

# COALITION AN

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

**V**ERY 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.’

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

**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.**

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.’

#### *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

**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.**

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

**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.**

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.

*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

**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.**

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.

‘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.'

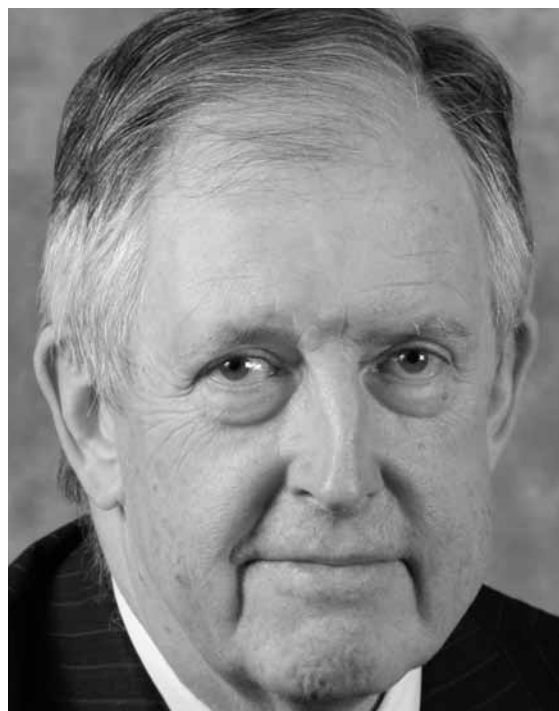
He and Shirley Williams were the only two Liberal Democrats with previous experience in a government required to work with another party. How had the recent Con–Lib Dem coalition compared in effectiveness with that of the Lib–Lab Pact of 1976–78?

'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 emasculating 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?

'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.'

**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.**

## 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 Sarkozy.'

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 heebie-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.



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

---

## 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

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."'

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

**There was a residual anger about the coalition across the country, complicated by the rise of the Scots Nats ... 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.**

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?

---

### 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

‘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.’

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.’

#### ... 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

**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.**



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 swapping 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 have 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.’

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

**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.**

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.'

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?

## 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.'



‘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

**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.**

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



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 be 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).'

### **... 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

**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.**



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.'

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.'

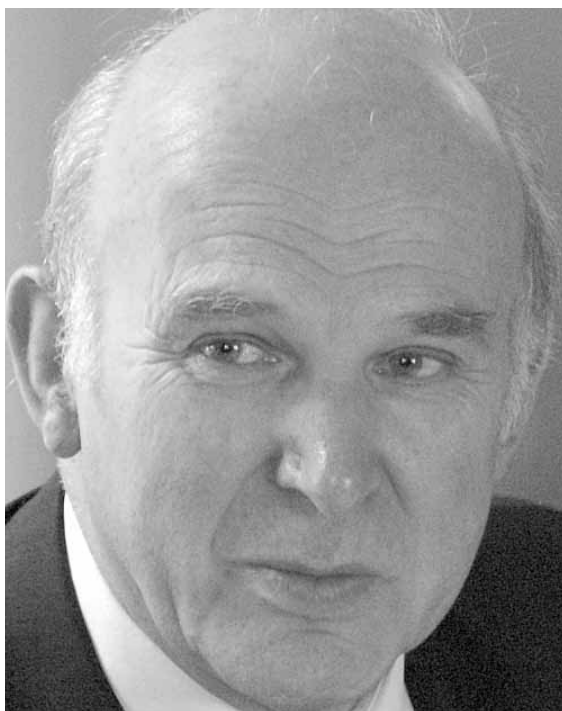
### **... and how it looks now (11 June 2015)**

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?

**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.**



‘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.’

We returned to coalition and its future, if there was one. It was

**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 ...**

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 over-enthusiasm 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.'

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

---

### 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



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.**

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.

---

### 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

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.*