Liberal Democrats in coalition: home affairs

Overview: home affairs under the coalition

Timothy J. Oliver

Lynne Featherstone celebrating the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013

Some of the key tensions and confluences of the coalition – both in its formation, and then in its record in government – came from the field of home affairs. When David Cameron first extended his 'big, open and comprehensive offer' to the Liberal Democrats after the 2010 general election, he argued that 'We share a common commitment to civil liberties and to getting rid, immediately, of Labour's ID cards scheme.'[1] On the other hand, he also highlighted disagreements with the Liberal Democrats, such as Conservative opposition to a government being 'weak or soft on the issue of immigration'.[2] There was also a long-standing tension over the Human Rights Act, which the Conservatives wanted to scrap, and the Liberal Democrats had vowed to protect.

However, the confluence between the two parties on the issue of civil liberties, in opposition to Labour's policies in government in this area, was strong enough to overcome the tensions over immigration and the Human Rights Act.[3] Once in government, however, the two parties frequently came to blows over issues of home affairs and, as this piece argues, the Liberal Democrats ultimately came off the poorer. Across three key areas – immigration, civil liberties and equal opportunities – the party managed to score some individual policy successes, such as on same-sex marriage, but overall it suffered a severe hit, particularly to its reputation as a party of civil liberties, one of the core tenets of its identity. The three Liberal Democrat ministers at the Home Office during this period – Lynne Featherstone,

Jeremy Browne and finally Norman Baker – each found themselves in increasingly hostile terrain. Lynne Featherstone's early decision to focus on delivering a key policy – same-sex marriage[4] – probably helped her achieve a clear victory, but the party was also struggling against a wider, increasingly unreceptive environment. Broadly, whilst some of the battles were victories, the war was a defeat, and the party has a real struggle on its hands to claw back its identity on these issues. However, we will begin by examining immigration, a topic that has been on the rise in British politics in recent years, and then go on to civil liberties, which has long been central to Liberal Democrat identity, before finishing on the topic of LGBT rights. Other areas we could consider, such as drugs policy, have been left aside for reasons of space and brevity.

Immigration

The 2010 Liberal Democrat manifesto laid out a 'firm but fair immigration system', divided into two parts.[5] In the first, the party promised to reintroduce exit checks at ports and airports, create a new border police force, introduce a 'regional points-based system' to channel workers towards areas where they were needed, and prioritise the deportation of criminals. The second section focused on asylum seekers, promising an independent asylum agency, a pan-EU asylum system, granting asylum seekers the right to work and ending child detention in immigration centres. Three of these policies made it through to the coalition agreement – that on exit checks, a border police force and ending child detention in immigration centres.[6] But, as Mike Finn notes, the big Conservative 'win' in this section – a cap on the number of migrants from outside the European Union – was one likely to alienate Liberal Democrat voters more than their victories here would appease them.[7] The underlying mechanics of this cap boiled down to a cap on a particular type of skilled worker visa, but the impression of agreeing to a cap that the party had opposed – indeed, Nick Clegg had ridiculed during the leaders debate – was also important.

During its time in office, the coalition was confronted with a steady rise in the prominence of immigration as an issue for the country. In 2010, between 25 and 38 per cent of voters raised immigration as their top issue; by 2015, the range was between 34 and 56 per cent.[8] At the same time, connected to this, was the rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP).[9] The response of the coalition was to increasingly tighten immigration policy, particularly for non-EU migrants. Perhaps the most public example of this was the 'go home' vans deployed by the Home Office in July 2013. Whilst Jeremy Browne, who was the Liberal Democrat minister in the Home Office at the time of the van's deployment, assured the party's conference in September 2013 they would not be returning,[10] the appearance of the vans was seen as a strike against him when he lost that job in October.[11] This single episode encapsulates much of the debate within the coalition over immigration; the Liberal Democrats critical, but ultimately unable to stop the steady tightening of controls over immigration that continued right the way through.

Rebecca Partos and Tim Bale chart this division, and note that it related back to the issue of the EU, which guaranteed free movement of people, thereby forcing the Home Office to focus on restricting non-EU migration levels to try and respond to the rising hostility to immigration among the electorate.[12] The end result, they argue, was a mixed-message position on immigration that deterred high-skilled migrants from wanting to come to the UK, without actually resolving the electoral dilemma posed to the Conservative Party by UKIP's rise. In the midst of this, the party managed to deliver on one particular promise – that of ending the ongoing detention of children in immigration centres, and indeed was very vocal about this success. Yet this policy, and the party's loud rancour at the increasingly anti-immigration positioning of the Conservative Party, failed to deliver a wider shift – either in the attitude of the government, or in public perceptions on this issue. Whilst the party was clearly limited by being the junior partner in a coalition, it nonetheless failed to transmit a clear, distinct position on immigration with a meaningful impact on the wider tone of government policies.

Civil liberties

The defence of civil liberties is a core component of the Liberal Democrat's self-identity – the party has long prided itself on being opposed to measures proposed by both Conservative and Labour governments that it counted as being too corrosive to civil liberties. In the 2010 manifesto, the Liberal Democrats argued that Britain's civil liberties were being 'eaten away', and proposed a 'freedom bill' as the centrepiece of their proposals on this topic.[13] The proposed bill would cover a variety of topics – CCTV, extradition and trial by jury – and topped off a series of other policies, such as reviewing libel law, scrapping the previous government's proposed ID cards scheme and preventing the repeal of the Human Rights Act.[14] This strong commitment to civil liberties was shared with the Cameron-led Conservative Party; as John Benyon notes, it became obvious that civil liberties were an area where the two parties had a very strong convergence.[15] David Laws noted in his book *22 Days in May* that the Conservatives themselves identified this convergence in the early stages of the negotiation of the coalition agreement.[16]

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The Conservatives had apparently been motivated much more by opposition to the policies of the Labour governments of Blair and Brown in these areas [civil liberties] than a deeper transformation on these issues. Once the initial policies – many of which were defined in opposition to Labour, rather than necessarily in their own terms – had been passed into law, the common ground evaporated very quickly.

Labour policies on subjects such as ID cards and trial by jury as the Liberal Democrat manifesto had been.[17] The coalition almost immediately introduced legislation to end the ID card scheme, and in February 2011 introduced a 'protection of freedoms bill', changing the law on topics such as CCTV and right to trial by jury.[18] Nick Clegg heralded these moves as part of a wider package of political reforms in his first speech as deputy prime minister, and promised 'the biggest shake-up of our democracy since 1832'.[19] But, by the middle of the coalition's term in office, this early optimism and consensus had begun to dissolve. In 2012, the Liberal Democrat's autumn conference came out in loud opposition to the proposal to introduce 'secret courts', contained in the government's justice and security bill.[20] Ultimately, the party's MPs overwhelmingly backed the bill, costing the party several prominent supporters and deflating a brief bounce after its victory in the Eastleigh by-election.[21] On the other hand, the Liberal Democrats did manage to continue to hold off the Conservative proposals for a 'British Bill of Rights' to replace the Human Rights Act, which they had advocated in their 2010 manifesto. The issue was moved out to a commission, and quietly buried, for the duration of the coalition.

In some ways, the Liberal Democrats were confronted with a much more vivid version of the scenario they faced on the topic of immigration when it came to civil liberties. As Peter Munce points out, the problem they faced was 'how genuine the Conservatives' long-term commitment to a robust civil liberties agenda would be during the lifetime of the coalition.'[22] As it turned out, the Conservatives had apparently been motivated much more by opposition to the policies of the Labour governments of Blair and Brown in these areas than a deeper transformation on these issues. Once the initial policies – many of which were defined in opposition to Labour, rather than necessarily in their own terms – had been passed into law, the common ground evaporated very quickly. As with immigration, the drift of the government after the initial agreement had been settled was increasingly rightwards, as Cameron battled to soothe his own party. The Liberal Democrats made angry noises – here, they were articulated by conference rather than by cabinet ministers – but their broad impotence on key issues such as secret courts can only have underlined the feeling among former supporters that the party had 'betrayed' them on these issues. On civil liberties, given its importance to the party's identity, such a feeling would have been particularly toxic.

LGBT rights

The Liberal Democrats have a long history of support for LGBT rights, stretching back to their predecessor party, the Liberals, in the 1970s.[23] However, the 2010 manifesto did not feature the issue especially prominently – the party pledged to improve recording of hate crimes against LGBT people, and to invest in tackling homophobic bulling, in the manifesto, but there was no single section or broad statement on this issue contained within the document.[24] Similarly, the coalition agreement generally avoids discussion of the issue – the two primary appearances are a pledge to lobby other governments to recognise UK civil partnerships, and to change the law so that historical convictions for now-legal same-sex acts would be treated as 'spent' and not show up on criminal records.[25]The second of these pledges was enacted through the government's protection of freedoms bill, which we introduced in the previous section.[26]

But the principal achievement that the government had on this front was in neither the Liberal Democrat manifesto, nor the coalition agreement – the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013. Lynne Featherstone, the Lib Dem minister in the Home Office at the time, announced a consultation on the issue in late 2011,[27] and after it had closed, the government announced they would move forwards with a bill in late 2012. Featherstone herself admitted to the lack of precedent for the decision to do this in her later book, *Equal Ever After*, but argued that it was a suitable, liberal policy for her to focus on during her time at the Home Office.[28] The party had voted to support her at autumn conference 2010, and David Cameron publicly threw his weight behind it early on.[29] Nevertheless, the coalition faced a hard fight – particularly with Conservative MPs and party members, many of whom were openly hostile to the bill, and indeed a majority of Conservative MPs voted against the bill in the Commons.[30] However, ultimately, same-sex marriage passed into law in 2013. Later, Nick Clegg would herald the first same-sex marriages to be held, by having the rainbow flag flown over the cabinet office for the day.[31] The coalition also, it should be noted, broke ground in other areas of LGBT rights. In 2011, the government introduced its first ever 'transgender equality action plan', which was heralded by the government as a 'first step' towards building better policies and services for trans people in the UK.[32] However, this early advance fell by the wayside; a select committee report on the topic in 2016 noted that the plan had gone 'largely unimplemented'.[33]

In the end, therefore, the Liberal Democrats in government managed to deliver several key advances in the field of LGBT rights. Compared with their manifesto commitments in 2010, and those made in the coalition agreement that year, one could argue that same-sex marriage represented an over-delivery on this metric. Certainly, it is very difficult to claim the argument that was advanced in the previous sections – that the coalition drifted noticeably rightwards, and that the Liberal Democrats failed to prevent this drift, only being able to offer loud complaints from

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the sidelines. The delivery of same-sex marriage showed an effective partnership between modernisers in the Conservative Party, and the Liberal Democrats, to deliver a concrete policy of measurable good to the people it impacted. Here, at least, the Liberal Democrats could claim success.

Conclusion

We have surveyed three key components of the coalition's home affairs agenda: immigration, civil liberties and LGBT rights. Across all of them, we have sought to see how effective the Liberal Democrats were at advancing their agenda. Certainly, in some key areas, the party managed to get a big policy win – ending child detention, the Protection of Freedoms Act, same-sex marriage – and would loudly trumpet these in the press and to voters after they had been passed. Indeed, the early ground of opposition to Labour policies provided fertile terrain on which to drive forwards policies jointly with the Conservatives. But, with the key exception of LGBT rights, the party increasingly found itself unable to deliver on a continuing basis as the coalition went on, and the government slid rightwards. Whilst it was able to continue to block some Conservative policies, such as the British Bill of Rights, and the 'Snoopers Charter', it was not able to continue to advance policies of its own. The pressure from the Conservative Party to respond to a rising electoral challenger in the form of UKIP, and the demands of backbench Conservative MPs for policies that reached out to their core vote, motivated the Conservative leadership to seek new ways of making peace.

The Liberal Democrats, therefore, should broadly regard this area of policy as a failure during the coalition years. Once the early common ground, founded on opposition to Labour's policies, had been used up, there were precious few opportunities for the two parties to work together in the cause of wider liberal interests. The party needs to understand lessons from these failures in order to make a greater success of its time in opposition, and in any future government at a UK or devolved level. Otherwise, it risks experiencing the same electoral cycle all over again.

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Commentary: former minister

Lynne Featherstone

Timothy Oliver's analysis of Home Affairs during the coalition years concludes that 'The Liberal Democrats should broadly regard this area of policy as a failure during the coalition years'. I disagree. We delivered on the Home Office policies that were in the coalition agreement and we stopped or mitigated much of the worst of the Conservative policies.

Coalition was one hell of a challenge in a country unused to coalition, fed by a binary system of right and wrong, left and right, and by a polarised voting system and media. We know the history of third parties in coalition in Europe from our sister parties. Our destiny was created the day we 'put the Tories into government'.

We certainly were guilty in the early days of trying to demonstrate that coalition was a strong form of government and worked for the country. There was a clear objective of making our long-heralded form of consensus government work. We could have done better – of course. If we had our time again I am sure we would have been more aggressively disagreeable in the early years. We would have had special advisers in place across our portfolios and not been completely isolated in our departments for the first year. We would have beefed up our communications operation hugely. Perhaps most importantly we would have negotiated 'outs' in the coalition agreement for those areas where we should never have had to cross a principled line.

Oliver's analysis follows the same pattern as we were up against in coalition. It belittles our successes and emphasises that which it was impossible for us to change. However there definitely are lessons to be learned.

Government works to the secretary of state – and the Home Office was headed by a Conservative, Theresa May. There were five Conservative ministers, up to five Conservative private parliamentary secretaries, several Conservative whips and several Conservative special advisers – and me. The ratio hovered around 15 to 1. I was later joined by one of Nick Clegg's special advisers for one-third of her time. The same was true for Jeremy Browne and Norman Baker who followed me.

I don't set that out for sympathy but it is a statement of fact. Of course, no one is interested in the nitty-gritty of the mountains we had to climb – all that is seen is the outcome and our good outcomes counted for less than our perceived travesties.

That is where Oliver is absolutely right – that whatever we may have felt we were achieving against great odds – the perception is that in certain core areas we failed to stop, and some times seemingly supported, illiberal policies. That is coalition.

Where Oliver analyses immigration policy and the damaging introduction of the 'cap' on immigration for those outside of the EU, our reputation did suffer. All the very good work that was done in modifying the Tory charge on immigration did not translate into understanding from our supporters, who only saw the 'cap' and not all the terrible things we had managed to prevent.

Despite all the cards being stacked against the Liberal Democrats, notable achievements are given scant import in the analysis: stopping child detention and introducing exit checks and a border police force all came to pass. Oliver gives us some credit on same-sex marriage but does not rate this as important compared to 'Go Home Vans'.

Oliver makes particular reference to the 'Go Home Vans' as an example of our 'failure'. They were an absolute disaster – but they were a Conservative disaster. Jeremy paid a high price for not getting on top of that one. However, he may not even have known that was going to happen. The Conservatives did not share everything with us.

This illustrates one of the key problems that the Liberal Democrats faced: when we did good things the Conservatives would get as much if not

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more credit than us; when the Conservatives did terrible things we were blamed for not stopping them. And one of the huge challenges unrecognised in Oliver's analysis was that of getting the media simply to report our successes, let alone support our position.

Same-sex marriage was a huge Liberal Democrat win – one to which David Cameron is now clinging like a life raft. But it wasn't David Cameron – it was me! I wrote the book *Equal Ever After* to tell the true story and make sure history attributed same-sex marriage to us because it was so difficult to get the credit for Liberal Democrats – even for that clear win. *The Guardian*, for example, which you might expect to cover same-sex marriage extensively, never mentioned my name in connection with same-sex marriage. Had I been a Labour MP I would have been celebrated on its pages daily. Same-sex marriages illustrates clearly the challenges of getting credit even when it was due.

On civil liberties we had a roaring start with abolition of identity cards followed closely by the freedom bill. We were super strong in stopping the British Bill of Rights and the 'snoopers' charter'. However I agree that the introduction of 'secret courts' did cost us some high-profile supporters.

I will finish on a small but important policy that Oliver makes reference to – the Transgender Action Plan. This was a Liberal Democrat win – I know because I introduced it to the Home Office. It was the first Transgender Plan in the whole world. You didn't know that? Shock horror – no publicity. Oliver then goes on to say that it 'fell by the wayside' and that a select committee noted that the plan had gone 'largely unimplemented'. However the chair of the select committee whose findings Oliver holds up as evidence of one of our 'failures' was Maria Miller – the very person who, as the Minister for Equalities, had responsibility for implementing the Transgender Action Plan.

I rest my case!

Baroness Lynne Featherstone was Liberal Democrat MP for Hornsey & Wood Green, 2015–15. During the coalition she was Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Home Office) (2010–12), Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (2012–14) and Minister of State for Crime Prevention (Home Office) (2014–15).

Commentary: former minister

Norman Baker

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There is no doubt that the Home Office was the hard edge of the coalition and Theresa May its granite face. The die was cast on day one when the former Home Secretary decided that she was running a Conservative department, with a Lib Dem somewhere in the corner, rather than a shared coalition department. This was in marked contrast to most other departments. Even Philip Hammond, no friend of the Lib Dems, had adopted a collegiate approach with me at the Department for Transport.

I was transferred to the department by Nick Clegg, and given the theoretical extra clout of being a minister of state, to claw back some ground, but three years into the coalition, with the honeymoon having given way to a transactional arrangement across government, it was an uphill struggle.

I was astonished to find that the basic architecture of coalition, such as access to papers and officials, was simply absent. I also had to deal with two highly political special advisors (now ensconced in Downing Street), polar opposites to the friendly and cooperative Tory Spads at the DfT.

Furthermore Theresa May had from the start of the coalition adopted a policy of negotiation with Nick Clegg, rather than the Lib Dem in the department. This was at odds, as far as I could tell, with the approach of every other Tory cabinet minister.

It would have been helpful for an agreed detailed template to have been agreed centrally in the first month of the coalition and then imposed on each department, rather than leave matters to each department to sort out itself, with only vague guidelines to follow. As I set out in my book *Against The Grain* (which Mr Oliver seems not to have consulted), in reality it was trench warfare from the off, with every inch having to be fought for.

Under these circumstances, it was indeed very difficult to find space to promote and introduce Lib Dem policies, to make progress as the only Lib Dem in a huge department when faced with a phalanx of Tories determined to stop you at every turn. So it is probably fair to say, therefore, that in my year and a bit, I took the pragmatic decision that the best chance to advance the Lib Dem cause was by stopping illiberal Tory initiatives, and by powering ahead on areas where either the Home Secretary and I were of the same mind, or where she was unlikely to notice what I was doing.

In the first category, we had some success on immigration matters when Mark Harper was the relevant Tory minister. Mark was Tory through and through but also bought into the coalition concept and happy to sit down and do

Norman Baker as Home Office minister

horse-trading. Hence we were able to win an end to child detention, as well as head off undesirable ideas, either by negotiation or by persuading him that the matter in hand would not get past our peers in the House of Lords, whose failure to follow the party line was sometimes very useful to me.

Of course if I was unable to stop a particular policy in the department, my links with the Lib Dems at the centre meant it could be raised again by Nick, either in his bilateral with the Home Secretary or with the prime minister.

It was often the case that David Cameron was more amenable to compromise than was Theresa May. When it came to the data retention and investigatory powers bill, for instance, this was something which was in my view genuinely needed for reasons it would perhaps not be prudent to spell out. But this was also an opportunity to inject some Lib Dem ideas into the framework.

Accordingly I sat down with Julian Huppert and we drew up along wish list of civil liberty safeguards and advances that was to be our negotiating position. To my astonishment, Cameron accepted the whole lot with barely a murmur, bar moving one date. Theresa May was furious. Whether she had been bypassed entirely or ignored totally was not clear.

In the second category, the Home Secretary and I shared a wish to make good progress on the issue of tackling violence against women, and she gave me good support and plenty of petrol in the tank to power ahead. The new initiatives, such as the disclosure orders allowing a woman to ask whether a partner had a history of violence, were genuine coalition policies that are positive and have made a real difference. I was given a green light to move forward on FGM, and so created the first ever cross-departmental declaration on the issue (helping to push a reluctant Michael Gove into line).

There were also issues where she and I agreed, and worked together to take on No. 10. This included alcohol issues, heading off Boris and his water cannon plans, and pushing up firearms licence costs.

In the third category, I was able, working with David Willets at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and with support from Oliver Letwin at the Cabinet Office, to launch the first ever government strategy to reduce the use of animal experiments. I think this was also a world first.

Of course I did also find time to sail into the teeth of the gale where it was necessary to do so, most notably over drug policy. Despite huge internal opposition, I managed to complete and publish the work Jeremy Browne had started, namely the publication of an International Comparitors Study, the first proper review of drug policy since the passage into law of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971.

This review demonstrated that the Portuguese approach of treating drug use as a health issue rather than as a criminal justice one had been successful in reducing drug use. It also demonstrated that harsher sentences did not reduce drug use, but did worsen health risks, for example by leading to more needle sharing.

I would argue therefore that the Lib Dems did achieve more than is credited for in the Home Office, but the lesson for the future is to ensure that, in any future coalition, the architecture and processes are firmly and fairly set on day one.

Norman Baker was MP for Lewes 1997–2015, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport 2010–13 and Minister of State for the Home Office 2013–14. He now undertakes training, including democracy building in developing countries, lecturing, and writing; he is the author of The Strange Death of David Kelly *(2007) and* Against The Grain *(2015).*

Commentary: critic

Caron Lindsay

Love is equal. Of course it is. That's why Lynne Featherstone put so much effort into ensuring that one of the key Liberal Democrat achievements in government was same sex marriage.

Unfortunately, there was little sign of this sentiment when the party agreed to an income threshold, unachievable for many, for spouses of UK citizens to live in the UK. Even if the spouse had a well-paid job, it required the UK citizen to earn more than £18,600 with additional requirements for children before they could be granted residency. This is highly discriminatory against women, who were more likely to earn less and to take time out of the labour market for caring responsibilities. It has also separated couples and families across continents. It is, in my view, one of the worst things that we agreed to in our five years of government.

Those two issues highlight the Liberal Democrats' record in the Home Office. When it was good, it was very, very good. When it was bad, it was awful.

Tim Oliver's piece highlights the tensions over immigration. I would like to focus on the human consequences of our failure to improve the treatment of very vulnerable people and of our pandering to the narrative that 'something must be done' about immigration.

The ending of child detention for immigration purposes, with families instead being housed for short periods in The Cedars facility, developed with input from Barnardos, was a major step forward. However, we did little to help women caught up in the asylum system, who faced deportation to countries where they had little or no status or legal protection. The case of Florence and Precious Mhango,[1] who faced deportation to Malawi in 2010, was an early test where we failed to make a difference.

In early 2013, a harrowing report by Maternity Action and the Refugee Council highlighted the plight of pregnant asylum seekers.[2] It included the example of a young woman forced to walk home from hospital in the snow with her newborn baby. At the same time, former minister Sarah Teather chaired an inquiry into the treatment of children in the asylum system which found that they were being brought up in an environment of state-induced destitution, disrespect and disruption.[3]

By agreeing to measures like the controversial 2014 immigration bill, which reduced rights of appeal, introduced landlord checks and allowed the deprivation of citizenship in certain circumstances,[4] we contributed to the developing anti-immigration consensus that had such an impact on the EU referendum.

Our record on civil liberties was better, but not without fault. We supported the introduction of secret courts that gave preferential treatment to the security services in cases where their actions were being questioned. We allowed the key principles of fairness in the justice system, openness and equality of arms, to be undermined.

We were, however, consistent in preventing the Tories from getting rid of the Human Rights Act and in stopping Theresa May from introducing measures which would require retention of communications data. However, our opposition to the Snoopers' Charter was not instinctive. Nick Clegg had initially been minded to accept May's plans. An angry conference call between bloggers who understood the technology and one of his advisers kick-started the process of a rethink. Jonathan Calder gave Nick some unsolicited advice at the time:

> What we need is a core of liberally minded people who naturally vote Liberal Democrat. If you put yourself on the other side of this debate from every civil liberties group in the country, it is hard to see why liberally minded people should vote for you.[5]

In July 2014, Nick Clegg agreed to rush the Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act through parliament, much to the consternation of civil liberties groups and many in the Liberal Democrats. This measure was ruled illegal in July 2015. As James Baker wrote on Liberal Democrat Voice at that time:

> If there was one lesson I think Liberal Democrats need to learn from the coalition years is that there are things you can compromise over and other matters of principle you simply can't. After all power without principle isn't power worth having.[6]

While we were undoubtedly less bad than either the Tories or Labour would have been alone, there is no doubt that we damaged our reputation as champions of civil liberties and lost the trust of people who supported us on that basis.

One area mentioned only in passing by Tim Oliver is that of drugs policy. We never stood a chance of persuading the Tories to pursue the sort of evidence-based radical reform that is proving successful in other parts of the world. However, we were able to secure a review that came up with such inconvenient truths that Theresa May was unwilling to make them public. That refusal precipitated the resignation of Norman Baker in November 2014.[7] Nevertheless, that groundwork has been done, so a future, more-enlightened government will not have to start from nothing.

Tim Oliver is right to state our achievements for lesbian, gay and bisexual people, but for transgender people our record is more mixed. Lynne Featherstone ensured that England had the first Transgender Action Plan in the world, but it fell into some very long grass after she left.

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The same-sex marriage legislation contained a 'spousal veto' that could stop some transgender people from being recognised in their new gender if their spouse did not agree.[8]

In a Home Office where Theresa May was determined to give as little ground as possible to the Liberal Democrats, there is no doubt that our ministers had a tough job to get things done. There is also a limit to what one junior minister could achieve even with backing from the deputy prime minister. Same-sex marriage and steps forward in gathering evidence on drugs policy were important and positive achievements. It is a matter of great regret, though, that we were unable to make the immigration and asylum system more humane or to emerge with our reputation as champions of civil liberties intact.

Caron Lindsay is editor of Liberal Democrat Voice, a member of the party's Federal Executive, and treasurer of the Scottish Liberal Democrats.

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2 Rayah Feldman, *When Maternity Doesn't Matter: Dispersing pregnant women seeking asylum* (Maternity Action and Refugee Council, 2013), available online at: http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0002/6402/When_Maternity_Doesn_t_Matter_-_Ref_Council__Maternity_Action_report_Feb2013.pdf

3 The Children's Society, *Report of the Parliamentary Inquiry into Asylum Support for Children and Young People* (The Children's Society, 2013), available online at: https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/asylum_support_inquiry_report_final.pdf

4 Ruth Grove-White, 'What you need to know about the Immigration Bill' [blog], *Migrants' Rights Network* (12 May 2014), http://www.migrantsrights.org.uk/blog/2014/05/what-you-need-know-about-immigration-bill

5 Jonathan Calder, 'Some unsolicited political advice for Nick Clegg' [blog], *Liberal England* (3 Apr. 2012), http://liberalengland.blogspot.co.uk/2012/04/some-unsolicited-political-advice-for.html

6 James Baker, 'Opinion: High Court rules DRIP legislation introduced by Liberal Democrats in government is unlawful', *Liberal Democrat Voice* (18 Jul. 2015), http://www.libdemvoice.org/opinion-high-court-rules-drip-legislation-introduced-by-liberal-democrats-in-government-is-unlawful-46817.html

7 Nicholas Watt, 'Norman Baker resigns as Home Office minister with parting shot at May', *The Guardian* (3 Nov. 2014), available online at: http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/nov/03/norman-baker-resigns-home-office-minister

8 Naith Payton, 'What is the trans "spousal veto" and why does it matter?', *Pink News* (7 Aug. 2015), available online at: http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2015/08/07/feature-what-is-the-trans-spousal-veto-and-why-does-it-matter/

Do you have time for Liberal history?

Can you spare some time to help run the Liberal Democrat History Group?

The Group was set up in 1988 to promote the discussion and research of topics relating to the histories of the British Liberal Democrats and its predecessor parties, the Liberal Party and the SDP, and of liberalism more broadly. We publish the *Journal of Liberal History* and a range of books and booklets, organise regular speaker meetings, maintain the Liberal history website and provide assistance with research.

We'd like to do more, but our activities are limited by the number of people involved in running the Group. The tasks include:

- Publishing the *Journal of Liberal History*, including identifying authors and commissioning articles and special issues.
- Publishing books and booklets: discussing ideas, finding authors, guiding the book through the final publication.
- Managing our internet and social media presence: developing our website as a source of research and communicating Liberal history through Facebook and Twitter.
- Organising our meeting programme: thinking of good topics and speakers.
- Running the organisation: necessary administration of a subscriber-based organisation, including our presence at Liberal Democrat conferences.

Our Committee meets about every three months, and much work is carried out by sub-groups (for instance on publications or on the website), which can often be done remotely.

If you'd like to be involved in any of these activities, contact the Chair of the History Group, **Tony Little** (a.little519@btinternet.com) – we would love to hear from you.