

# COALITION B WHIGS, PEELITES

Coalition as a political term has decidedly mixed connotations. The word coalition entered English usage in the early seventeenth century in a religious context, denoting the growing together of parts, or coalescence – as in ‘God and Humanity by coalition becoming one nature in Christ’. By the later seventeenth century it was used in scientific discourse, meaning coalescence in one body or mass. It became a political term in the early eighteenth century denoting the combining of distinct parties without incorporation into one body. **Angus Hawkins** examines Liberal coalitions before 1886.



**A**s a political term it also acquired the immediate connotation of a mutual compromise or sacrifice of principles for the object of securing power. These negative implications were affirmed by the unhappy experience of the eight-month Fox–North coalition ministry of 1783.

The inference that coalition involved a mutual sacrifice or

compromise of principles in order to secure power continued into the Victorian age. So, for example, the Conservative leader Lord Derby declared to parliament in 1866:

By a government of coalition one understands a government of men of different parties, in which each, to a greater or less extent, sacrifices his individual opinions for the purpose of obtaining

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united political strength. We all know that it is always exceedingly repugnant to an Englishman to sacrifice his private opinion for expediency.<sup>1</sup>

This echoed Benjamin Disraeli's famous dictum of December 1852, pronounced in the Commons against the background of a violent thunderstorm, that 'England does not love coalitions'.<sup>2</sup>

So coalition was a term more often used in the nineteenth century by hostile opponents to decry ministerial arrangements than a badge of honour. A more positive, patriotic and principled description was that of a 'broad-based' or 'broad-bottomed' government: an eighteenth-century term meaning the coming together of different politicians in support of the 'national interest' and the monarch. The Younger Pitt's ministry after junction with the Portland Whigs in 1794; the 'Ministry of All the Talents' of 1806–7; Liverpool's government after the adherence of the Grenvillites in 1822; and Canning's short-lived Cabinet of 1827 with four Whig members were perceived in these terms. Likewise, Grey's Reform ministry of 1830–4, containing Whigs, Huskissonites, Reformers and one

ultra-Tory minister was not commonly referred to as a coalition, but a government brought together in the 'national interest' in order to secure a necessary reform of parliament. This resonated into the twentieth century when Ramsey MacDonald's coalition ministry of 1931 was described as a 'National Government', bringing Labour, Conservative and Liberal politicians together at a moment of economic crisis. The recent often lurid and sometimes tawdry experience of Lloyd George's coalition of a decade before had done little to displace the negative connotations of coalition government; in 1922 the *Daily Mail* talked of 'the poison of coalition'.

Only one of Queen Victoria's ministries acquired the commonly accepted label of a coalition, and that was Lord Aberdeen's government of 1852–5, in which Whigs, Liberals, some prominent Peelites and a small number of radicals, united by the advocacy of free trade, came to form what was initially perceived as a distillation of executive talent. This perception did not survive the mismanagement of the Crimean War, and the graphic reports of *The Times* correspondent W. H. Russell which brought descriptions of appalling ineptitude to the breakfast tables

of the British public. While coalitions in the twentieth century were often formed to prosecute wars, as in 1915 and 1940, the Aberdeen coalition was brought down by war. Moreover, one prominent minister in Aberdeen's Cabinet, William Gladstone, preferred to describe the ministry as 'a mixed government', rather than a coalition. The formation of a 'mixed government', Gladstone wrote, was only warrantable when ministers had the most thorough confidence in the honour, integrity and fidelity of each other; when they were in agreement upon all the great questions of the day; and when a great and palpable emergency of state called for it.<sup>3</sup> Lasting a little over two years, the Aberdeen coalition, with the exception of Gladstone's landmark budget of 1853, did not go down to posterity as a great success. As Gladstone again observed in February 1855, the majority against it 'not only brought us down, but sent us down with such a thwack that one heard one's head thump as it hit the ground'.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the notion of coalition, its relation to government by party before 1886, and how this bears on the genesis of the parliamentary Liberal Party requires further unpicking. Here it is important to

Left: the Aberdeen coalition cabinet in 1854, as painted by Sir John Gilbert

understand the nature and function of parliamentary parties between the Reform Act of 1832 and the Irish home rule crisis of 1886. Parties in Westminster, particularly in the Commons, were seen as essential to the authority and survival of governments. Ministries were sustained or removed by Commons votes, rather than the outcome of general elections as became the norm after 1867. But parties were *not* rigid blocs of homogeneous votes bound by ideological unity, MPs acting as the division fodder of the front bench leadership. This was a notion of party behaviour which became more familiar in the early twentieth century. Rather, Victorian parliamentary parties were more loose-limbed associations of MPs and were of a mutable nature. They safeguarded the sovereignty of Westminster against the dangerous exertion of the royal prerogative, and equally importantly resisted the notion of a direct electoral mandate. MPs were not instructed delegates, sent to vote as their constituencies demanded, but were representatives exercising a discretionary judgement on the 'national interest'. These fluid party connections, moreover, embraced differing shades of opinion. Intra-party differences were as marked as inter-party divisions. The ministries of Grey and Melbourne during the 1830s comprised Whig, Reform, Liberal and certain sections of radical support. Party leadership was a matter of brokering between sections of supporters, rather than dictating a line of policy which MPs were expected compliantly to endorse. Thus the mutable party connections of the early and mid-Victorian Commons were, by their very nature, combinations of political sentiment; fluid alliances of opinion being inherent to the character of parliamentary parties. So, while self-avowed government coalitions were rare, all early and mid-Victorian governments represented shifting alliances of party sentiment. This adds a necessary nuance to an overly simple distinction between single-party government and coalition ministries.

Our understanding of British politics is still dominated to a great extent by a paradigm characteristic of the party politics of post-1945 in which rigidly aligned national parties alternate in power. The rise of

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political science as an academic field in Britain after 1945 reinforced the perception of the binary structure of a national two-party system in Britain as 'natural'. The historical distortion produced by this paradigm is twofold. First, it suggests anachronistically that earlier parliamentary parties were or should be more united and ideological homogeneous than in fact they were. Secondly, it conceals the extent to which governments prior to 1945 were in fact coalitions or minority ministries. During the sixty years between 1885 and 1945, for example, only ten governments commanded a Commons majority, all others were coalition or minority ministries. Clear-cut single-party government was far less the norm prior to 1945 than the post-war paradigm allows. Shedding the distortions of this post-1945 paradigm is particularly relevant to understanding the party politics of pre-1886 and, in particular, the extent to which all parliamentary parties pre-1886 were fluid associations of differing opinion. While the word coalition carried negative connotations, in reality all governments comprised an alliance of varied shades of political feeling.

Self-avowed government coalitions come into being in a variety of circumstances. Often they are formed in the context of a national emergency, such as war; and in such a case they are usually seen as a temporary expedient in dire times. The historical warnings associated with the experience of such coalitions should give a lesson to David Cameron and Nick Clegg. The prospect of the next general election hangs over such coalitions like the sword of Damocles. Exiting gracefully from such coalitions is far harder than entering into them. The dynamics of such coalitions, moreover, operate differently at different political levels, depending on whether one is looking at the Cabinet, parliament or the electorate. The further from the political centre one moves the harder harmonious coalition politics are to maintain; retribution seeps in from the grass roots.

On other occasions coalitions portend a fusion of parties, marking a profound process of party realignment. Here temporary arrangements cast a far longer shadow. The short-lived Aberdeen coalition

should be seen in this context. Here lies its relevance to the formal foundation of the parliamentary Liberal Party in 1859. Ministerial relations within Aberdeen's Cabinet were often strained and difficult. Many Whigs at Brooks's were infuriated at so many Peelites being given Cabinet office. Aberdeen himself was an indifferent speaker who had never sat in the Commons, though his good relations with the Queen bolstered his authority. It is worth noting that in coalition governments the constitutional role of the monarch is brought to the fore: as in 1852 so in 1931. The prima donna of Aberdeen's Cabinet, the Whig leader Lord John Russell, disrupted ministerial relations with his commitment to further parliamentary reform. Palmerston, as Home Secretary, who privately referred to Aberdeen as an example of 'antiquated imbecility',<sup>5</sup> exploited disagreements over foreign policy to enhance his popular standing, while also refusing to being 'dragged through the dirt by Lord John' over parliamentary reform.<sup>6</sup> Patriotic denunciations of the coalition's Crimean policy by the Conservative opposition and radical critiques of either the feebleness of Aberdeen's diplomacy by John Roebuck or the misguided nature of national policy by John Bright exacerbated ministerial divisions. In the face of Cabinet differences, the Peelite minister the Duke of Argyll complained in October 1854 that the coalition was prevented from pursuing 'any definite course', leaving it at 'the mercy of the tides; and our motion becomes a mere drift'.<sup>7</sup> When Disraeli represented the Whigs as the subservient pawns of the Peelites, and the radicals as the unwitting tools of both, it was 'a most skilful and ingenious rubbing up of old sores'.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the Aberdeen coalition was an alignment of executive talent which anticipated that alliance of ministerial experience which came together in Palmerston's second ministry in June 1859, following the Willis's Rooms meeting of earlier that month. In 1859 non-Conservative MPs almost universally adopted the label Liberal as a common description of their party affiliation; older designations such as Whig, Reformer and Peelite rapidly falling into abeyance. Under Palmerston, Whigs and

Liberals shared ministerial office with a small minority of prominent Peelites, notably Gladstone, Herbert, Newcastle and Cardwell, the great majority of Peelite backbenchers having returned to Derby's Conservative Party. What the rich ministerial blend of Palmerston's 1859 government also enjoyed, and what the Aberdeen coalition had lacked, was significant radical support. Palmerston, unsuccessfully, even invited Richard Cobden to join his Cabinet. As Palmerston acknowledged, in 1859 he was forced 'to reconstruct the government upon a different principle and ... out of a larger range of political parties' – what Gladstone referred to as 'our strangely constructed Cabinet'.<sup>9</sup> The prominent Whig Lord Clarendon described it as 'a great bundle of sticks'.<sup>10</sup> It was a large span of political opinion, however, that assumed the common label of Liberal.

When, in late March 1859, Palmerston drew up a list of possible Cabinet appointments it contained no radicals or advanced Reformers. The Cabinet he was actually required to form in June under the banner of Liberalism was far broader. Thus Palmerston's ministry proved a rich blend of those parliamentary ingredients comprising Victorian Liberalism, Whig legislative reform and disinterested governance, Peelite morality and administrative expertise, and radical notions of economic and efficient government. Political parties are united by shared animosities as much as by common aspirations. Prior to 1859 Whigs displayed an anxious disparagement of radicalism, radicals found common purpose in decrying the oligarchic and pious assumptions of Whiggism, and Peelites assumed a self-adulatory sense of superiority enshrined in the cult of their dead leader. After 1859, as Whigs, former Peelites and radicals shared office, such antipathies were replaced by a common Liberal vision of effective and fair government resting upon liberties protected by the rule of law; of government being in the interest of the nation as a whole, rather than a particular section of society; of free trade, government economy and low taxation encouraging individual liberty, self-improvement and moral responsibility. This powerful Liberal vision affirmed Britain's

standing as a nation of lawful tolerance and moral decency, a bulwark against intolerance and dogmatism. The historic constitution, civil liberty, fiscal accountability, free trade and Christian humanitarianism grounded the Liberal commitment to stable and ordered progress. This was a moral political creed supporting a patriotic belief in Britain's status as a civilised and enlightened polity, superior to corrupt and repressive regimes abroad. During the early 1860s, Palmerston's Liberal government also drew to itself the dynamic popular forces of militant Nonconformity, organised labour and an expanding press.

Not that the path between the end of Aberdeen's coalition in 1855 and the formation of Palmerston's Liberal government of 1859 was straight or smooth. The radicals' relations with Palmerston were ambiguous and often hostile. Deep enmity between them erupted during the general election of 1857. Gladstone's career between 1855 and 1859 was especially fraught and his political trajectory shrouded in uncertainty. In many ways his natural political home seemed to be with Derby's Conservative Party, but in June 1859, to the surprise of many, he agreed to serve in Palmerston's Cabinet as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Russell's ambition to reclaim the Whig/Liberal leadership also stirred up fractious and bitter feelings, his genuine Liberal instincts compromised by a perceived selfish impetuosity and reclusive temperament. In February 1858, Clarendon despaired that Whigs, Liberals and radicals were 'split into factions more bent on cutting each other's throats than disposed to unite against the Tories'.<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, in 1859 the foundation of the Liberal Party as a lasting parliamentary alignment, under Palmerston's leadership rather than that of Russell, was merged with Liberalism as a doctrine, whose origins lay in the political economy of the 1820s, the Whig cry of civil and religious liberty, Nonconformist pressure for humanitarian reform, the radical demand for retrenchment in government expenditure, and the belief in efficient disinterested administration serving the whole of society. This coalescence of Liberal values and a Liberal parliamentary party was briefly foreshadowed by the Aberdeen

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coalition, underlining its significance in Liberal history. After 1859 the Liberal Party won four unambiguous and clear electoral victories (in 1865, in 1868, in 1880, and in 1885), affirming its dominance of Victorian politics as the embodiment of progressive and dynamic social values. Though coalition retained its negative connotation as a description of government arrangements, the Aberdeen coalition is notable for anticipating the crucial political coalescence of those ideas and beliefs which defined the great Liberal Party of Gladstone and his successors.

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