COALITION AND THE

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.

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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 realistic 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.

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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.

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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.

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