

Letters to the Editor

Liberal Democrats and the Coalition

The account in the *Journal* (issue 94, spring 2017) of the autumn conference discussion on whether the Liberal Democrats could have handled the Coalition better made interesting reading. I am grateful to Neil Stockley for his careful and detailed report of the meeting.

The organisers, however, could have set up a more representative meeting that might have enabled dispassionate conclusions to be drawn. Three of the four on the top table (David Laws, Chris Huhne, and Jo Swinson) were at various times ministers in the coalition government. No articulate critic of Lib Dem participation in the coalition seems to have been chosen as a main speaker. This is unfortunate since, regardless of one's view on whether it was desirable or indeed necessary to enter a coalition with the Conservatives, there are many valid points to be made about tactical and strategic mistakes made by the Lib Dems in coalition, and how these led directly to the dreadful general election results of 2015 and 2017.

It also seems that no serious challenge was mounted to the extraordinary assertion that: 'smaller parties almost always suffer at the ballot box. The senior partner claims credit for popular policies and achievements, and leaves the junior partner to take the blame for unpopular features of the government's performance'. This nonsense is often repeated by defenders of how the coalition was managed – most recently by Nick Clegg at the Scottish Lib Dem conference in March of this year. It is just not true. Consider the FDP in Germany, for instance. They were partners in successive coalitions with Christian Democrats and Socialists in Germany from 1950 to 1990 without noticeable effect on their support, which fluctuated between 6 and 10 per cent for most of that period. Being junior partner in a coalition didn't particularly harm them. Their popularity waned only when they later swapped Liberalism for neo-liberalism in an ill-fated attempt to become a 'party for business'.

Nor is it necessary to look to the continent for examples. In Scotland, Liberal Democrats entered coalition as the junior partner with Labour in 1999 and suffered no damage at all in the subsequent election. They entered another,

more detailed, coalition with Labour in 2003 and again did well at the general election that followed. Key to this success was that long-standing, radical Liberal policies were written into an explicit programme for government and then implemented. Among these was the abolition of tuition fees, promised and successfully delivered. Other Liberal policies implemented include free personal care for the elderly, land reform, and PR for local government elections. If Lib Dems in the 2010 Westminster coalition could be shown to have achieved such radical change, the later political landscape might have been very different.

Instead, the 2010 Westminster coalition's achievements seem paltry in retrospect. Failures such as the AV referendum (lost); the Green Investment Bank (now sold to a hedge fund); the Fixed-term Parliament Act (didn't prevent the 2017 election); and chaos over tuition fees weigh heavily in the balance against successes like the pupil premium and the triple lock on pensions (still in place at the time of writing). Raising the income tax threshold benefited high earners as well as those on low (but not very low) incomes and therefore had only limited effect on combating poverty.

In the Scottish coalition, Liberal Democrats took senior government positions and enforced true collective responsibility among ministers. Arguably a similar approach in 2010, with Lib Dems taking at least one of the great offices of state, would have increased the profile of Lib Dems. It might also have enforced collective responsibility more fully, thereby preventing Tory adventurism such as David Cameron's exercise of the UK veto in the EU and Lansley's disastrous NHS reforms. Instead, Nick Clegg took the largely meaningless post of Deputy Prime Minister (as John Prescott's successor!) and decided to concentrate on constitutional matters. These included our relationship with Europe, the AV referendum, and reform of the House of Lords. I leave your readers to judge what a success was made of those.

Ross Finnie – a former MSP and Scottish minister – has written convincingly about the perception of political closeness between Lib Dems and Conservatives created by the image and

mood music of the 2010 coalition, so it is unnecessary to elaborate on that.¹ It may, however, be worth quoting just one sentence from his article: 'Whether the exercise of taking a party which had spent 60 years establishing itself as a radical party of the centre-left into a coalition with the Conservatives could ever have been achieved without electoral damage remains a moot point.' And there is the crux of the matter. Electoral disaster results not from being a junior partner in a coalition, but from your choice of whom to coalesce with, and how you do it.

It might also have been worthwhile for the autumn conference discussion to have considered the one formal attempt made during the life of the Coalition to examine how it was being handled. In 2012 the Scottish Liberal Democrats' spring conference voted to establish a Commission 'to evaluate the progress and achievements of the Coalition after its first two years in office, so far as they affect Scotland'. That Commission held a number of meetings and brought recommendations to the party in the following year.

The Commission's recommendations were all approved, almost unanimously, by the Scottish party conference in 2013. Four years on, they can be seen as a cry for help from the membership, and as ways in which the party could have been strengthened and Liberal Democrat presence in government made more effective. Sadly, however, although I understand they were transmitted to the UK leadership, the leadership took no action on them and passed up the opportunity to engage in any dialogue with the Commission and its members.

There is much still to discuss about the 2010 coalition and how it was handled. It is to be hoped that the debate can be taken further at future meetings. But next time, please let us have a panel of speakers that balances those who were involved in the coalition with people outside it who have a different story to tell.

Nigel Lindsay

¹ Ross Finnie, 'From coalitions with the Conservatives to a coalition with the Conservatives', in *Unlocking Liberalism* (FastPrint, 2014).