those with relatively few (–15.4 points). However, as it happens many of the instances where the party did relatively well in such circumstances were places where the party apparently profited from tactical voting by Conservative supporters, and this may have helped mask any the loss of student support in these instances.

One seat where the presence of a relatively large number of students would seem to have contributed to the local MP's difficulties is Bristol West, where the 29.2 point drop in Stephen Williams' support was the biggest suffered by any incumbent MP. But the result in Bristol West was notable for another

reason – it also represented by far the largest increase in support (23.1 points) for the Greens anywhere. Although exceptional, the Bristol West result reflected a wider pattern whereby it was the Liberal Democrats who suffered most from the Greens' unprecedented success in winning nearly 4 per cent of the Britain-wide vote. For a start, the Greens typically performed best in seats where the Liberal Democrats have performed best in the past. On average the party won 5.2 per cent of the vote in seats in which the Liberal Democrats won more than 28 per cent of the vote last time, representing on average an increase of 4.1 points in those seats that the Greens also contested in 2010. The equivalent figures in seats where the Liberal Democrats won less than 16 per cent of the vote in 2010 were just 2.9 per cent and 1.8 points respectively. At the same time, in those seats where the Liberal Democrats were previously relatively strong, the stronger the Green advance the worse the Liberal Democrats did. In those seats where the Liberal Democrats won over 28 per cent of the vote in 2010, support for the party dropped on average by 16.1 points in seats where the Green performance represented less than a 2 point increase on the party's vote in 2010, but by as much as 24.6 points where it represented more than a 6 point increase.[11] In contrast, Labour actually performed relatively well where the Greens advanced most, while there is little discernible relationship between Green performance and that of the Conservatives.

The initial rise in support for the Greens coincided with the further decline in Liberal Democrat support in the run up to the European elections in spring 2014 we mentioned earlier. That coincidence, together with survey evidence as to where the Greens were acquiring their support, strongly suggested that the Greens were profiting in particular from the Liberal Democrats' difficulties. The relative liberalism of the Greens on social issues and the relatively high concern about the environment amongst many Liberal Democrats suggests the two parties are always likely to do relatively well amongst similar voters and in similar places. And the pattern of the actual election results lends further weight to that supposition. On the other hand, there is little sign that support for UKIP, which actually displaced the Liberal Democrats as the third party in votes, came at the Liberal Democrats' particular expense. Not that nobody switched from Liberal Democrat to UKIP, despite the fact that the parties might be thought to represent very different ideological outlooks, but simply that Liberal Democrat voters were not especially likely to do so.

Of course the question that now faces the party is where it goes from here. Recovery will certainly not be easy. For not only has it lost votes, seats, power and parliamentary position, but also one of its signal achievements of recent years, that is to buck the first-past-the-post electoral system by developing bridgeheads of local strength. That success was reflected in a measure of how the party's percentage share if the vote varied from constituency to constituency that is known as the standard deviation. Since 1992 that measure has consistently been between 10 and 11 points. But as we have seen, at this election the party's support fell most heavily in places where it was previously strongest. The bridgeheads have been heavily eroded. As a result the standard deviation of Liberal Democrat support has fallen back to 8.4, similar to the level of the 1970s and 1980s when, for example, even as much as 26 per cent of the vote left the then SDP–Liberal Alliance with just twenty-three seats. Unless those bridgeheads can be rebuilt, converting any future gains in votes into seats in the House of Commons will prove to be very difficult.

Indeed apart from retaining just eight seats, there are now only sixty-three seats in which the party is in second place, fewer than at any time since 1970. Of these no less than forty-six are constituencies that are currently held by the Conservatives, suggesting that rebuilding the party's parliamentary strength will be especially difficult while David Cameron's party is relatively popular. Meanwhile, the seats in which the party now looks truly competitive are few and far between – there are just sixteen that it lost by less than 10 percentage points. In all but one case, these are all seats that were lost this time by an incumbent MP who may well decide not to stand again in five years' time, thereby putting at risk any personal popularity they may still have. In any event there will inevitably be a question mark over whether all the local parties in these seats will have the resilience required to recover from defeat and rebuild their position locally during the course of this parliament.

Junior coalition partners often suffer at the polls, though the experience of the party after eight years of coalition with Labour in the Scottish Parliament between 1999 and 2007 suggests that heavy losses are not inevitable. But it did not help that having acquired a measure of power at Westminster for the first time in over sixty years, the party immediately did an about-turn on what many had come to regard as one of its unique selling points, the abolition of tuition fees, and then engaged in a seemingly futile attempt to claim a coat of tax cuts and economic competence that was always going to fit more easily on their coalition partners' shoulders. In any event the party has paid a heavy price for its five years in office. It now faces a severe test of its resilience and of its ability to regain voters' trust and confidence in what is now a much more crowded electoral marketplace. Whether it can pass that test will determine whether it ever gets a second chance to show that it is up to the challenge of being a party in power.

It was the Liberal Democrats who suffered most from the Greens' unprecedented success in winning nearly 4 per cent of the Britain-wide vote … the Greens typically performed best in seats where the Liberal Democrats have performed best in the past … In contrast, Labour actually performed relatively well where the Greens advanced most.

John Curtice is Professor of Politics, Strathclyde University.

1 The 10.4 point average drop in seats where the party won less than 16 per cent in 2010 represents 80 per cent of the 12.9 per cent of the vote that the party won in those seats in 2010. The equivalent proportion for those seats where the party won between 16 per cent and 22 per cent in 2010 is 77 per cent, in those where it won between 22 per cent and 28 per cent, 72 per cent and in those where it won more than 28 per cent, only 52 per cent. Even if we leave aside those constituencies where an incumbent Liberal Democrat MP was trying to defend their seat, the loss of support in the seats where the party won more than 28 per cent is still no more than 63 per cent.

2 This pattern also largely accounts for the somewhat lower level of support

in Scotland, where the party won less than 16 per cent of the vote in nearly two-thirds of all seats in 2010. Once we take into account the prior level of Liberal Democrat support, there is no systematic evidence that the average drop in support north of the border was lower than that in England and Wales.

3 I am grateful to Michael Steed for drawing this point to my attention.

4 Note that this calculation excludes Eastleigh, where the incumbent MP first won the seat in a by-election held between 2010 and 2015. Here any personal vote gained by the new incumbent might have been counterbalanced by the loss of the previous MP's personal vote. Indeed at 20.7 points the drop in the Liberal Democrat vote was relatively high in this seat.

5 A rebel is defined as an MP who voted differently from the majority of Liberal Democrat MPs in at least 2 per cent of all those divisions in which the MP participated between 2010 and 2015. Data from www.publicwhip.org.uk.

6 Though in practice in Scotland, where 40 per cent of these seats were located, the challenge came from the SNP, the apparent consequences of which for the pattern of tactical voting north of the border are examined in subsequent endnotes.

7 In practice these measures of Labour performance are very different on the two sides of the Anglo-Scottish border. In England and Wales, Labour's vote actually increased on average by no less than 11.5 points in seats where the party was challenging a Liberal Democrat incumbent, well above its performance across all seats in England and Wales and in seats where the Conservatives started off in second place to a Liberal Democrat incumbent (an average increase of 4.4 points). In Scotland, in contrast, Labour's vote fell on average by 13.6 points in Liberal Democrat/Labour contests, though this is somewhat less than the 17.7 point drop Labour suffered across Scotland as a whole. However, once we take into account the fact that, like the Liberal Democrats, Scottish Labour's vote fell more heavily in seats where the party was previously strongest (and given Labour was relatively weak in many of these Liberal Democrat/Labour seats), Labour's performance was in fact typically rather worse than it was in other seats with comparable levels of Labour support in 2010. Thus, in some of these seats at least (most notably East Dunbartonshire), the Liberal Democrats would appear to have profited from anti-SNP tactical switching by previously second-placed Labour supporters as well as lower-placed Conservative ones.

8 This pattern is particularly evident in Scotland where the Liberal Democrat vote fell on average by just 9.7 points in seats being defended by a Liberal Democrat incumbent against a nominal challenge from Labour, but in practice one from the SNP. Here the Conservative vote dropped on average by as much as 6.5 points, perhaps because the party's voters were even more willing vote tactically against the SNP than their counterparts in England were against Labour. This willingness even seems to have extended to the one Liberal-Democrat-held seat where the SNP were already second in 2010, even though in this instance the seat was not being defended by the incumbent MP (i.e. Gordon, where the SNP leader, Alex Salmond, was standing). Here the Conservative vote fell by 7.0 points while the 14.2 point drop in Labour support was also relatively high given that the party was relatively weak there in 2010. The Liberal Democrat vote fell by just 3.3 points.

9 At 28.6 points, the collapse in the Liberal Democrat vote in seats where the party was previously relatively strong and started off second to Labour was typically particularly marked in Scotland. In these circumstances the Liberal Democrats appear to have been the loser from the apparent willingness of some voters to vote tactically against the SNP. In particular, the 30.3 point drop in the party's vote in Edinburgh South, together with a 4.1 point drop in Conservative support, may well have been instrumental in enabling Labour to retain the one seat it still won in Scotland.

10 Apart from Argyll, which the SNP captured, the party also still lost out (to Labour) in Cambridge.

11 In making this calculation, the Green performance is measured by the party's share of the vote in 2015 in those seats that the Greens did not contest in 2010.

It did not help that … the party immediately did an about-turn on what many had come to regard as one of its unique selling points, the abolition of tuition fees, and then engaged in a seemingly futile attempt to claim a coat of tax cuts and economic competence that was always going to fit more easily on their coalition partners' shoulders …

2015: disaster – or darkness before dawn?

Michael Steed

Anyone with the slightest awareness of the Liberal Party's history knew that entering any form of coalition (or national working agreement) with another party involved serious electoral risk. If the 1918–22 Lloyd George coalition was in such different circumstances as to be ignored, the harmful electoral impact of the 1931 coalition was clear, if effectively spread over two elections (1931 and 1935). The party, and its leader in government, Sir Herbert Samuel, was given temporary importance. However, as Baldwin's biographers nicely put it, 'Liberals were flattered, cajoled and bullied, and finally taken for a ride, at the end of which they knew neither where they were nor where they had begun.'[1] The party dropped from 59 seats in 1929 to just 21 in 1935.

The 1931–32 National Government, the 1977–78 Lib-Lab Pact and the 2010–15 Cameron–Clegg coalition were all both a response to a national economic crisis and to the absence of an overall Commons majority. The Pact also hit the party hard in votes and seats – straightaway at the 1977 county council elections and in by-elections. Following some fifteen months of electoral purgatory, David Steel took the party out of the Pact and after nearly a year of rebuilding in opposition, he was able to lead it to a better outcome in 1979 than the results and polls of a year earlier had predicted – though with some loss in both votes and seats.[2] That post-Pact recovery period, rather than the form of the agreement and the party with which it was made, is arguably the most significant difference to the 2010–15 experience (see below).

The Liberal Democrats fought the May 2015 election, as it had defended itself throughout the previous five years, on its effectiveness in coalition and the prospect of forming another one. The popular verdict on this message broke records for the scale of a party's loss, as John Curtice explores in the preceding article, and produced, on any conceivable basis of comparison, the worst Liberal result since

1970. It was as if the adhesion of SDP voters from the Alliance years, and the steady growth of local strength for more than four decades, had never happened.

My own analysis, extending further back, shows that it was much worse than that. Although the party has now two more MPs than in 1970, the party's vote in the seats fought was much higher then. Of the 618 British seats, people had the chance in 1970 to vote Liberal in only 328. In these seats the Liberal vote was 13.7 per cent, and in the vast majority where direct comparison can be made between 1970 and 2015, the vote was lower this year, usually by around 3–4 points. In 2015, the party lost deposits in over half the country by polling under 5 per cent; in 1970 the Liberal share had been lower than 5 per cent in only seven seats.

We have to go back to the early 1950s to find a level of popular Liberal support as low as it was on 7 May 2015. Direct seat-by-seat comparison with 1950 and 1959 shows that Liberal support was clearly higher in both years than it was in 2015. Only in 1951 and 1955 was the party as unpopular as it was this year.[3] No wonder the actual 2010–15 drop in support, from 24 per cent to 8 per cent, was hard to believe or to anticipate, despite the spot-on predictions of the polls.

We have to go back to the early 1950s to find a level of popular Liberal support as low as it was on 7 May 2015. Direct seat-by-seat comparison with 1950 and 1959 shows that Liberal support was clearly higher in both years than it was in 2015. Only in 1951 and 1955 was the party as unpopular as it was this year.

The most striking feature of this loss was just how remorselessly Britain-wide and uniform it was. No region, no type of constituency and almost no tactical situation was exempt from the national rejection of the party by the majority of those who had voted for it five years earlier.

No calamity like this has ever hit British Liberals before. The 1970 result was bad nationally, yet between 1966 and 1970 the vote still shot up by over ten points in four seats, each with a strong local councillor candidate (Birmingham, Liverpool, Rochdale and Southport), while in North Devon Jeremy Thorpe saved the seat he would lost on the national swing by increasing his share slightly. In 1951, the party's worst ever result, a handful of the 109 seats fought still put up their share (notably Honiton, North Dorset and Orkney). The 1989 European Parliament disaster, when the Greens polled better than the newly merged Social & Liberal Democrats almost everywhere, was bucked by Paul Tyler's good result in Cornwall & West Plymouth. These exceptions offered hope and comfort, in the evidence that a strong candidate, a local government base or a regional Liberal tradition could withstand national unpopularity and provide a platform for recovery. The 2015 results, far from that, indicate in their detail that not only is the party less popular than at any time since the early 1950s, it is in as bad a position for winning back seats.

To see just how and why, we have to be careful how we measure performance. This is discussed systematically by Curtice (see especially table 1); as the drop in the Liberal Democrat vote share in 2015 was greater than the party's 2010 starting point in many seats, the traditional measure of percentage point change in share necessarily appears non-uniform. (This happened, incidentally, with the measure of swing to Labour in the 1997 landslide – it had to be smaller in the areas where the Conservatives were very weak.[4]) Let us explore what that means for identifying where the Liberal Democrats did less badly.

On the normal measure, the party held its ground best in the tiny number of seats where the vote share fell by less than 5 points. Of these eight 'good' performances, six were in Scotland and just two in England – apparent evidence of a better Scottish performance. Yet the more significant distinction is that six were in held seats, and just two were not – and of course from 1964 to 2015, the party has done better in winning seats in Scotland. As for the 'best' result in a non-held seat, it was in Glasgow East, where the vote share dropped by only 4.3, to 0.75 per cent!

The point is reinforced if we examine the 80 seats where the vote share dropped by less than ten points. With one exception,[5] all these cases fall into one of two categories. The party stemmed its loss to under ten points in 12 out of its 57 held seats, the vote dropping in that dozen from 40.2 per cent to 34.4 per cent.[6] At the opposite end of the scale, the same cut-off point picks out 67 seats in weak Liberal Democrat areas, where the average vote dropped from 10.6 per cent to 2.5 per cent. Scotland accounts for 29 of these seats (2015 vote 2.1 per cent, drop 7.5), London for a fifth (2.6 per cent, drop 8.7), with the rest in Wales (2.4 per cent, drop 8.3) or other, mostly old-industrial, parts of England (3.5 per cent, drop 8.1). The hint that Scottish votes held up better effectively evaporates when we compare numerical like with like. The really significant findings are (I) the party did a lot better in some, but not all, held seats, and (II) in the four-fifths of the country where it was neither very strong nor very weak, there is only one solitary case of a drop of under ten points. Outside held seats, once allowing for prior strength, the loss of ground really was quite extraordinarily uniform.[7]

Not only is such even change historically most unusual for Liberal performance, it was not how voters were otherwise behaving in 2015. English and Scottish Labour performed poles apart, and indeed Labour gained some ground from the Conservatives in London whilst losing ground in old-industrial, small-town, mixed and rural provincial England. The national Tory advance did not extend to the Liverpool city region,[8] where Cameron lost both his sitting MPs, including a junior minister; his must be the first UK government in history not to have anyone from this part of England on its Commons benches. In contrast Conservatives fared better in Wales than in England;[9] Cameron holds areas in south-west Wales not won in living memory.[10] Both the UKIP and Green advances were markedly uneven according to type of constituency.

For Liberals, so long the party of local campaigners and regional diversity, the experience of such a relentless uniformity is totally new – the failure to anticipate this behaviour helps to account for the failure to foresee how many seats would be lost for the vote share that was so accurately predicted. As for the variation that occurred, clearly we must examine held seats. Table 1 shows these broken down by type of incumbency, in my judgement the main reason why some votes dropped less than others.

Even without an incumbent, the credibility (and greater campaigning resources) of having won in 2010 produced a benefit. The 15.8 drop in all 57 held seats compares

favourably with the 57 non-held seats which had the highest vote share in 2010 (over 31.3 per cent) then. In this latter 57 (many formerly held, with strong local government bases or a historic Liberal tradition), the drop was a massive 24.7 on average, and only five managed to do better than the held-seat average.[11] Conversely, only seven of the held seats saw a drop as big as 24.7; in all but two of these (both ministers) the MP stood down. So across the board, the party's vote dropped by 9 points less where it had won in 2010 than in the strongest seats not won then.

Table 1 Impact of incumbency on Lib Dem fortunes in 2015

	2015 Challenger			
Nature of incumbency	*Conservative*	*Labour*	*SNP*	*All*
No incumbent standing	22.8 (6)	31.3 (2)	8.2 (2)	21.6 (10)
MP 1st elected 2010 standing	13.9 (4)	7.6 (4)	2.8 (1)	9.8 (9)
Pre-2010 MP standing	15.7 (19)	17.1 (8)	12.9 (8)	15.4 (36)
All LD held seats	17.3 (31)	16.4 (14)	11.1 (11)	15.8 (57)

The figure for each category is the mean percentage point drop in the Liberal Democrat share of the vote, with the number of seats in brackets. Ceredigion (Plaid challenger) is included in the final column only. Eastleigh and Portsmouth South (complex incumbency) are included in the bottom row only.

Most of the best results were achieved by MPs newly elected in 2010, who had used the five years to dig in locally. Other causes of variation are fully explored by Curtice, with a clear interaction with incumbency, as Liberal Democrat ministers were naturally drawn from those already elected before 2010, while consequently the newer MPs, as backbenchers, had more chance of distancing themselves by rebelling. But even though Liberal Democrat ministers appear to have paid some penalty for their association with government, all but two performed better than the average candidate in the strongest non-held seats.[12]

The other distinction in table 1 is the Scottish factor. This reflected the much more limited losses in a few seats where there was clearly tactical voting by voters of the three non-separatist parties against the SNP – especially against the former SNP leader in Gordon (at 3.3 by far the lowest drop result for a non-incumbent) and in middle-class urban areas. Such tactical voting meant that 2010 Liberal Democrat voters deserted in record numbers where another party had that advantage.[13] If we compare like situation with like, there is very little evidence that 2010 Liberal Democrat voters deserted differentially north and south of the border.[14]

Put together, Scottish tactical voting and new incumbency explain almost all the better results achieved by Liberal Democrat MPs; the only two who managed, outside those situations, to stem the drop to under ten points were Tim Farron in Westmorland and Andrew George in St Ives, both well-known and both having successfully distanced themselves from some government policies. Looking forward to 2020, we cannot predict whether Scottish political developments will help or hinder Liberal fortunes, but the implications of what we have established about both held seats and incumbency for the party's chances of winning more seats then is grim indeed.

Leaving aside the likely damaging effect of boundary change,[15] the party will no longer have these advantages in the seats it has just lost. Most of those defeated in 2015 had served several terms and will not stand again. One has only to scan the 2015 results in seats lost in 2010 like Chesterfield, Hereford, Richmond Park, Rochdale or Romsey to see how much the party's vote can plummet in such cases. If we take the seats, on present boundaries, where the 2015 vote still looks a good base, we find that all those within 15 per cent of victory have now lost the advantage of being held, and mostly that of incumbency. Even if we extend the range to 20 per cent, which gives us 42 'winnables', only in two is the party's apparent strength not bolstered by these inevitably waning assets.[16]

However, the extent and extraordinary uniformity of the 2015 debacle, in the wider context of the new British political landscape, does offer a glimmer of hope in another form.

With the adoption of the community politics strategy in 1970, the evidence of the 1980s that Liberals had firmer local bases than the SDP, the growth of systematic targeting in the 1990s, the doubling in Commons seats in 1997 despite a slippage in votes and the holding of around fifty to sixty seats at each of the following three elections, the party had come to believe that it had found a formula to get round the massive obstacle of the single-member (uninominal) electoral system. There was always a flaw in the assumption that it could seek to exercise power at Westminster on this basis. Winning in a uninominal contest meant normally squeezing someone else's vote; but power could only mean working with another party, which would necessarily offend some squeezed voters. Any choice made by the party in 2010 would almost certainly have lost it a good chunk of its voters and some of its seats.

The actual choice made was not only with which partner to work, but what message to send about the party's achievements and future relevance. Ignoring the evidence that the party depended for representation on building up pockets of support in geographically concentrated groups, the leadership chose to pitch its appeal nationwide in terms of its impact on the country's economic policy. There was a total mismatch between that message and the localism of its attempt to hold seats on a uninominal basis. Yet the faith of enough of its MPs that they knew how to buck the harsh logic of the uninominal system was shown in their decision that, rather than using their leverage in 2010 to seek an advance towards a more proportional system, the party would go for tweaking the existing system with the alternative vote.[17]

So can we conclude other than that a coalition is fatal poison to a Liberal party in Britain? Curtice's evidence shows the lack of any electoral dividend from the party's contribution to the coalition government's economic achievement.

Table 2 Liberal Democrat votes (%) in 2010, at by-elections and in 2015

Date	*By-election in:*	*2010*	*2011–14*	*2015*
Jan 2011	Oldham East & Saddleworth	31.6	32.0	12.9
May 2011	Leicester South	26.9	22.5	4.6
Mar 2011 – Mar 2012	Four other seats	14.0	4.2	2.5
Nov 2012	Manchester Central	26.6	9.4	4.1
Nov 2012	Five other seats	18.9	6.6	3.6
Feb 2013	Eastleigh	46.5	32.1	25.8
May 2013 – 2014	Six seats	18.1	2.7	3.0

He does pick up signs of heavier losses due to its neglect of its higher education constituency. My interpretation differs a little on this point; the timeline of the party's loss suggests that the damage done by the fees U-turn (though real enough) may be exaggerated.

The opinion polls recorded a clear drop in support in autumn 2010, associated with that issue. In turn this was confirmed by the widespread losses at the 2011 district elections, and anecdotal evidence from many who went out on the doorstep then. Yet the further losses in district seats in 2015, when the seats won in 2011 (despite the student fees issue) came up again, shows that there was a further loss of support as that issue should have faded. It is instructive to examine the party's by-election track record to pursue the evidence, as shown in table 2, where results in seats with less than a quarter of the vote in 2010 are grouped together.

This shows that the 2015 level of support sank below the vote in most by-elections; the haemorrhage of Liberal Democrat votes became greater as the five years went by. However, by the last cluster, starting with South Shields in May 2013, the drop had already reached its 2015 level. Although opinion polls showed that Clegg's challenge to Farage in the 2014 European elections failed, the party's by-election performance was no worse after than before that event (or the bad result in the Euro election).

Interpretation of this interesting pattern needs to be melded with evidence of the motivation of former Liberal voters that election surveys may reveal. Table 2 suggests that the massive scale of rejection of the party in 2014–15 was caused not so much by the decision itself to form the coalition or by the fees debacle as by a failure over time to convince its voters. It hints that if Clegg had followed Steel's 1978 example and left the coalition a year or six months before the election, more seats could have been saved. The party needed an exit strategy.

The party asked to be judged on its national message, and was so judged. That message did not fit its localism, its community bases, its historic role in regions where it had maintained credibility as the main anti-Tory party or the priorities of particular groups of its supporters. The 2015 election outcome demonstrated conclusively that the party did not know how to play the uninominal system.

British politics has changed, becoming more national (whether British, English or Scottish) and distinctly multi-party. The Conservatives now benefit from a more favourable distribution of their vote,[18] and have been able to win an overall majority of seats on 36.9 per cent of the vote. Britain no longer has a balanced two-party system.

The lesson for the Liberal Democrats could not be clearer. Attempting to build on the basis of localising support to beat the uninominal hurdle has ended in disaster. The deck has been cleared for the party to rebuild by looking for national messages which make strategic political sense.

Michael Steed wrote (or co-wrote with John Curtice) the analytical appendix to the Nuffield series of general-election studies 1964–2005. and stood as a Liberal parliamentary candidate seven times between 1967 and 1983.

1 Keith Middlemas & John Barnes, *Baldwin: A Biography* (London, 1969), p. 641.

2 See *Journal of Liberal History* 60 (Autumn 2008) p. 25 for full details; during the 1974–79 Parliament, the pre-Pact by-election loss rate averaged 5.5; during the Pact period it was 10.1; the post-Pact rate was 6.0, while in 1979 it was 4.4.

3 Most seats fought in 1951 or 1955 can be compared directly with a near equivalent seat in 2015, with three-cornered fights in the 1950s and multi-cornered ones in 2015. The majority of 1951–2015 comparisons show the 2015 vote higher, while the majority of 1955–2015 comparisons show the 1955 vote higher.

4 See John Curtice & Michael Steed in David Butler & Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1997*, p. 302.

5 Montgomeryshire at 8.6. This could indicate that the weakness of the 2010 incumbent depressed the vote then. Montgomery was one of just three seats where the party's traditional vote enabled it to hold the seat in 1951 and 1955; the other two, then called Cardigan and Orkney & Zetland, elected Liberal Democrat MPs in 2015.

6 Westmorland & Lonsdale was the only one of these twelve best performances where the seat was saved. The other seven re-elected MPs experienced on average (16.2) as bad a drop as the MPs who lost; they are back in the Commons due to the party's prior strength in their seat, or to the weakness of their opponents.

7 Two individual campaigns or candidates in stronger areas stand out for what, in this general context, was a really good result with small drops – Bosworth (11.0) and Maidstone & The Weald (11.9). The second of these two candidates was seen as close to Clegg, the other as associated with his Social Liberal Forum critics.

8 These are the 15 seats in Merseyside metropolitan county, together with four adjacent ones in Cheshire and Lancashire. Esther McVey, Minister of State for Employment, lost her seat in Wirral West. This sharp regional Conservative slump helped John Pugh hold Southport despite suffering a more than typical drop in the Liberal Democrat vote. Next door the once safe Tory seat of Crosby, won by Shirley Williams in 1981 and now disguised as 'Sefton Central', has turned into a safe Labour seat.

9 I can find no precedent for this; the traditional (Butler) swing was 1.1 to Labour in England but 0.3 to Conservatives in Wales.

10 The Gower peninsula has a Conservative MP for the first time since a Tory took one of the two Glamorganshire seats in 1852; western

Carmarthenshire acquired a Conservative MP in 2010 for the first time since a Tory took one of the two Carmarthenshire seats in 1880.

11 In addition to those mentioned in notes 5 and 7, Oxford West & Abingdon and Watford.

12 The two were Bristol West (29.2 drop), where the local Green surge clearly damaged Stephen Williams badly, and Berwickshire, Roxburgh & Selkirk (26.7), where tactical unionist voters seem to have decided that the Conservative had the better chance of blocking the SNP; or perhaps Michael Moore paid a special penalty for his role in office.

13 In addition to Berwickshire, notably Edinburgh North & Leith (29.3 drop), Edinburgh South (30.7) and Glasgow North (28.6).

14 As the registered electorate in Scotland rose in 2014 (referendum effect) and turnout rose sharply in 2015 (in contrast to the rest of Britain), actual numbers of Liberal Democrat votes cast in Scottish constituencies could be higher in 2015 despite the drop in vote share.

15 This assumed harmful effect does not predict that new boundaries will be drawn with a view to harming Liberal Democrats. The reality is that the new, mathematically rigid, rules (voted through by Liberal Democrat MPs in 2010) will necessarily make both for more artificial boundaries and for more frequent disturbance, both more easily handled by parties with more national resources and a national or class appeal, while undermining the Liberal capacity for building up support in distinct, identifiable communities.

16 Montgomeryshire and Oxford West & Abingdon. Enlarging the net to include all seats within 25 per cent of victory in 2015 adds three more non-held seats – Bosworth, Maidstone and Newton Abbott.

17 The Electoral Reform Society calculates that with AV there would have been nine, not eight, Liberal Democrat MPs elected in 2015; see its *The 2015 General Election Report* p. 34. My estimate is a little larger, some 12–15 seats. ERS also calculates that with AV, the 36.9 per cent first-preference vote would have given the Conservatives double the overall Commons majority they actually secured.

18 It has often been misleadingly claimed that Labour was advantaged, and the Conservatives disadvantaged, by the constituency boundaries. That encouraged the coalition government to change the rules in a way that will probably slightly help the Conservatives in 2020. But the big advantage for Labour prior to 2015 was that the distribution of its vote helped it to win more seats than the Tories at an equal level of support. The dramatic voting changes in 2015 have now handed that advantage to the Conservatives, without any boundary change. This effect is intrinsic to the uninominal system. That makes the feasible coalition for radical electoral reform potentially greater and more realisable than it has been at any time since the early twentieth century.

8 per cent but only 8 MPs: the death of the fabled Liberal Democrat grassroots campaigning machine?

Mark Pack

There were two elements in the disaster that was the 2015 general election result for the Liberal Democrats: just 8 per cent of the vote and also just eight MPs. Many of the other articles in this edition of the *Journal of Liberal History* explain the 8 per cent vote share. However, the fact that even such a low vote as 8 per cent turned into only eight MPs also needs explanation, both because it was well below prior expectations – inside and outside the party – and also because in the past the party had consistently won more seats than the percentage of the vote it secured.

Indeed, up until the 2005 general election, the Liberal Democrats had been starting to learn to live with the bias that first past the post (FPTP) imposes on smaller parties who do not have a very strong geographic concentration in one part of the country.

The lesson for the Liberal Democrats could not be clearer. Attempting to build on the basis of localising support to beat the uninominal hurdle has ended in disaster. The deck has been cleared for the party to rebuild by looking for national messages which make strategic political sense.

As I set out in 'The Liberal Democrat approach to campaigning',[1] from the 1970s through to 2005 the Liberal Democrats became progressively better at turning votes into seats at Westminster elections. This is best illustrated by the party's seats to vote share ratio.

With about 650 seats in parliament[2] but only a maximum of 100 per cent of voters to be won, a proportional result would mean a ratio of around 6.5:1. The party has never got close to that, but from the early 1970s its predecessors' results, and then the Liberal Democrats', consistently improved, rising from a low of 0.7 to 2.9 by 2005. To put flesh on that ratio, had the party still been at 0.7 in 2005, it would have won fifteen seats, not the sixty-two it actually secured. This was not trivial progress.

However, after the 2005 peak things slipped back in 2010 before plummeting in 2015, returning the ratio to its pre-merger levels.

As I wrote of the 2010 slippage for the *Journal* in 2014,[3] the 2010 seats to votes ratio made it the then worst for the party since 1992: a poor reflection on the campaign machine's ability to turn national vote share into actual seats. For pessimists this was the result of the Conservatives in 2005 having largely cottoned on to how to do intensive target seat campaigning, and by 2010 Labour doing so too, leaving the Liberal Democrats' ability to outperform the national picture in selected constituencies hugely reduced. For optimists, there were specific mistakes in 2010 which could be remedied in the future. One was the weakening of the focus on target seats in the heady wake of Nick Clegg's first TV debate victory and the resulting poll surge. Another was that the party called several seats wrongly in the last few days before polling day, misdirecting resources as a result. For example, a great deal of effort was directed to Oxford East on polling day, which Labour held on to by a significant margin – 4,581 votes – whereas, had the effort been directed instead to neighbouring Oxford West & Abingdon, Evan Harris would not have ended up losing by just 176 votes.

The party's own official review into the 2010 general election, chaired by James Gurling,[4] was a relatively low-key affair. Some of

Table 1: Liberal, Alliance and Liberal Democrat general election performance

Election	*Seats won*	*% share of the vote*	*Seats:votes ratio*
1970	6	8	0.8
1974 Feb	14	20	0.7
1974 Oct	13	19	0.7
1979	11	14	0.8
1983	23	26	0.9
1987	22	23	0.9
1992	19	18	1.1
1997	46	17	2.7
2001	52	19	2.8
2005	62	22	2.9
2010	57	23	2.5
2015	8	8	1.0

the causes of the party's failure to win more seats in 2010 it ascribed to specific one-off factors such as the failure of the party's immigration message and the old 'you can't win' argument (both of these factors came through strongly in the party's post-election private polling). It made many detailed recommendations, and some significant organisational ones – particularly that the party should change its computer database software for fighting elections. In addition, the increasing emphasis in the Labour Party on the virtues of canvassing rubbed off on the Liberal Democrats, with a switch from viewing canvassing as a data-gathering opportunity, where a virtue is made of talking to each person for as little time a possible, to an attempt to get into longer conversations about issues.[5]

It was hoped that these organisational improvements, plus the fact of being in coalition government giving a completely different spin to the 'you can't win' argument, would allow the party to regain its local campaigning edge. However, given the 2015 result, those hopes were not only not met but the seats to votes ratio crashed catastrophically. What went wrong?

During the 2010–15 parliament, the Liberal Democrats certainly put in a considerable effort to target campaigning activity at winnable Westminster constituencies. This included a 'Dragon's Den' style application process for support, whereby constituency teams had to make the case that their seat was winnable and their applications were assessed with the assistance of an extensive constituency polling programme. The process was far more ruthless than in previous parliaments, with the party willing to withdraw support even from seats held by long-standing Liberal Democrat MPs[6] – something that had been a bone of contention in some previous parliaments where, regardless of the constituency campaigning performance of an MP, the party would always end up putting in outside support to sort things out.

Those seats that made it through the process received, despite the party's low poll ratings throughout the parliament, generously funded support thanks to the efficacy of the party's fundraising operation. It was a regular feature of the quarterly donation figures published by the Electoral Commission for the party's fundraising from individuals to be more successful than that of Labour.

They also received more effective targeting of volunteer resources than in previous parliaments.[7] This was partly due to a widespread understanding in the party of how few seats were truly winnable in 2015 and therefore a greater willingness on the part of volunteers to travel to help elsewhere.[8] It was also due to the increasing use of telephone canvassing via an easy-to-use web system (called VPBs, or Virtual Phone Banks). VPBs made it easy for people to help a seat without having to travel to it, and replaced the previous reliance on printing and posting back and forth paper canvass sheets, which had been a rather cumbersome mechanism even when the arrival of the fax machine and later digital scanning/photography brought a little IT relief.

VPBs were possible due to the party's migration, as recommended by the Gurling review, to a new web-based electoral database, called Connect. Supplied to the party by the American firm NGPVAN, Connect was based on the same technology as used by the 2008 and 2012 Obama presidential campaigns (and the Canadian Liberals).[9] In addition to investing in Connect, the party also commissioned micro-targeting research to score uncanvassed voters on their likelihood of being Liberal Democrat, Conservative or Labour in order to prioritise canvassing and to allow the more accurate targeting of campaigning such as direct mail to otherwise uncanvassed voters.

Although Connect had a severe slow-down on polling day in 2015, resulting in some features being scaled back, even in the midst of the post-election dismay there has been no call to abandon it or blame it from the result. Rather VPBs, scoring and Connect were to varying degrees successful.

Unsuccessful, however, was the party's constituency polling. This had been inaccurate in places in 2010 (see above) and was even more so in 2015, leading the party to believe it would return far more than eight MPs and hence to Paddy Ashdown's promise on live TV on election night to eat his hat if the exit poll prediction of the party winning just ten seats turned out to be right. That so many public pollsters got their polls wrong too provides some cover for the party's error, and indeed some of the criticisms of the party's polling methodology (such as question order) do not stack up as a similar methodology was followed by other, successful pollsters.[10] More likely, the problem with the polling was that it was asking about one sort of election but the public decided to vote in a different sort. That is, the polling accurately captured how people would vote if they were not thinking about who would be prime minister (such as if it was a foregone conclusion); however once worrying about the prime minister came into consideration, they switched away from the Liberal Democrats to other parties.

That would fit with a broader pattern of the party doing best

(1997, 2001, 2005) when the name of the prime minister after polling day is little doubted and doing worst (1992, 2010, 2015) when there is real doubt over who will be prime minister. This change in voter perspective also helps explain why the hoped for Liberal Democrat incumbency boost was muted: the more people worried about who the prime minister was, the less their love of their MP mattered. Hence the strong polling results for the party's MPs during the parliament[11] were not enough to save most of them.[12]

Three other factors, however, contributed to the party's dreadful seats to votes ratio aside from the strategic political landscape. One was the abortive attempted major restructuring of staff at party HQ in 2012. It produced some positive results, with the turnaround in the party's membership figures starting following the renewed focus on membership services. However the attempt to change the campaign staffing structure was very controversial. The idea was to move from primarily geographically based staff to skills-based staff, but the handling of the axing of the geographically based posts led to widespread protests through the party. The eventual structure that emerged was very similar to the pre-restructure one, but with a greater emphasis on monitoring performance standards[13] than on collaboration with seats, and with those staff with geographic responsibilities covering huge areas and so spending very considerable amounts of time travelling. Moreover, there was widespread bad feeling – and some rather complicated wrinkles, to cater for particular personality clashes and differences. This contributed to a significant cadre of highly skilled and experienced staff deciding to move on from party employment, often also dropping out of voluntary party activity too.

A second factor was that, despite the attempt to move to a more skills-based structure, the party did very little in the way of testing out alternative campaign tactics in the field, such as by splitting voters into two different groups and trying a different direct mail design on each. In the US, such A/B split-test field experiments have been the norm for political campaigners for many years now[14] and are spreading to other parties, but the Liberal Democrats almost never carried out A/B split testing except for online campaigning and the party's campaigning tactics changed little from ten years previously. More broadly, the party's development of campaign tactics had in many areas stalled.

The final factor is one, however, also outside the party's direct control: the death of constituency election expense limits. Although campaigning in constituencies in the months running up to polling day is nominally tightly controlled by constituency expense limits, there is very large scope for campaigning to be done that is targeted at swing voters in marginal seats but which does not count against the local limit. A mailshot from David Cameron, for example, to soft Lib Dem voters in a Lib Dem MP's seat did not need to count against the constituency limit. As a result, the Tories were able to spend millions of pounds extra on 'national' campaigning in Liberal Democrat-held seats, outgunning the Liberal Democrat campaigns and undermining the party's traditional incumbency advantage.[15] This regulatory death played into the hands of the Conservatives not only because of the parties' relative finances but also because the key messages to such swing voters for Tories were national ones (be afraid of Ed Miliband in hock to the SNP), yet for the Lib Dems were local ones (praise for the local MP). Therefore even when the Liberal Democrats spent money on 'national' campaigning in key seats, it was not as effective for the party as the equivalent Conservative campaigning was.

The lessons for the future, then, are twofold. Wider political circumstances – not only the party's overall popularity but also the degree to which the election result is seen as a forgone conclusion – matter, as do regulatory issues the party cannot unilaterally influence. Nevertheless, in addition to pushing for the revival of meaningful constituency expense limits, there are other factors under the party's control which can be altered ahead of 2020, including a revised approach to polling and a reinvigoration of campaigning tactics, fuelled by a belief in testing and experimentation.

Dr Mark Pack worked at party HQ from 2000 to 2009, heading up the party's online operation for the 2001 and 2005 general elections. He is author of 101 Ways To Win An Election *and the party's election law manual, as well as co-author of the party's general election agents' handbook.*

The author would like to thank Neil Fawcett and Ed Maxfield for their comments on an earlier draft of this piece.

1. *Journal of Liberal History* 83 (Summer 2014).
2. The number has varied with boundary reviews and devolution. During the period in Table 1, the Liberals, then Alliance and subsequently Liberal Democrats contested nearly every seat, with a few exceptions such as the Speaker's constituency and, in 1997, Tatton.
3. *Journal of Liberal History*, 83 (Summer 2014).

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COMPARING

The Liberal Democrat – Conservative coalition of 2010–15 was not of course the only coalition the Libera
the party's experience in coalition in Scotland from 1999 to 2007, while **David Dutton** draws parallels fr

Jim Wallace and Scottish Labour leader Donald Dewar agree the first coalition in Scotland, in 1999

Reflections on two coalitions

Jim Wallace

When I was asked to serve as Advocate General for Scotland in the coalition government formed in May 2010, it was to be my second experience of coalition, having been deputy first minister in the Labour–Lib Dem government formed after the first election to the Scottish parliament.[1] Indeed, one of the main reasons for my appointment was that I had experience of having been in coalition government. I have often been asked to compare and contrast the two experiences. This is never as easy as it sounds, not least because of differences in circumstances. However, the *Journal of Liberal History* is as good a place as any to try and commit some of these thoughts to paper.

The biggest difference in circumstances probably relates to the creation of the coalition. In Scotland, in 1999, there was some expectation that the outcome would be a Labour–Lib Dem coalition. That did not make it a certainty, as I was always prepared to walk away from an agreement if the terms were not acceptable. But given that the PR system used for the election was not expected to produce a majority outcome, and given that in a number of policy areas, there was reasonable compatibility between our respective parties, a coalition was widely seen as more likely than not.[2]

By contrast, whilst polls during the 2010 campaign pointed to a parliament where no one party would command a majority, such expectations had been confounded in the past. Moreover, there did not appear to be any natural political affinity between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservative Party. Intuitively, a coalition between these two parties seemed less likely than not. Consequently, in both public and party eyes, there were more difficulties in 2010 in

COALITIONS

l Democrats or the Liberal Party has ever participated in. **Jim Wallace** compares the UK coalition with om history.

achieving if not legitimacy, then at least acceptance.

If the background was different, there was a ready comparison in the preparations made by the party in the run-up to the election. Based on work done by Philip Goldenberg for Paddy Ashdown before the 1992 election, Scottish Liberal Democrats had prepared well for coalition talks. I had asked David Laws to distil our manifesto into a possible programme for coalition government; whilst preparatory work in 2010 by Andrew Stunell and Danny Alexander ensured that the negotiating team entered talks having given careful thought as to our coalition goals.

The contrast was with our respective opposite numbers. In 1999, the Labour Party had given precious little thought as to what a coalition government might do. Donald Dewar's opening pitch to me was that two Lib Dems should join his cabinet and, with a couple of junior ministers, we would, to all intents and purposes, be a continuing Westminster Labour government in Scotland. Interestingly, they do not seem to learn, as UK Labour's attitude in 2010 did not seem all that different!

However, it was evident from the speech which David Cameron made on the day after the 2010 election that the Tories had been as diligent as we had in making preparations for the eventuality of a 'hung parliament'. I believe this was the experience of our negotiating team, when they got down to serious discussions. That we achieved a coalition agreement which incorporated the key pledges from the front page of our manifesto together with a referendum on voting reform and other cherished policies besides is a tribute to the negotiating team.

I do wonder whether a row or two over a significant policy issue, such as we had in Scotland over university tuition fees and personal care for the elderly … or landing a big policy prize … would have been helpful in raising the profile of a battling junior coalition partner.

What we possibly lacked was a good-going row, and a threat to break off the talks. Admittedly, the circumstances were again very different. In 1999, I did not have to negotiate against a background of international financial turmoil and turbulent markets (a coalition for a devolved administration was never going to trouble the markets). Walking away was an option in 2010, but the downside was immense.

But more generally, I do wonder whether a row or two over a significant policy issue, such as we had in Scotland over university tuition fees and personal care for the elderly (from which we emerged successful), or landing a big policy prize such as STV for Scottish local government elections, to which Labour was considered to be instinctively opposed, would have been helpful in raising the profile of a battling junior coalition partner. Indeed, because the tuition fees issue was not resolved by the partnership agreement in Scotland and was remitted to an inquiry chaired by Andrew Cubie, that tension was evident from the outset. Working relations were good, but there was not what, after 2010, has sometimes been described as a 'Rose Garden phase'. And that lack of honeymoon period was not always to our advantage. In the Hamilton South Westminster by-election in September 1999, our candidate came sixth behind the Hamilton Accies FC Supporters candidate! But once the Cubie committee had reported and ministers (Nicol Stephen, in particular) had worked out implementation, it was generally accepted that the outcome reflected that the Lib Dem view had prevailed.

Moreover, we were assisted in establishing a separate identity by the futile efforts of the SNP opposition to drive wedges between the coalition parties. Initially, they often used their Opposition Days to debate issues reserved to Westminster where the two parties were not in agreement. As our coalition agreement did not extend to reserved issues, I insisted that there could not be a government line, and we often responded by tabling a coalition amendment which acknowledged the respective positions of the two coalition parties – and our contributors to the debate could articulate a distinctive Lib Dem line.

This is not to underestimate the 2010 achievement of policies such as the minimum income tax threshold, the pupil premium or the green policies which are now being unstitched on a daily basis. I know just how much effort was put in by ministerial colleagues to secure these; but they were all delivered without a major public fall-out, and so became more difficult to badge as distinctively Liberal Democrat.

Another difference between Scottish government and UK government is scale. After all, prior to devolution, the Scottish Office was one government department among many. This led to shorter lines of communication, which undoubtedly facilitated quicker decision-making. One of my frustrations as a minister in charge of a bill in the Lords was the need for a lengthy paper chase before I could accept an amendment which was self-evidently sensible. The theory is that it is that which secures collective responsibility – fair enough,

but there must be a more efficient way of doing it!

Coalition government also requires its own structures and processes. The UK civil service is instinctively uncomfortable about these. It is a system which has increasingly been built around a prime minister, who is the source of all authority. The need to be sensitive to and even accommodate the views of two parties in government is more challenging than taking the cue straight from the top.

On the day of the Rose Garden, Oliver Letwin and I – and our respective teams – sat in a room in Downing Street, trying to fill in some of the gaps in the primary coalition agreement which the negotiations were never going to be able to cover. I remember being quite pleased with a compromise which I thought had diluted the Tories' more punitive proposals on knife crime. Oliver thought he had better check out the wording with the newly appointed justice secretary, Ken Clarke. He returned saying, 'Ken doesn't think it's liberal enough!'

One issue which we did attempt to grapple with that day was a dispute resolution process. In Scotland, I sometimes became exasperated by the number and nature of the issues which would quickly escalate to first minister–deputy first minister for resolution.[3] I reckoned that with considerably extra pressures on the prime minister and deputy prime minister, some filtering process was needed. We proposed a Coalition Committee to which any disputes that could not be resolved at departmental level could be referred. Only if that committee could not broker a solution would the prime minister and deputy prime minister be called in. The committee never, to my knowledge, met. Instead the 'Quad' emerged. Whilst it undoubtedly made demands on the PM, DPM, chancellor and chief secretary (and did not remove the need for bilaterals between David Cameron and Nick Clegg) I believe that it was more effective in reaching decisions which were the 'last word', than a compromise hammered out at a lower ministerial level could have been. Viewed from within government, Quad decisions had a finality, which everyone, ministers and officials, understood and could act upon.

But, as already alluded to, the primary responsibility on resolving difficulties lay at the door of departmental ministers. It was essential that junior ministers were the Lib Dem eyes and ears throughout their respective departments. In turn, that required Conservative secretaries of state to recognise that their Lib Dem junior ministers had a legitimate role in representing the party's interests across the board, and not just within their allocated departmental portfolio. Whether or not this worked very much depended on personalities.[4] But where it did work, it ensured that a policy could command support across the coalition. Where it did not, a good deal of time was taken up in protracted negotiation and dispute resolution.

As already noted, the scale of government and the pressured environment of Whitehall are different from the situation in Scotland. My workload as deputy first minister was very substantial; but it would have been physically impossible for Nick Clegg to have maintained the scaled-up overview of the whole of government which I could do in Scotland. That Nick was able to cover as much as he did is a great testament to his resilience and capacity for work. But it did underline the important role of Lib Dem ministers in their respective departments. Some commentators have argued that we should have focused on three or four departments; but the nature of our political culture is that government as a whole is held accountable, and we need a handle on what is going on in each department.

Negotiations were not exclusively within government. Many of the real challenges of coalition, both at Holyrood and at Westminster, were the need to get our backbenchers on board. I do not think it was ever recognised just how much interaction there was at Westminster between minsters (of both parties) and backbenchers to try and satisfy specific concerns. Both as a minister who had to take some contentious bills through the Lords, and latterly as the leader of our Lib Dem group in the Lords, I was aware of just how much time and effort was made by ministers of both coalition parties (including Commons ministers) to meet coalition peers (of both parties) to try and identify legislative solutions.

Whilst [the Quad] undoubtedly made demands on the PM, DPM, chancellor and chief secretary … I believe that it was more effective in reaching decisions which were the 'last word', than a compromise hammered out at a lower ministerial level could have been.

Important in these efforts was the role of special advisers (Spads). Writing a piece for the Institute for Government on the first anniversary of the coalition, I said,

> My experience of coalition government in Scotland underscores the importance of these advisers. They provided a vital channel of communication with the backbenches and the wider party, both to explain decisions, and to inform decision-making with the knowledge of what our MSPs would wear.

At that time (May 2011), I do not think as much use had been made of special advisers as could have been, but their role undoubtedly developed. I am not in a position to judge their engagement with Commons' backbenchers, but in the Lords, Elizabeth Plummer[5] performed a sterling job in keeping Lords ministers, and the wider ministerial team, aware of what our backbench peers were thinking and what would carry and what needed more work and attention.

From a ministerial perspective, as well as Elizabeth, I was fortunate to benefit from the advice and hard work of Tim Colbourne and Verity Harding when taking the justice and security bill through the Lords, and the patience, wisdom and perseverance of Matt Sanders and, again, Tim Colbourne, as we navigated the tricky waters of giving substance to the Leveson proposals on the press. This latter cross-party exercise involved not only contact with our own party colleagues, Conservative ministers and their advisers, and departmental officials, but also the Labour Party and the important interested lobby groups. They each fulfilled, in an exemplary way, the role which falls to a Spad of keeping relevant colleagues in the loop, passing on intelligence about who was thinking what, and testing waters with those the minister has to deal with, so that ministerial time is well used.

Concluding reflection

I joined the Scottish Liberal Party in 1972 after reading Russell Johnston's pamphlet, *To Be A Liberal*,

because I readily identified with the principles and values which Russell so clearly articulated. We did not even have eight MPs, and so I did not entertain a realistic expectation of becoming an MP, let alone a minister in a Scottish parliament (although the ambition of a Scottish parliament within a federal United Kingdom undoubtedly motivated me) or a minister in a United Kingdom government. I count it a privilege, almost beyond belief, to have done both. What I particularly resent is a view that whilst it is perfectly acceptable for Labour, Conservative or even SNP politicians to aspire to government office, there is something unseemly about a Liberal Democrat wishing to do so. If you are in politics, it must surely be to do something – to put into practice your principles; not take them home every night to polish up from the comfort zone of opposition.

That is why I believe that we were right on both occasions – on acceptable terms – to have gone into coalition government. Undoubtedly there were things that we could have done better; but I firmly believe that on both occasions we left government with the country in a better place than when we went into power.

What I particularly resent is a view that whilst it is perfectly acceptable for Labour, Conservative or even SNP politicians to aspire to government office, there is something unseemly about a Liberal Democrat wishing to do so.

Jim Wallace (Lord Wallace of Tankerness) was MP for Orkney & Shetland from 1983 to 2001, and MSP for Orkney from 1999 to 2007. He led the Scottish Liberal Democrats from 1992 to 2005. Following the first election to the Scottish parliament in 1999, he became deputy first minister and minister of justice in the newly established Scottish executive. He was later (2003–5) minister for enterprise and lifelong learning. On three occasions he assumed the role of acting first minister. He stood down as Scottish party leader and deputy first minister in 2005. Lord Wallace was introduced into the House of Lords in 2007 and appointed advocate general for Scotland in the 2010 coalition government. In 2013, he was elected leader of the Liberal Democrat peers and appointed deputy leader of the House of Lords. He was re-elected as Lib Dem leader in the Lords after the 2015 election.

1 I am sometimes told that my experience is unique, but, of course, my Lords colleague, Baroness Jenny Randerson, was minister for culture, sport and the Welsh language in the Welsh Assembly government from 2000 to 2003, and at Westminster, was parliamentary under secretary of state for Wales from 2012 until May 2015.

2 Even then, there was still hostility to the very idea of Lib Dems in government; to the extent that my wife stopped buying daily newspapers as she thought that exposing our children to some of the abusive attacks on their father was a form of child abuse!

3 On my final night in office as DFM, Jack McConnell and I literally resorted to a Thesaurus to find wording acceptable to both parties on the issue of third-party rights of appeal in planning decisions for a White Paper which had to go to the printer the following morning.

4 One can never underestimate the importance of personalities and relationships in oiling the wheels of coalition government. That was my experience in both Scotland and Westminster. On the Monday following the heavy defeat of the AV referendum and disastrous results in Scotland and local government, commentators were predicting stormy relationships between coalition ministers. My Westminster office was next door to that of my 'opposite number' in the coalition, the attorney general, Dominic Grieve. Having heard me return to my room, Dominic knocked on the door and said, 'Come and have a drink, you'll be needing one!'

5 Because special advisers were technically assigned to cabinet ministers, Elizabeth was appointed as a Spad to the (Conservative) leader of the House of Lords, albeit she worked for Tom McNally and subsequently me as deputy leader of the House.

Something about coalitions? Historical reflections on the Liberal Democrat experience of government 2010–15

David Dutton

Historians are likely to debate for some time to come the origins of the Liberal Democrats' decision to enter a coalition government with the Conservatives in 2010 and also, as many would see it, the shared origins of the party's disastrous performance in the general election of 2015. One possible starting point must be the election to the party leadership of David Steel as long ago as 1976. Though Steel's own natural inclinations were towards the political left and a possible realignment with Labour, he made it a clear objective of his campaign to succeed Jeremy Thorpe that the broader issue of coalition must be addressed head on. Interviewed by *The Guardian* within weeks of becoming leader, Steel insisted that Liberals had to 'start by getting a toe-hold on power which *must* mean some form of coalition'. Then, in a well-received speech to the party conference in September, Steel stressed that if the Liberal Party wished to move from the periphery to the centre of the electoral argument, 'we must not give the impression of being afraid to soil our hands with the responsibilities of sharing power. We must be bold enough to deploy the coalition case positively.'[1] This represented a clear repudiation of the 'long-haul' strategy of earlier decades – that the Liberal dawn would eventually come without the need to contaminate the party's ideological purity. By 'simply pretending to be an alternative government in exile we would continue to fail'.[2] Participation in a Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition between 2010 and 2015 must be seen as the fulfilment of Steel's strategy.

Yet the electoral denouement of 2015 can only raise uncomfortable questions for Liberal Democrats about coalitions in general. Granted the rise of the SNP (fifty-six MPs from 4.7 per cent of the vote) and UKIP (just one MP but 12.6 per cent of the vote), 2015 was the first general election in the Liberal Democrat/Liberal Party's history in which it could not claim even third place in the electorate's preferences. Historians must necessarily turn to the past for guidance. Contrary to the popular saying, history does not repeat itself; but it

does offer informative and revealing parallels and similarities.

Coalitions and more informal inter-party arrangements were less alien to the norm in the history of twentieth-century Britain than is sometimes supposed. Formal coalitions existed between 1915 and 1922 and again between 1940 and 1945. On both occasions they represented a natural response to the demands of war and the need to repress domestic differences in the face of a graver external threat. A less broadly based coalition was formed in 1931 and lasted until 1940. In addition, more informal arrangements sustained a Liberal government, which had lost its parliamentary majority, between 1910 and 1915, two minority Labour governments in 1924 and between 1929 and 1931, and a Labour government which had been reduced to minority status in 1977–8.

At first sight the formal coalitions might seem to offer the most relevant comparisons with what happened after 2010. In each case Liberals, in their willingness to share power with other parties, were responding to a national crisis, albeit that of 2010 fell short of European war. But in terms of impact on the party, these earlier coalitions provide less exact parallels. The actual creation of a coalition in 1915 and again in 1940 was broadly accepted. Indeed, both wars ended with a widespread belief that coalition had been a successful innovation in the practice of government. It is true that it is easy enough to find contemporary assessments that Asquith's acceptance of Conservatives into his government would result in catastrophic consequences for Liberalism. 'Among Liberal intellectuals', reported the *Manchester Guardian*, 'there is a melancholy feeling, very frankly expressed, that this is probably the end of the Liberal party for many years to come.'[3] John Simon had already warned that a coalition would be 'the grave of Liberalism'.[4] Charles Hobhouse was now ready to agree. 'Nothing will persuade me', he wrote, 'that this is not the end of the Liberal party as we have known it.'[5] But while Asquith may be legitimately criticised for shrouding the whole process of coalition-making in an unnecessary veil of secrecy, leaving many of his followers bewildered and upset, the Liberal

Coalitions and more informal inter-party arrangements were less alien to the norm in the history of twentieth-century Britain than is sometimes supposed. Formal coalitions existed between 1915 and 1922 and again between 1940 and 1945.

Party itself survived the upheaval. Indeed, it remained in broad control of the overall direction of the government. The real damage to the party, culminating in the catastrophic electoral outcome of 1918, derived from the later split between the supporters of Asquith and those of Lloyd George.

Similarly, after the entry of the party into Churchill's coalition in May 1940, many Liberals worried about their loss of an independent identity, fearing that their leader, Archibald Sinclair, had fallen almost totally under the prime minister's masterful spell. Again, the subsequent general election in 1945 saw the party badly mauled, with just twelve MPs returned to parliament. But it is doubtful whether membership of the wartime coalition was the critical factor. Quite simply, the Liberal Party seemed irrelevant to the political debate of the time, notwithstanding the fact that individual Liberals, most notably Keynes and Beveridge, had helped shape that debate. More relevant, then, to the experience of 2010–15 are earlier periods in which Liberals were damaged by the decision to sustain minority governments in power. In this short essay, the example of the minority Labour administration of 1924 will be used to illustrate the author's argument.

Broadly speaking, the Liberal Democrats' decision to join the coalition in 2010 seems to have alienated three distinct groups within the party's support base. The first, and probably the smallest, consisted of those for whom ideological purity remained all-important – those, in other words, who had never accepted the strategy propounded by David Steel and followed in differing ways by his successors, that coalition was a necessary step in the party's evolution. Such voters believed, however unrealistically, that the party could eventually prevail under its own colours, even in a first-past-the-post electoral system, and that the differences between Liberal Democrats and the other main parties were too profound for coalition to be an acceptable option. Among MPs, party activists and members, this sort of thinking was almost entirely absent in 2010. All the party's MPs, except Charles Kennedy who abstained, supported the decision to go into government; the Federal Executive voted 27 to 1 in favour; and only a handful of the more than 1,500 delegates at the special conference called to consider the coalition deal withheld their support. Moreover, there was surprisingly little pressure within the party hierarchy to pull out from the coalition over the years that followed.

A second, and altogether more significant, group comprised those voters who accepted the broad proposition of coalition, but regarded themselves as ideologically closer to Labour than to the Conservatives. A dilemma of choice had been inherent in Liberal politics for several decades, ever since in fact the party fell into third-party status, but the arithmetical outcomes of the British electoral system had largely kept it at a theoretical level. Back in 1926, Keynes argued that, forced to make the choice, Liberals would divide into those who would vote Conservative and those who would back Labour.[6] Now the choice had had to be made. Many leading Liberal Democrats shared a preference for Labour. Figures such as Vince Cable and Paddy Ashdown missed no opportunity to stress that they had spent their political lives fighting the Tories and that sharing power with them did not come easily. But the practical realities of 2010 – not least that a Liberal Democrat–Labour coalition would not have commanded a parliamentary majority – forced them to abandon their preferences and work in the national interest. For some Liberal Democrat voters, however, it seems that this was a step too far. Their support was lost, at least when it came to the 2015 election. Yet this argument should not be exaggerated. The logic that such voters would now shift their allegiance to Labour is only partially sustained by the evidence of what happened. Inner-city seats such as Bermondsey did see significant swings to Labour, but in the swathe of lost constituencies in the Southwest, the Conservatives were the overwhelming beneficiaries of Liberal defection. Furthermore, preliminary research suggests that Labour was singularly unsuccessful in attracting erstwhile Liberal Democrat voters in those key marginals

that it needed to win to have any chance of forming a government.

The third element may be the most important in explaining the disaster that befell the party in 2015. Ever since the beginning of the Liberal revival in the mid-1950s, the party has drawn heavily upon the support of floating and protest voters. Such citizens tend either to be inherently antagonistic to the parties of government, thereby giving rise to the 'none of the above' vote, or incurably fickle in their allegiance, withdrawing their support when their (usually unrealistic) expectations of government performance remain unfulfilled. Liberal Democrat partisans have sometimes been reluctant to acknowledge the importance of such voters in their party's success. The belief in a solid phalanx of committed 'Liberal opinion' is obviously more gratifying. Yet the evidence for their importance is strong. It has been shown that, over the general elections between 1959 and 1979, less than 50 per cent of those who voted Liberal at one election confirmed this preference at the next. The corresponding figures for both Labour and the Conservatives were around 75 per cent. Even more revealingly, just 2 per cent of the electorate gave the Liberals consistent support in each of the four general elections of the 1970s.[7] Similarly, a striking feature of the years of Liberal revival was the party's ability to secure record swings in by-elections, usually at the expense of the incumbent government, performances which the party found it difficult to replicate at subsequent general elections. None of this suggests a strong and reliable core Liberal vote. But, by entering government in 2010, the Liberal Democrats largely forfeited their claims to the electorate's anti-establishment and protest votes. It was their misfortune in 2015 that UKIP and, north of the border, the SNP were well placed to fill the resulting void.

After the general election of 1923, as after that of 2010, the Liberal Party made a conscious decision to install a minority party in office. In 1923 Labour was not even the largest party, but their Conservative opponents (like Labour in 2010) had indubitably lost the general election. That of 1923 had been fought specifically on the issue of protection and had left the combined Liberal and Labour parties holding a clear 'free-trade majority'. Asquith believed that Labour, as the larger of these two parties, now had the right to form a government. He argued that, if a Labour government was ever to be tried, 'it could hardly be tried under safer conditions'. Yet, like Nick Clegg in the early days of the 2010 coalition, Asquith overestimated the strength of his party's position. 'It is we,' he insisted, 'if we really understand our business, who control the situation.'[8] Clegg, however, at least had the advantage of a formal coalition agreement. As Labour took office at the beginning of 1924, no vestige of an agreement existed with the Liberals on the content of the new government's programme. In particular, no effort had been made to secure a promise of electoral reform, which perceptive Liberals already recognised as pivotal to their chances of revival in British electoral politics. In 2010 Clegg at least won a commitment that the coalition government would hold a referendum on the Alternative Vote. But AV proved a difficult proposition to sell to the electorate, lacking the compelling, if somewhat questionable, simplicity of earlier campaigns in which Liberals had equated PR with 'fair votes'.

Yet the Liberal position in 1924 was almost as constrained as that which Clegg and his party accepted nearly a century later in a five-year, fixed-term parliament, with an agreed policy programme which involved the abandonment of key manifesto pledges, including that on university tuition fees. Asquith's Liberals were not in a position to assess the individual policies of the Labour government on their merits. Only the positive support of the Parliamentary Liberal Party could ensure Labour's survival. Even abstention would involve the government's defeat and possibly another general election which the Liberals, for financial reasons, were keen to avoid. As the period of Labour government proceeded, Liberals seemed surprised that Labour insisted on behaving in a partisan manner, showing little gratitude for Liberal support. In Lloyd George's memorable words, 'Liberals are to be the oxen to drag the Labour wain over the rough roads of Parliament for two to three years, goaded along, and at the end of the journey, when there is no further use for them, they are to be slaughtered. That is the Labour idea of cooperation.'[9] In fact, Ramsay MacDonald's long-term strategy of seeking to destroy Liberalism as a necessary precondition of his own party's further advance was as ruthless, and in purely party terms as justified, as the Conservatives' decision in the 2015 general election to target Liberal Democrat seats as the most promising route to winning a Commons majority. Many Liberal Democrats felt that Clegg had been as naïve as Asquith before him in seemingly embracing the coalition with enthusiasm rather than as a slightly distasteful necessity. The bonhomie of the rose garden press conference on 12 May jarred with many. Figures such as Vince Cable sought, by contrast, to maintain a certain distance from their new Tory colleagues. But Clegg seems to have felt the need to dispel the prevailing sentiment, not least in the world's markets, that hung parliaments were bound to lead to weak, divided and ineffectual governments.

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Also instructive are the reactions of prominent Conservatives to the Liberal–Labour alignment which installed Labour in office. Austen Chamberlain, former party leader and future foreign secretary, offered the most eloquent commentary. Speaking on 21 January 1924 in the no-confidence debate which formally brought down Baldwin's government, Chamberlain warned that Asquith had:

> taken his choice and he has by that choice constituted his own immortality. He will go down to history as the last Prime Minister of a Liberal administration. He has sung the swan-song of the Liberal Party. When next the country is called upon for a decision, if it wants a Socialist Government it will vote for a Socialist; if it does not want a Socialist Government it will vote for a Unionist. It will not vote again for those who denatured its mandate and betrayed its trust.[10]

The situation in 2010 was significantly different, but Chamberlain

at least understood that, by coming down on one side of the fundamental political divide, the Liberals were likely to lose a section of their electoral support. Indeed, writing to Samuel Hoare a week later, he suggested that two-thirds of the Liberal Party was now Labour in all but name and that the Conservatives should strive to absorb the remainder.[11] The evidence from the general election of 1924, with three-quarters of Liberal MPs going down to defeat, is complicated by a significant reduction in the number of the party's candidates, but does point to a marked drop in its underlying electoral support.

Rather than explaining what happened between 2010 and 2015, history can do no more than offer interesting lines of enquiry and discussion. Important questions remain to be answered. Were Liberal Democrat voters, as has been suggested, so frightened by the prospect of a Labour–SNP 'arrangement' as to turn in large numbers to the Conservatives? The party's poll rating was poor from the first year of the coalition onwards. Observers expected the actual outcome in 2015 to be somewhat better than opinion polls suggested; in fact it was worse. Liberal Democrats argued that loyalty to well-regarded sitting MPs would outweigh national trends; it didn't. The party held on to Chris Huhne's old seat of Eastleigh in the by-election of February 2013, when anger at the 'betrayal' over tuition fees was still relatively fresh in the electorate's mind, but lost it by over 9,000 votes just over two years later. The debate over this latest strange death of Liberal England (and Wales and Scotland) may well run and run.

David Dutton is currently researching the career of Percy Molteno, Liberal MP for Dumfriesshire, 1906–18. His vote in the recent general election failed to halt the SNP landslide in Scotland.

1. D. Steel, *A House Divided: The Lib–Lab Pact and the Future of British Politics* (London, 1980), p. 25.
2. Ibid., p. 16.
3. *Manchester Guardian*, 20 May 1915.
4. C. Addison, *Four and a Half Years*, vol. 1 (London, 1934), p. 35.
5. University of Newcastle, Runciman MSS 136, Hobhouse to Runciman 28 May 1915.
6. S. Lee and M. Beech (eds.), *The Cameron–Clegg Government* (Basingstoke, 2011), p. 5.
7. J. Curtice in V. Bogdanor (ed.), *Liberal Party Politics* (Oxford, 1983), p. 102.
8. C. Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party: The Road back to Power* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 94–5.
9. J. Campbell, *Lloyd George: The Goat in the Wilderness 1922–1931* (London, 1977), pp. 94–5.
10. D. Dutton, *Austen Chamberlain: Gentleman in Politics* (Bolton, 1985), p. 215.
11. University of Birmingham, Chamberlain MSS, AC25/4/19, Chamberlain to Hoare 28 January 1924.

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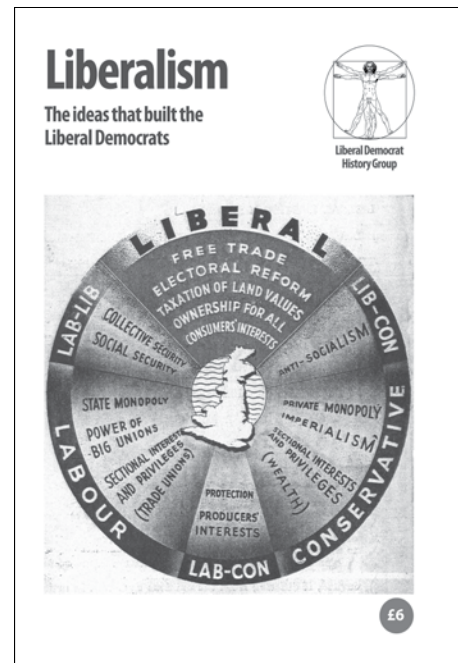

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8 per cent but also only 8 MPs: the death of the fabled Liberal Democrat grassroots campaigning machine?

concluded from page 75

4 In his role as chair of the party's Campaigns and Communications Committee (CCC). He discussed his review at the Liberal Democrat History Group's fringe meeting at the autumn 2010 party conference. See the meeting report at http://www.markpack.org.uk/16887/the-2010-election-in-historical-perspective/.

5 One cause for this renewed emphasis on canvassing – and canvassing, moreover, as more than just brief data-gathering conversations – was the Obama 2008 election campaign which was a high-profile example, widely reported in Britain, of the resurgence of doorstep canvassing in the United States.

6 Although there was some controversy over whether such decisions were made soon enough.

7 With lower membership and fewer councillors in 2015 than in 2010, the total volunteer base available was smaller. Hard data is not yet available as to whether the net result of fewer volunteers used better was more or less activity in key seats.

8 The contrast with 2010 was especially notable, when the Cleggmania poll surge resulted in more activists thinking their own seat was winnable and so damaging the party's attempt to target efforts.

9 A small number of local parties continued to use the previous database system EARS, which had bid for the new party contract but lost out to Connect. This number of local parties declined steadily during the parliament, and the central party's influence on the target seats operation helped push any slow movers over to Connect.

10 For details on this, see Mark Pack, 'What went wrong with the Liberal Democrat polling and key seat intelligence?', revised August 2015: http://www.markpack.org.uk/132249/what-went-wrong-with-the-liberal-democrat-polling-and-key-seat-intelligence/.

11 For example, see the research by Phil Cowley and Rosie Campbell, using polling data from July 2013: http://www.totalpolitics.com/opinion/416802/polling-not-love-actually.thtml.

12 Another factor was the number of Liberal Democrat MPs retiring in 2015. See http://nottspolitics.org/2014/07/29/lib-dem-incumbent-mp-retirements-could-cost-the-party-four-seats-in-2015-before-any-votes-are-cast/.

13 The value of the key performance indicator (KPI) framework used to monitor seat progress and help determine allocation of resources is thrown into severe doubt by the 2015 results as seats which were consistently rated as performing in the top tier on the KPIs ended up being lost heavily.

14 On which the seminal work is Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber, *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout* (Brookings Institution, 2004).

15 For more details on this see Mark Pack, 'Constituency expense limits are dying off in the UK, but neither politicians nor the regulator will act', March 2015: http://www.markpack.org.uk/130283/internet-speeds-up-the-killing-off-of-expense-controls-in-marginal-seats/.

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