Coalition and the Liberal D

Duncan Brack introduces this special issue of the *Journal of Liberal History,* devoted to the the policy record of the coal

The events of 2010 to 2015, when the Liberal Democrats participated in the first peacetime coalition government at UK level since the 1930s, and its catastrophic aftermath in the shape of the party's collapse in the 2015 general election, are momentous enough to deserve special treatment in the *Journal of Liberal History*. We can reasonably expect this five-year period to be the subject of many books and articles over the coming few years. Accordingly, together with our first special issue on the coalition, published in autumn 2015, this special issue of the *Journal of Liberal History* aims to offer raw material for the political scientists and historians writing those analyses.

The core of last year's special issue was provided by interviews with Nick Clegg and ten other former ministers on their experiences of coalition. Accompanying this, John Curtice and Michael Steed's analyses of the 2015 election result showed how in most of the country the party's support had fallen back not to the level of 1970 (the last election at which the number of Liberal MPs was in single figures) but to the Liberal nadir of the mid 1950s. In the remainder of the issue a wide range of contributors presented their views on why the coalition experiment ended so disastrously, aspects of how the coalition worked in practice, reviews of some of the impacts on the party, and comparisons of the coalition with other experiences.

We did not have space in that issue to consider in any detail what the coalition government actually did – its policy record – and what difference the Liberal Democrats made to it. That topic is the subject of this special issue.

We have chosen eight policy areas to focus on: economic policy, education, health, social security, home affairs, climate and energy, Europe and constitutional reform. Under each heading, we aim to explore the impact of the Liberal Democrats. How did the coalition government differ from what a Conservative majority government would have done? What did Liberal Democrat ministers achieve? What did they stop? And what should they have achieved?

For each of the eight headings, we invited a neutral academic to write an overview of what the coalition did and what difference, in their view, the Liberal Democrats made. We then invited former ministers in the relevant departments to write commentaries on these overview pieces. In their view, was the overview a fair assessment? What did it miss out? And to balance the views of the ministers, we also invited critics of the coalition's record from within the Liberal Democrats to write their own commentaries.

Making a difference

A number of common themes emerge from these contributions. First, in most areas Liberal Democrat ministers clearly made a difference to government. Often these were positive achievements: raising the income tax threshold, developing an industrial strategy, introducing the pupil premium, moving to parity of esteem between mental and physical health in the NHS, establishing the 'triple lock' for the state pension, investing in renewable energy, setting up the Green Investment Bank, legislating for same-sex marriage, and establishing fixed-term parliaments. It seems likely that a Conservative majority government would have done none of these, or done them more slowly; as can be seen in the Cameron government's record, in 2015–16, in dismantling or eroding several of them – though some, such as same-sex marriage, now seem firmly established.

Perhaps just as importantly, Liberal Democrat ministers also blocked, or at least ameliorated, a series of Conservative proposals, including measures to reduce workers' rights, cut benefits for people with disabilities and young people, reduce immigration, extend covert surveillance and hold a referendum on EU membership. Very little of this was obvious at the time; once again, the Tory governments' record since 2015 is making some of it much more evident now.

In passing, whatever one thinks of these achievements, it should be clear that almost none of them would have been possible through a confidence and supply arrangement – the alternative to a coalition that it is sometimes suggested the Liberal Democrats should have tried to negotiate in 2010. Much of what government does is not achieved through legislation, which is the main stage at which a party providing confidence and supply can influence outcomes.

Failing to communicate

The second general theme is that very little of what Liberal Democrat ministers did – positive as well as negative – was obvious to the general public. Much of it was achieved behind the scenes, or was evident only to specialists familiar with the detail of government policy. When it did make the light of day it was not strongly associated, or not associated at all, with the Liberal Democrats.

Partly this was due to the country's lack of experience with coalition governments – people are not used to one part of government claiming responsibility for a particular policy in opposition to the other part – and partly to the doctrine of collective cabinet responsibility, in which, indeed, the government acts, or at least pretends to act, as a unified whole.

Partly also, however, this was due to the Liberal Democrats' own decision, for at least the first nine months of the coalition, to emphasise the government's unity rather than the difference they made to it. One can understand why this decision was taken – it was important to demonstrate that this new form of government could work effectively – but the Liberal Democrats did this so impressively well that they entirely submerged their identity. Opinion surveys showed that by 2015 the problem was not so much that voters disliked what the Liberal Democrats had done; they simply thought the party was irrelevant and that

emocrats: the policy record

ition government of 2010–15, and the Liberal Democrats' influence on it.

the coalition was in reality a Conservative government. Several of our contributors now regret not making it much more clear from the outset (and also during the 2015 election campaign) how different the Liberal Democrats were from their coalition partners – though this strategy would not have been risk-free either.

Failing to make a difference

The third general theme – at least with our academics and critics – is that while Liberal Democrat ministers did make a difference, in crucial areas they didn't make enough of a difference, or that it was the wong difference.

The obvious example is the tuition fees episode, a disaster from start to finish which significantly eroded voters' trust in the party in general and Nick Clegg in particular. But arguably the more significant issue was austerity, where during the coalition negotiations the party entirely dropped the stance on which it had fought the election and signed up wholesale to the Tory agenda – with profound consequences for the following five years. It is of course deeply ironic that in the end, the pace of deficit-cutting achieved by the coalition was much closer to what the Liberal Democrats (and Labour) had campaigned for during the 2010 election than to the much harsher cuts the Conservatives had wanted; but since the Liberal Democrats had signed up to the latter's agenda, they could hardly claim credit for the outcome.

An underlying problem is the lack of a solid Liberal Democrat core vote; unlike the Conservatives and Labour, the party has very few groups of voters who will stick with it come what may. The protest vote element of the party's support at the 2010 election departed almost as soon as the coalition as formed; the party lost more than a third of its support by October 2010, before the tuition fees episode. Half of those who remained were then driven away by tuition fees, the long-drawn-out and botched reform of the NHS, the bedroom tax, the 2012 cut in the higher rate of income tax, secret courts and the lack of reform of the voting system, the House of Lords or party funding – all measures they expected Conservative, not Liberal Democrat, governments to do. The party's achievements, real though they were, were not salient enough to offset this – and some of them, like the reduction in income tax, were coopted by the Conservatives anyway.

Before 2010 the party seemed to be developing an embryonic core vote among a few groups, most notably students and those who work in higher education, and public-sector professionals. The coalition almost seemed to go out of its way to alienate precisely those voters.

As our contributors argue, some of this was due to the limited influence junior partners should expect to exert in coalition governments; some of it was due to bad judgement or bad luck; and perhaps some of it was due to a lack of thinking in the party before the 2010 election. Although it is rare to claim that the Liberal Democrats lack policy detail, more than one of our contributors argue persuasively than on some key issues, particularly economic policy and health, the party was not distinctive in opposition; hardly surprising, then, that it failed to make a mark – or enough of a mark – in government. This, above all, is perhaps the clearest lesson for the Liberal Democrats as they seek to recover from the impacts of the coalition of 2010–15.

These are all, of course, matters of speculation. What we offer in this issue of the *Journal* is the story – or, more accurately, many stories – of what happened during those five years of coalition government, and what Liberal Democrat ministers did, and what they should have done. I hope you enjoy reading them.

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Note on contributors

Our warmest thanks go to all of the contributors to this issue. You may notice that a few former ministers you might have expected to see here are missing. Sarah Teather (Minister of State at the Department for Education, 2010–12) and Steve Webb (Minister of State at the Department for Work and Pensions, 2010–15) are both now in jobs which they felt restricted them from speaking out openly on their government experiences. Nick Clegg (Deputy Prime Minister, 2010–15) declined our invitation to write a commentary on constitutional reform, or on the coalition's record more broadly (his own book is due to be published as we go to print, and will be reviewed in the next issue of the *Journal*). Danny Alexander (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2010–15) agreed to write a commentary in the economic policy section, but then never submitted it.

Note on topics covered

Reasons of space have constrained us to covering just eight policy areas in this issue; we have chosen those we believed to be most politically salient in terms of the Liberal Democrats' impact on the coalition and the coalition's impact on the Liberal Democrats. It should be noted, however, that in addition to the departments covered in this issue, Liberal Democrat ministers also served, for the duration of the coalition, in the Departments for Communities and Local Government and for Transport, the Ministry of Justice, the Scottish Office and the Office of the Advocate-General for Scotland; and, for part of the coalition, in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Cabinet Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Departments for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and for International Development and the Welsh Office. We hope to consider some of these areas in future issues of the *Journal*.