

WHY DID IT

Whatever the achievements of Liberal Democrat ministers in the coalition, the experiment ended disastrously. **John Pugh, Matthew Huntbach** and **David Howarth** offer their opinions of why it all went so badly wrong.

Decline and fall: how coalition killed the Lib Dems (almost)

Stephen Tall

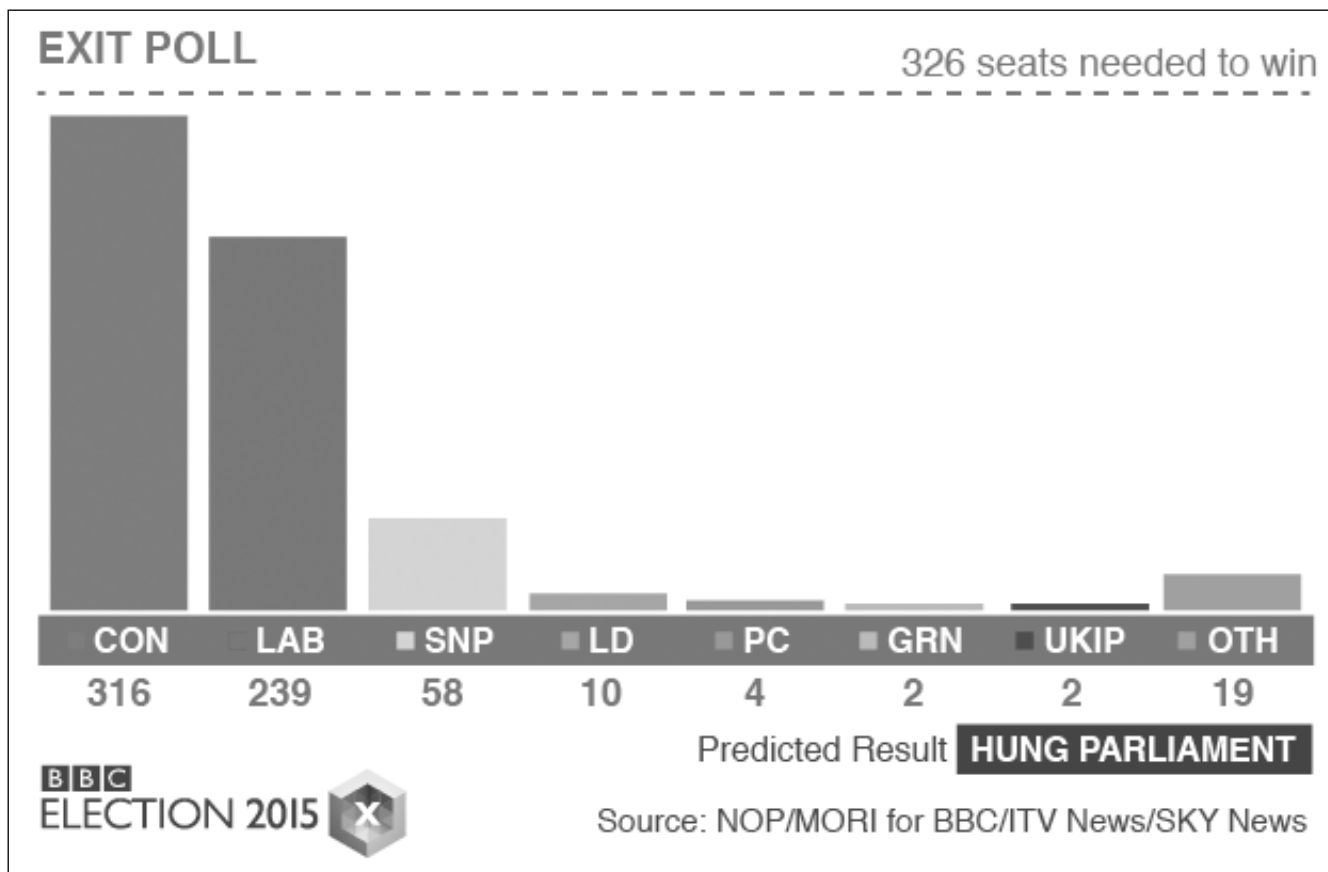
AT 10 PM on 7 May 2015, the Lib Dems experienced our very own 'JFK moment' – we all remember where we were – when the BBC exit poll was released showing the party scythed down from fifty-seven to just ten MPs. Some, like our campaign chair Paddy Ashdown, refused to admit the possibility, famously promising David Dimbleby that, if it were accurate, 'I will publicly eat my hat on your programme'. Many more of us had an instant sinking feeling in our guts, recalling how

accurately the 2010 poll had predicted that the Lib Dems were destined to lose more seats than at any election since 1970. If anything, the psephologists were over-optimistic this time: in forecasting the party would reach double figures, they inflated our result by 25 per cent.

No one – not even the most pessimistic, coalition-hating, Clegg-allergic, Orange Book-phobic Lib Dem – had thought it would be that bad. The rout of all but one of our Scottish MPs by the SNP was not entirely unexpected. Nor was

the loss of our urban English seats where Labour was the challenger. What was quite stunning – utterly, compellingly, breathtakingly unforeseen – was the scale of our defeat at the hands of our Conservative coalition partners in the suburbs and rural areas we had thought were our fortresses. None of us had seen that coming.

Thinking I could detect some kind of 1992-style Tory bounce-back in the final few days of the campaign, I got in touch with a top Lib Dem strategist to ask, 'Should



GO WRONG?

ously for the party, with the catastrophic May 2015 general election. **Stephen Tall, Nick Harvey,**
wrong.

we be worried that Cameron's schedule is targeting so many Lib-Dem-held seats? Do they actually sniff 300+ seats?' No, I was assured, the Conservatives were 'wasting their time in Twickenham and Yeovil'. Tell that to Vince Cable and David Laws. In one top Lib Dem target, where the party ended up finishing third, I was told by a highly experienced activist that 'our canvassing goes back years. I thought it was robust. I still do. There were absolutely no signs of this, not even on the ground today.'

So how did it happen? What caused the most disastrous election result for the Lib Dems since ... well, pretty much since records began?

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The answer is almost too obvious: our decision to enter into a coalition government with the Conservatives during the most severe economic downturn in a century. However, it is worth taking a step back to make another obvious point, but one which is now often forgotten: the Lib Dems had not expected to be in government in 2010. The widespread assumption had been (from the moment Gordon Brown flunked 'the election that never was' in October 2007) that David Cameron's Conservatives would triumph. In April 2010, the *Independent on Sunday* asked eight pollsters to predict the result: all eight forecast an overall Conservative majority. The Lib Dems were widely seen to be on the defensive against this blue tide; after all, the Tories were the nearest

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Then two things happened. First, the global financial crisis rocked the domestic political scene. Cameron's flimsy platform of compassionate Conservatism – that through 'sharing the proceeds of future growth' it was possible both to cut taxes and protect public services – collapsed, and his party retreated to its right-wing, austerity comfort zone. The public looked on, nervously, at the thought of the untested Cameron and his even younger shadow chancellor, George Osborne, taking the helm at this moment of crisis. The Tories' poll lead narrowed.

Secondly, the first-ever televised leaders' debate between the three main party leaders took place, with the fresh-faced Clegg besting both Cameron and Gordon Brown. The Lib Dem poll surge it sparked proved to be phosphorescently flashy and brief. But even the small ratings boost probably helped deprive the Conservatives of the majority they had expected to be theirs, as well as saving a clutch of Lib Dem seats – eight MPs won with majorities of less than 5 per cent over their Tory challenger – that might otherwise have been lost.

It is intriguing to pose the counterfactual: what if the Conservatives had edged a victory in May 2010 and the coalition had never been formed? Cameron would have had to have tried to keep his rebellious backbenchers in check without the assistance of the hefty majority the Lib Dem bloc of MPs afforded him. Chances are he would have struggled at least as

badly as his predecessor Tory prime minister, John Major. Meanwhile Labour, denuded of the instant unity conferred by its misplaced outrage at the 'ConDem' coalition, might well have descended into Miliband v. Miliband civil war. It would have been an ideal scenario for the Lib Dems, the perfect launch pad for further gains from both parties.

This may be just an alternative reality based on nothing more than idle speculation – but the tantalising glimpse of what might have been is worth bearing in mind, not least because it is what the Lib Dem leadership had planned for. One of Nick Clegg's first decisions as party leader at the start of 2008 was to commission what became known as 'The Bones Report' (after its author, Professor Chris Bones, a Lib Dem activist and management expert) into 'how the Liberal Democrats' internal organisation could be built upon to double our number of MPs over the next two general elections'. The implicit assumption was that the party would grow, rapidly but incrementally, for a further decade in opposition.

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As it was, the party was faced, on 7 May 2010, with the Hobson's choice of doing a deal with the Tories. This was the only option available for which the numbers added up to more than the 323 MPs required for a bare majority and so offered a period of stable government. The alternative, most of us assumed (I still think correctly), was a minority Tory administration forcing a

WHY DID IT GO WRONG?

second cut-and-run election within months and a resulting vicious squeeze on the Lib Dems.

However, few of us were under any illusions as to quite how dangerous a Lib-Con pact might be to the party's electoral fortunes. As I wrote on the *Liberal Democrat Voice* website on the Saturday morning after the election:

... many of our members, and even more of our supporters, would identify themselves as 'progressives', a vague term which can be reasonably translated as 'anti-Tory'. There is a very real risk that by throwing in our lot with Cameron, or even just appearing to, those progressive voters will desert the Lib Dems in favour of Labour, and that may threaten many of the fifty-seven Lib Dem seats we now hold.

Despite these fears, though, it was a collective, almost unanimous, decision. No official count was taken at the special Birmingham conference on 16 May, 2010, which sealed the deal, but estimates in the hall, where about 1,500 Lib Dem members debated the formation of the coalition, suggested only about fifty conference representatives voted against the motion endorsing the agreement: the rest of the hundreds eligible to vote were all in favour.

Initial enthusiasm was understandable. The Lib Dems had been out of government for close on a century, and the prospect of *our* policies, approved by *our* conference, being implemented in government by *our* ministers was a glistening one. What is perhaps more remarkable is that even with the benefit of hindsight, it appears most of us would do it again. When *Liberal Democrat Voice* asked party members in May 2015, 'Knowing all you know now, would you have still gone in to a coalition with the Conservatives back in 2010?', 74 per cent said yes.

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At first glance that enthusiasm appears odd, given we can date the Lib Dems' election catastrophe to that point-of-no-return decision. For many members, though, it was not the signing of the coalition deal which signed the party's death

warrant; it was our actions within the coalition. This debate matters because it has big implications for whether the party should consider coalition again. Is there something intrinsic about being a junior party in a Westminster coalition which means you have lost before you have started? Or is your fate in your own hands – is it possible to make a success of it, if handled well?

The biggest single plummet in Lib Dem vote share occurred in those first six months. Entering into the coalition with the Conservatives was a toxic act for many 2010 Lib Dem voters, and our rating plunged from 23 per cent in May, to 13 per cent by the end of the year. The tuition fees U-turn coincided with this, though did not in itself precipitate the collapse. It did, however, do longer-term reputational damage to the party (and, of course, to Nick Clegg, whose infamous 2010 pledge to oppose any increase spectacularly backfired).

What followed was a long-drawn-out decline. This was the period in which the party found itself outnumbered by the Conservatives in government, out-oppositioned by Labour on the centre left, and outflanked by anti-establishment parties untainted by government office with more strikingly populist messages (UKIP's anti-immigration dog whistle, the SNP's pro-nationalism placebo, the Greens' anti-austerity posturing).

Quite simply, we disappeared from view, becoming seen as an irrelevance as our support dwindled: a vicious spiral. By the time of the 2015 general election, and our doomed attempt to fight a first-past-the-post election on the basis of being everyone's second favourite party, we had been ruthlessly squeezed down to just 8 per cent.

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Was it worth it? Let us look at the profit-and-loss account, the debits and credits of our record in government.

The Lib Dems were not short of achievements. There was not a senior Lib Dem who was not able to rehearse, when challenged 'But what have you done?', the line that three of our top four 2010 priorities – tax cuts for low earners, the Pupil Premium, the Green Investment Bank – had been delivered. Or

who would not point to other policies – like infant free school meals, or same-sex marriage, or more apprenticeships – which were successfully pushed by the Lib Dems in office. Or who would not highlight Conservative policies, such as hire-and-fire at will or repeal of the Human Rights Act or the proposed 'snoopers' charter', which the Lib Dems had vetoed. It is a creditable litany, especially for a party with just 9 per cent of MPs.

The trouble was that the public did not notice. At least they were even-handed, ignoring not only our triumphs but also our disasters and treating both those imposters just the same. As the British Election Study, which has been examining how and why the public vote as they do in every election since 1964, noted: 'The Lib Dems did not do so badly because they were blamed for the failings of the coalition; rather, the majority of voters simply seem to have felt that they were an irrelevant component of the last government.'

Two examples suffice. Among the 44 per cent of voters who thought the economy was getting better, just 19 per cent credited the Lib Dems compared to 73 per cent who thought it was thanks to the Conservatives. Meanwhile, of the two-thirds of voters who thought the NHS had got worse under the coalition, just 19 per cent held the Lib Dems responsible while 69 per cent pinned the blame on the Tories.

Unfair? Mostly, yes. But like sailors complaining about the sea, it is pointless to wag our finger at the voters. Moreover, I do not think I was the only Lib Dem who, as the coalition drew to a close, felt a nagging worry that while our party's successes were things which the Conservatives had little trouble with, the Conservatives' successes (too-tight-too-soon austerity, over-harsh crackdowns on social security such as the 'bedroom tax', Andrew Lansley's pointlessly expensive health reforms) were things we should have had no truck with.

Sure, our ministers did their best, and yes, the coalition was markedly less right wing, and in some areas even quite liberal, compared to full-blown Tory rule. But – let us ask ourselves honestly – did we truly succeed in moving

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the country in a sufficiently liberal direction for enough people during our five years in government given the price we ended up paying?

Because it was not just in May 2015 that the Lib Dems were wiped out. That was simply the culmination of five years of humiliating defeats at every level of representative government. In the European parliament, eleven of our twelve MEPs were defeated. In Scotland, we lost twelve of the seventeen seats we were defending. (Wales, where we lost only one of our previous six AMs, was a relative success.) Our local government base was hacked down year after year, from 3,944 councillors in 2010 to just 1,801 in 2015. Today we control six councils, down from twenty-five in 2010. Only in the unelected House of Lords has Lib Dem representation grown.

For five years of restraining the Conservatives at Westminster, plus a handful of policy advances, the Lib Dems sacrificed decades of hard-won gains across the country. The opportunity cost of lost liberal influence has been huge.

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Was there anything the party could have done to staunch the losses we suffered in May 2015? I am doubtful. We were, I believe, destined for heavy defeat the moment we joined the coalition. Too Tory for our progressive voters, not Tory enough for our small-c conservative voters. The voters who remained – pragmatic, rational liberals (many of whom have since swelled the ranks of the party as new members) – are too thinly spread to win us many seats.

Maybe it would be different under proportional representation (our 8 per cent of the vote would yield us around fifty MPs), but first past the post is what the voters chose in 2011. And for as long as we have it, a third party looking to be the moderating force in what seems to be a close election will get flattened by the inevitable pincer movement. Even our MPs' much-vaunted local incumbency is not, it turns out, a magic wand.

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The party's campaign itself has been much criticised, in particular for Nick Clegg's mantra that the purpose of the Lib Dems was to 'bring a heart to a Conservative government and a brain to a Labour one'. This kind of split-the-difference positioning was unloved by activists – who labelled it defensive and unambitious – yet it was the only realistic option available.

Labour one'. This kind of split-the-difference positioning was unloved by activists – who labelled it defensive and unambitious – yet it was the only realistic option available. I call it an option, but it was not, not really. It was thrust on us by the voters when they popped the 'Cleggmania' balloon in May 2010 and then torpedoed electoral reform by rejecting the Alternative Vote a year later.

Those who denounced the strategy of liberal centrism were hiding from the truth that the party's only route into government was in coalition with one of the two main parties, either the right-leaning Tories or left-leaning Labour. That inevitably meant compromise, pegging the Lib Dems as the party of moderate, fair-minded pragmatism. We may not have wanted to place ourselves in the centre, but that is precisely where our circumstances put us. We had no choice but to make a virtue from necessity. An appeal to radical liberalism – land value tax, proportional representation, a citizen's income! – would merely have invited derision given our necessarily constrained record in coalition and that we would have been unable to explain how such manifesto promises could plausibly be delivered.

Ultimately, the 2015 general election simply was not about us. It was not a change election, but a fear election. The spectre of Prime Minister Miliband in hock to the SNP appears to have persuaded enough voters to put to one side their doubts about the Conservatives, to hold onto nurse for fear of something worse. Former Lib Dem MP Jeremy Browne was surely right when he said: 'If the coalition was on the ballot paper, it would win in May'. But it was not, so the only logical choice for those voters anxious to avoid a change of government was to vote Conservative.

On completing the coalition negotiations in 2010, William Hague is said to have told his wife, Ffion: 'I think I've just killed the Liberal Democrats.'

Well, perhaps. After all, we were just 24,968 votes – the combined majorities of the eight rump Lib Dem MPs – away from being wiped out. And, assuming the Tories now move to implement the long-overdue constituency boundary reforms (blocked by the Lib Dems in 2012 in retaliation for the Tories kiboshing of House of Lords reform), our notional number of seats is a mere four. Just because we feel we have hit rock bottom does not automatically guarantee things will now get better.

But we have 18,000 new party members and we have a new leader, Tim Farron. Which other political force in the next five years will be making the case for being pro-immigration and pro-Europe, for reforming our drugs laws and our political system, for championing civil liberties and the environment, and for opposing inheritance-tax cuts which benefit only the wealthiest and tax-credits cuts which hurt the working poor?

For five years the Lib Dems were the opposition to the Conservatives within the coalition. Now that is done, and with Labour clueless about how to respond to their defeat, it looks like the Lib Dems will be the only effective national opposition to the Conservatives in this parliament as well. We are not dead yet.

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From the Rose Garden to the compost heap Nick Harvey

THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS' cataclysm on 7 May 2015 demands analysis and reflection, and will be subjected to both for many years. A 'gathering of the fallen' at the start of July – organised by the Whips' Office as

a post-mortem exercise and to let people get things off their chest – brought roughly half the defeated MPs together for the first time since the election. There was a unanimous view that we had 'fought the wrong campaign' (but fought

WHY DID IT GO WRONG?

it rather well). But there were as many disparate views of what the 'right campaign' would have been as there were people in the room.

What was striking, however, was that despite our appalling election outcome – following disastrous rounds of local elections, calamitous European elections, and the loss of a third of our membership and two-thirds of our popular support – there also remained a unanimous view that we had done the right thing in the crisis conditions of May 2010 in entering into coalition with the Conservatives.

So where did it all go wrong? Following my involuntary exit from government in September 2012, I wrote a pamphlet, *After the Rose Garden*, later published by the Institute for Government, exploring from a partisan Lib Dem perspective what I perceived had gone wrong from the 'inside' and, drawing on my experiences, aiming to promote a debate about our expectations if we ever engaged in any future coalition negotiation.

Before describing my conclusions, let me offer a view of the election catastrophe. I filled an advisory role on Paddy Ashdown's election 'wheelhouse' – representing the interests of MPs and candidates. I felt throughout – and said to Paddy, Ryan Coetzee and Olly Grender – that they were seeking an organisational solution to a political problem. The party's best political brains spent hours poring over micro-detail of how many doors had been knocked on in which seats; baffling, as this could have been done by good ground organisers.

Our problem was our political platform, congratulating ourselves on our achievements in coalition and producing a worthy but dull manifesto whose message seemed to be 'steady as she goes' and 'more of the same'. My view throughout was that we looked (and indeed were) far too keen to serve in another coalition which, given the damage to our political position that the first had inflicted, seemed positively kamikaze. But questioning this starting point seemed to be perceived as disloyalty to the leadership team, though in truth we had long passed the point of no return on that.

My suggestion was to say: 'Coalition? Nah: been there, done that,

We were far too keen in the early days to show that the world doesn't end if you get a hung parliament and to prove that coalition could work. It was far too cosy and voters perceived that we had sold our souls to the Tories. By contrast, in the final phase, when we were belatedly trying to demonstrate 'clear water', we looked almost childishly petulant ...

got the T-shirt. Now let's tell you about *our* plans for the next five years ...' and to have listed four or five distinctive, radical and above all new ideas. I had no magic recipe, but promising five (unspecified) bills sold our environmentalism short; we abandoned our cutting edge on education (Michael Gove had set a shocking agenda – might we not have recovered our initiative, for example in the deplorably underdeveloped space of 14–19 education?); admirable proposals on mental health had a narrow appeal on the NHS; new economic thinking and something striking on either civil liberties or internationalism might have made for a more interesting pitch. And if there *had* been a hung parliament, they would have made a good prospectus for negotiations.

Perhaps we kidded ourselves all along that the advantages of incumbency could overcome awful poll ratings – after all it hadn't helped longstanding councillors. Then we convinced the media; and then between us, I wonder whether we and the media rattled the pollsters into making some allowance for it in their analyses, if only on the gut instinct that we had bucked headline figures before?

Looking back over the five years, we were far too keen in the early days to show that the world doesn't end if you get a hung parliament and to prove that coalition could work. It was far too cosy and voters perceived that we had sold our souls to the Tories. By contrast, in the final phase, when we were belatedly trying to demonstrate 'clear water', we looked almost childishly petulant, undoing any advantage which serving in government might have done to our fortunes. Like everyone else at the July post-mortem, I still believe that we were right to go into coalition. But much of the political handling – from start to finish – was little short of disastrous, and *that* accounts for our current plight.

Coalition negotiations

Things started to go wrong from before the word 'go', not least because the Conservatives were so much better prepared for the hung parliament scenario than we were. They had foreseen the outcome months ahead and war-gamed the

scenarios. The 'big offer' on the Friday lunchtime was far from spontaneous: it had been well rehearsed and was carefully choreographed.

The coalition negotiations in the heady days following the 2010 election were conducted in three parts. Firstly – and most publicly – was policy: two teams, led by William Hague and Danny Alexander, assisted by policy gurus Oliver Letwin and David Laws, spent hours hammering out a policy prospectus for the coalition, which was duly presented to the nation as the foundation block of the new government. On the Lib Dem side there was consultation over its contents and buy-in from parliamentarians, key party committees and even a special party conference. All this served the party leadership well when the going later got rocky, because there was a sense of shared ownership of the decision to go into coalition.

The second part of the negotiation focused on coalition machinery – the way disputes, which would inevitably arise, would be resolved. On our side, Jim Wallace brought to bear his experiences of two coalitions in Scotland and Andrew Stunell contributed his wisdom gained working for the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors and helping council groups to form coalition administrations. The principal idea was a 'Coalition Committee' as the Star Chamber to resolve disputes. Interestingly it rarely met. Instead the more informal 'Quad' (PM, DPM, chancellor and chief secretary to the Treasury) was used for this purpose. It tangled with some thorny issues, but appears to have been largely harmonious, reflecting perhaps some similarities in outlook between the participants. But backbenchers and the wider membership of both coalition parties might question the extent to which it protected wider political equities.

The third part of the negotiation – almost unremarked upon at the time, beyond the fact that the Lib Dems had some cabinet posts – was referred to colloquially as 'bums on seats'. For the Lib Dems this meant which – and how many – government posts would be filled by Liberal Democrats, and who would fill them. This was dealt with entirely on a one-to-one basis between

David Cameron and Nick Clegg. But, as was clear from the moment of Cameron's 'big offer' to the Lib Dems at lunchtime the day after polling, the Tories knew what they wanted from this part of the negotiation far more clearly than did the Lib Dems.

Compounding this difficulty, in contrast to the policy agenda, we Lib Dems had no internal discussion about what we wanted here. This struck me as rather odd. In the British political culture party leaders choose who holds what post, but it was surely a matter of collective interest what number and nature of posts we expected. But it seemed to be thought either unseemly or tempting providence to dare discuss 'bums on seats' and instead we sent Nick Clegg – who had served only one term in the Commons and had very limited familiarity with the Lords – into battle entirely alone, with no support, and no indication from his colleagues as to what we wanted. I was astonished that we had not deployed a heavyweight team to haggle over posts, numbers and operational questions.

Once these mechanical issues had been agreed – at breakneck speed and with inadequate collective forethought – there was really no way of unpicking them. We had waited eighty years for a peacetime coalition but, in a matter of hours or at most days, on critical points the pass had been sold. There was no political incentive for David Cameron to agree later to revisit any of these issues and concede more than we had agreed at the outset. The window of opportunity for fundamental renegotiation had gone for five years. We could only learn from experience and form a much more detailed shopping list for any future negotiation.

With fifty years of political progress reversed in one parliamentary cycle, it looks a daunting task to rebuild our lost political capital to the point that we would be relevant to a hung parliament following any future general election. But if that proves overly pessimistic, then inevitably much of the haggling in the days after the election would again focus on policy. So, establishing well in advance our clear 'demand' over government machinery and positions, then making this demand clearly understood from the outset, would

strengthen our position and save valuable time.

Governing with the Conservatives

Many Lib Dems greeted the 2010 negotiation as a triumph – rejoicing that key Lib Dem policies were to be enacted in government, and by Lib Dem ministers, for the first time in eighty years. For myself, I was more sceptical. When our negotiators reported back, my immediate thought was that agreeing to Lib Dem MPs abstaining on student fees and nuclear energy was a hostage to fortune. It was – in practical impact – capitulation, giving to the Conservatives a majority on these issues which they had not won. I also looked at the policy prospectus drawn up and could only see enough to fill the early part of the parliament, and I wondered whether as five years rolled out we would ever again be in so strong a position to bargain. And I looked at the 'bums on seats' in astonishment and dismay. I simply couldn't believe how few posts we had secured: seventeen ministers (one unpaid), three whips in the Commons, and three whips in the Lords (two unpaid). We held just 23 posts out of 122 in the government.

My assumption was that the Conservative starting point would be a divvy-up pro rata to Commons seat numbers (Lib Dems getting roughly one-sixth of the posts), whereas the Lib Dem starting point would be a divvy-up pro rata to votes (Lib Dems getting roughly one-third of the posts), and we would haggle to a midway point – Lib Dems getting roughly one-quarter of the posts. But the Conservatives cannily recognised that over five years, giving a bit of initial ground on policy was a price worth paying for getting plenty of their best bums onto the key seats. Bitter experience proved them right. We must never make this mistake again! In any future negotiation we must demand absolutely that we appoint at least one minister in every department (if the talent pool in the Commons were small, we are blessed with talented peers) and three paid whips in each House. Those seven or eight extra posts would have made a huge difference, as I was to discover to

my personal cost two years later. In short, in a two-party coalition where we essential to its viability, we must have roughly a quarter of the posts.

As we lick our wounds and survey the wreckage of our fortunes from the political wilderness, the excitement of forming Britain's first peacetime coalition in almost a century seems a distant memory now. We are all older and wiser. We can take some quiet satisfaction in the progress made in stabilising the economy, reforming aspects of welfare, improving the lot of pensioners and sustaining overseas aid. We can point to our signature achievement of raising the threshold and taking millions out of income tax; stimulating the creation of two million apprenticeships; guaranteeing a healthy annual rise in state pensions; the pupil premium paying extra money to help children from disadvantaged backgrounds; saving the post office network; creating the Green Investment Bank and the Business Bank and other hobby horses.

But being in government with the Conservatives was not the sweetness and harmony suggested by the rose-garden scenes of May 2010. They drove a hard political agenda and too often we hadn't enough political firepower in the right places to stop them. Some of the time they truly set out to 'shaft' us and took relish in doing so (and throughout they were planning a 'stealth' election strategy to destroy us). At other times they just conducted government as though we weren't there and assumed we would go along with it. Too often, we did.

Recommendations for any future coalition

Framing my recommendations in my Institute for Government pamphlet, I was hugely encouraged by the degree of colleagues' support for them: such as each department having a Lib Dem deputy secretary of state armed with a veto – akin to the one Nick Clegg cleverly secured for himself as deputy prime minister. Indeed the big wins of the 2010 coalition must be consolidated – in particular that 'DPM veto' (receiving contemporaneously, and having to approve, prime ministerial papers); the balanced 'Quad'; the

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WHY DID IT GO WRONG?

deputy prime minister's chairing of the Home [domestic] Affairs cabinet committee; and a Lib Dem chief secretary to the Treasury.

Secondly, we must have a minister at every department (twenty-two in the current structure of government, though we favour merging departments), plus three government whips in each House. Add a couple of junior ministers to support Lib Dem secretaries of state, and we would still only total thirty: roughly a quarter of the government. This is entirely reasonable in a two-party coalition if our participation makes the whole thing viable, and peers can always fill posts if Commons numbers are limited.

We shouldn't accept backwater cabinet posts. We can reasonably demand one great office of state (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, Treasury or Home Office); one of the politically sexy 'hot potato' departments (Education, Health, or Work & Pensions), and fight to the death to get it; one 'hard-edged' department (Business, Innovation & Skills; Defence; Energy; Communities & Local Government); and one 'softer' service department (Environment, Food & Rural Affairs; Transport; Culture, Media & Sport; Justice; International Development). The final Lib Dem cabinet minister pretty much has to be chief secretary to the Treasury.

The coalition party not heading any department must get first choice of the next portfolio in it. And in every department, whichever party does not have the secretary of state should provide the deputy secretary of state – Lib Dems should make this a deal-breaker in any future negotiation.

Further recommendations include:

- Every Lib Dem minister must have a special adviser to support them, and cabinet ministers at least two.
- The Lib Dem minister in every department must be able to: serve on the department's board; bring in chosen outsiders to conduct reviews and fill appointments; and commission work from officials on their own policy initiatives across the department's work.
- A completely new approach to Short and Cranborne funding

is needed: perhaps backbench funds for all parties, and front-bench funds only for those in opposition.

- We must move beyond the nonsense of one party's press team trying to gag the other party: the solution is for Lib Dem ministers to answer to the DPM press team and not to Number Ten's.
- The Coalition Committee should actually meet regularly and handle routine tensions inevitable in any partnership – only referring up to the 'Quad' intractable problems they are unable to resolve.
- The smaller party in a coalition must not be silenced in parliament on the basis that the larger partner 'speaks for' it. If ministers from the smaller party wish to make a separate front-bench statement, transparency demands that they must always be able to do so.
- Any future coalition should focus on running the country well, implementing policy, dialogue with parliament and nation, devolving power, and so reducing the flow of new legislation.

Conclusion

Politically, the greatest lesson Liberal Democrats must learn is to heed the words of Nancy Reagan and 'just say no'. It is difficult for the smaller party in a coalition to make the larger one do things it doesn't want to. But the reverse should not be true: it should be relatively simple to stop them doing things we don't want them to do.

Coalition history – our follies and our fortune

John Pugh

THERE IS A SCENE in *The Godfather* where Michael Corleone, calm and collected at the christening of his nephew, waits to hear the news that his plans have worked. Across the country in various places, rivals and erstwhile colleagues are being gunned down and eliminated on his orders. At a gathering of Conservatives after the 2015 election, Greg Hands,

They need our votes to get anything through parliament. With proper working arrangements, they also need our assent to all significant executive actions.

Of course, deals have to be struck which will sometimes result in one or other party going through the lobbies holding their noses. The larger party will inevitably get its way more; its greater numbers mean it will set the agenda more of the time. Lib Dems must accept that, and the underlying democratic legitimacy derived from winning more votes.

Willingness to serve in any coalition entails willingness to compromise in the national interest, and an acceptance that we will not get our own way all of the time. But we must ensure that we have reliable machinery to provide an effective veto on all occasions. We must be ready to use it on a daily basis. And we must have greater collective ownership of that veto.

And all Lib Dem MPs and peers, prominent frontbencher or loyal foot soldier, must be able to look themselves in the mirror as they brush their teeth before bed, confident that the sound sleep of the righteous awaits them because nothing they have been asked to do that day has been an abandonment of the liberal and democratic values that drew them into public service in the first place.

Nick Harvey was Liberal Democrat MP for North Devon from 1992 to 2015 and Minister of State for Defence from 2010 to 2012. He served as party defence spokesman from 2006, having previously covered Transport, Trade & Industry, Health, and Culture Media & Sport.

inheritor of Danny Alexander's job at the Treasury, compared David Cameron awaiting the results to Michael Corleone, as one by one his former coalition allies were wiped off the electoral map.

Shortly after the election, at Lib Dem HQ, I attended a post-mortem to hear from defeated colleagues about what went wrong. Good points were made about the

Politically, the greatest lesson Liberal Democrats must learn is to ... 'just say no'. It is difficult for the smaller party in a coalition to make the larger one do things it doesn't want to. But the reverse should not be true: it should be relatively simple to stop them doing things we don't want them to do.

nightmare scenario we had faced – the polls showing a stalemate between Miliband and Cameron, the fear of Scottish leverage, the resource and intelligence of the Tory ground and air war, the weakness of ours, etc. Any change in any of those variables and the result would not have been so bad.

However, one thing the defeated MPs omitted to mention was that we had not just started to lose in 2015. We had lost badly – very badly – and consistently throughout the coalition years. Without the Scottish factor, an appalling night might perhaps just have been a very bad night. But with our poll ratings at their worst level for decades, it was perhaps odd that MPs thought they might somehow be immune from the decline in support that had affected our MEPs, our councillors, our by-election candidates – the rest of the party.

Perhaps, trapped in the Westminster bubble, we could not see the tsunami coming, consoled by the trappings of power, errant party polling and irrational optimism. Lured in by the courtesies of the House, many did not see their ‘honourable friends’ (for so we were taught to refer to our Tory coalition colleagues) as their mortal enemies – parts of the most successful political killing machine the country has seen. The Corleone analogy works here.

It is said that, after the coalition negotiations were concluded, William Hague went home and told his wife he had just killed off the Liberals. I do not know if he did say that, but I do not think he was correct. The coalition per se was not the cause of the electoral disaster that overtook us. That resulted for the greater part because the parliamentary party made a succession of strategic blunders which, looking back now, still appear staggeringly naïve – almost reckless – in their disregard of mature political calculation.

It is often said that heroically we sacrificed party interest in order to secure the good of the country – and that is how the coalition parliamentary party would like to be remembered. The coalition government was not a bad government and was, in its own terms, successful; but practically none of the strategic blunders we made that so badly damaged the party

had anything to do with the major achievements or goals of the coalition. The blunders we made were utterly de trop and born of political inexperience and hubris.

This was manifest from the very beginning, when people with previous experience of coalitions and pacts within a British context (Steel, Williams, etc.), whether at parliamentary level, regional level or council level, were either ignored or kept on the margins and advice sought instead from selected continental sources and special advisors.

Insufficient challenge was built into the new system. Had it been there, it might have been pointed out that, given the tribalism of British politics, the choreography of coalition had to look right. It had to look like a business arrangement not a rose garden ‘love in’. It might have been noticed that encumbering so many of our small parliamentary party with junior ministerial positions is a great way of tying up some of our best talent in the minutiae of government – while ensuring good behaviour from those hoping for ministerial preferment.

The Tories, in offering us so many baubles of office, made our party more manageable and potentially acquiescent. It suited the Tories to inveigle us into the tribal politics of Westminster, to embrace us, to school us in the old ways of government – and before long, colleagues were jumping up and down in the chamber asking on-message whips’ questions, ignoring sane amendments from opposition sources, and churning out centrally drafted press releases of depressing vacuity.

In a nutshell we needed to show from the word go that coalition was a new way of doing politics and we did not. We failed. It was as though traditional Westminster politics was temporarily being led by a new political-amalgam party. Politics in Westminster was still tribal; we had just gone off and aligned with the Tory side. It suited the Tories. It suited Labour. It did not suit us, however, but we guilelessly let it happen.

Having got the ground rules in place, the Tories’ next move was to undermine elements of our core vote and our biggest asset, which at that stage was Nick Clegg.

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Knowing the strength of support we had off the back of our resolute defence of public services, they immediately brought forward legislation on educational and health services that was designed to antagonise many of those who worked within them and possibly alarm those who used them. They very consciously acted, as Oliver Letwin put it, before their political capital was used up. In luring us into the health and social care bill (never in the coalition agreement) and creating misconceived havoc in our most cherished British institution, they successfully cemented an image of the Lib Dems as Tory-lite. We let them, and initially, to some sections of the party, associating the party with pro-market health ‘reforms’ did not seem to be a problem.

Forcing an early response to the Browne review of university funding – a move which in the end made a negligible contribution to deficit reduction – Osborne, through pressure on Alexander and others, invited us to trash our own reputation. We took up the invitation. Much has been made of the ‘foolishness’ of our tuition fees pledge but, having made it and had our leader iconically filmed on Westminster Bridge berating previous politicians for broken promises, it is hard to find a better instance of kamikaze politics. Post-2009 and the expenses saga, where trust was simply the major political issue, we chose to appear faithless rather than stand up to Osborne.

That the AV referendum shortly after became a plebiscite on Clegg and coalition fell nicely for the Tories, as did the sheer ineptitude of the Yes campaign and the people chosen to run it.

By that time, too, we had agreed to prioritise oddly the inevitable cuts in spending, by reducing capital expenditure and foolishly making sure that local government working over-rigidly on an annual financial cycle bore the major brunt of the first tranche of cuts. With some sleight-of-hand redistribution to largely Tory areas mixed in, we allowed a narrative of unfairness to blossom and ensured our rapid demise in many cities.

Casually we dismissed the resulting wipeouts in Liverpool and Manchester – the undoing of decades of graft – as mid-term

WHY DID IT GO WRONG?

blues and moved on, unfazed. Our relative failure in council elections compared even with the Tories was deemed inevitable. After all, everything was as normal in Westminster – save that a party once routinely graced with by-election victories was instead shored up with knightships and privy counsellors. As the Lib Dem benches came more and more to resemble Camelot, hard political realities receded. Belatedly we recognised our potential clout and embraced differentiation as something more than the odd spat in cabinet, but by then people inside and outside the party had a very unclear sense of what the party was about.

Given this, our campaign pose as the honest broker for the next government looked doomed and even risible as a campaign strategy. Ryan Coetzee, whose gifts turned out to be sub-Napoleonic, had schooled us to ram home our mantra of ‘a stronger economy – fairer society’. There is, however, scarcely a political party in the world that claims to campaign for the opposite. We could not get people to ‘get’ anyone who we were.

They may when they see Tory rule untrammelled. They may when they count and begin to appreciate some of the blessings of coalition government. They may when we rediscover our voice.

From a historian’s point of view it would be only fair to say that I struggle to be dispassionate. As a philosopher, I have concerns anyway about the objectivity of history; perhaps there are only ever ‘histories’. Whenever I look back I feel again the anger and bewilderment I felt over some of the crass decision-making in the first two years – the decisions that wounded the party without improving the economy. Damage was inflicted which was wholly and utterly unnecessary.

In my more charitable moments I tend to see such errors as stemming from inexperience, too trusting a nature, overconfidence in the rationality and fairness of the great British public. In darker moods I see hubris, the influence of ‘class’, a clumsy misguided attempt by the party leadership to remould a party they could not love and barely understood. But I still gasp at the thought that, after five years in government, we as a party of

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reform – but for the intervention of the Lords – nearly went into the election with our only constitutional gains being individual voter registration and boundary changes that helped the Tories.

History is supposed to be written by the victors but there are not many victors left in the party to contest the narrative. I cannot prove that, but for the follies of the early coalition years, outcomes in 2015 would have been different. What I can do is to defy anyone to explain how such blindingly obvious errors could possibly have helped and to gently point out that the alternative accounts that

conclude by telling us that it was electorate that got it all wrong are more likely to be delusionaly.

John Pugh was leader of the Lib Dem group on the hung Sefton Council before entering parliament in 2001. He led that group through successive elections, turning them from the smallest group to the largest. He was elected to parliament to join the largest post-war cohort of Liberal Democrat MPs and now survives as a member of the smallest group. He was backbench co-chair on health during the coalition, but resigned as result of differences over policy. He is currently the party’s education spokesman.

Coalition: a difficult situation made worse

Matthew Huntbach

THE FEBRUARY 1974 general election marks the point at which it could no longer be assumed that British politics was purely Labour versus Conservative. Although the electoral system savagely discriminated against the Liberal Party, its huge growth in votes meant it could not be written off as a historical relic and established it as the main opposition to the Conservatives in a significant proportion of the country. It was also the election where the Ulster Unionists formally broke their links with the Conservative Party and the SNP and Plaid Cymru won enough seats that they could no longer be dismissed as fringe elements.

Ever since then the possibility of a ‘hung parliament’ has been a topic for discussion in general elections. It was usually discussed as if the Liberal Party, or Liberal Democrats as it became, would have a powerful position as ‘kingmaker’, free to choose with which of the two main parties it would form a coalition (often vulgarly put as ‘jump into bed with’), and able to dictate the terms of that coalition. So the Liberal Democrat leader would be subject to questions on which party he preferred and what conditions he would ask for, but that was almost never balanced by the Labour and Conservative leaders being asked about their willingness to form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats and the terms they

would demand. The impression was given that, if a general election ever did leave the Liberal Democrats holding the balance of power, they would have effectively ‘won’ the election.

This is counter to the experience both of Liberal Democrats in local government in the UK and third parties in other countries. Holding the balance of power often turns out to be a miserable experience, in which you get the blame for anything unpleasant but none of the credit for anything that works well. A good example is the Green Party in Ireland which formed a coalition with Fianna Fáil in 2007 and was almost wiped out in the 2009 local elections and 2011 general election. The collapse in support for the New Zealand First party in the 1999 New Zealand general election was similar.

Small parties which are able to do well in balance-of-power situations tend to be those with committed supporters who have a narrow interest in certain issues. They do well because their supporters are unlikely to desert them and are easily satisfied so long as their particular interests are dealt with. The classic example was the National Religious Party in Israel. The UK Liberal Democrats are the opposite of that sort of party, with much transient support and very few voting for it on strict ideological grounds or because of support for a particular policy issue.

A junior coalition partner always faces the problem that when it agrees with the senior partner its contribution is ignored. When it disagrees and tries to force through its own ideas, there are two possibilities. If it alone supports an idea, it faces being denounced for playing politics – causing damage to force through something which has little popular support. If the idea is supported by the opposition, it needs to look for moral support from the opposition to prove it is not acting irresponsibly or selfishly. However, the opposition is more likely to want to draw supporters of that policy to itself and profit from the small party being unable to succeed, and so to denounce it rather than offer support. The obvious example is the Liberal Democrats' position on tuition fees. There was no way the Conservatives would have agreed to the tax increases necessary to pay for the Liberal Democrats' original policy, yet the Liberal Democrats were denounced for 'breaking their pledge' on it. Here, as with most issues they received no outside support or acknowledgement for the compromise they reached, which saved universities from the large-scale cuts endured by further education colleges with a system which, in terms of money passing through hands, was little different from a graduate tax.

Following the 2010 general election the Liberal Democrats were in just about the worst situation a small party could be in. After a big rise in the opinion polls attributed to 'Cleggmania', the party did unexpectedly badly in its actual vote share. The situation seen in previous general elections, where its support had steadily risen as the campaign progressed, had not happened. Instead its support peaked early then declined, with (as seen again in 2015) an embarrassing 'I'll eat my hat if that's true' response from senior figures when the first exit polls came out. If the party had done unexpectedly well, it could have used the threat of doing better in an ensuing early general election to force its way. It was clear, however, that it had failed to meet expectations and would most likely be the biggest loser in an early general election, even if it could afford to campaign properly

in one, which it could not. The economic situation meant it would be denounced as irresponsible if it had not allowed a stable government to be formed, and Labour and Conservative would have joined forces in the election, as they did in the 2011 Alternative Vote referendum, urging voters to denounce the Liberal Democrats for the crime of existing and so denying the country a stable two-party system.

Most of all, the presence of MPs from other small parties and the distortion of the electoral system meant a coalition with the Conservatives was the only viable option, a Labour–Lib Dem coalition would not have had a majority. From Labour's point of view, allowing the Conservative–Lib Dem coalition to happen and then benefitting from the inevitable collapse of Liberal Democrat support was a far better option than attempting to form an unstable coalition with the Liberal Democrats, especially as they knew the economic situation meant that any incoming government would have to make unpopular decisions. The distortions of the electoral system, which gave the Conservatives over five times as many MPs as the Liberal Democrats even though they had barely one and a half times as many votes, meant that the resulting government was bound to be Conservative in its main thrust. The Liberal Democrats had no effective power they could use to get their way. Under these circumstances, they needed to take an extremely defensive position. The party's national leadership made sure it did the opposite.

By overemphasising and exaggerating the power the party had in the coalition, its leadership and national image-makers caused it huge damage. The reality is that the Liberal Democrats' influence in the coalition would be no more than a swinging of the balance towards the more moderate wing of the Conservatives. And that was relative given that in many ways the Conservatives had become far more right wing than when they were last in government, with the extinction of the old Tory 'wets'. Yet the image that was put out was that the coalition was almost an equal partnership. The Liberal Democrats needed to provide

assurance that the coalition government would be stable; but publicly acknowledging that their weakness meant it would be a government mostly Conservative in policy would have done this just as well, if not better.

As with many things, what happened at the start dominated how people saw it for ever afterwards. The 'Rose Garden' image of David Clegg and Nick Cameron holding hands was what stuck in people's minds. For a while, the Liberal Democrats appeared to push the idea that the coalition was not just half but actually three-quarters Liberal Democrat. The inaccuracies here are deliberate; the point is that human memory often constructs false images to fit in with conclusions it has already drawn. The '75 per cent of our manifesto implemented' message was well meant, but few saw that it did not mean the same as '75 per cent of the government's policies are ours'. People saw it as the Liberal Democrats supporting the coalition not out of necessity but out of direct support for its mostly Conservative policies. It was damaging also to trumpet the 75 per cent figure, which arose from one brief analysis, when another analysis gave 40 per cent.

Given that having a coalition was a novelty, and the coalition existed only because of the Liberal Democrats, and only the Liberal Democrats talked about it positively (Conservatives, of course, resenting it for denying them a majority), it was hardly surprising that people identified the word 'coalition' primarily with the Liberal Democrats, so assumed that what came out of the coalition government was essentially what the Liberal Democrats were about. Opponents of the government assiduously used the word 'coalition' where previously they would have used 'government' and took delight in using the phrase 'coalition policies' to describe policies which the Liberal Democrats would have fought against internally and accepted only reluctantly as part of the general compromise. The emphasis that the Liberal Democrat leadership put on boasting about being 'in government' helped support this notion.

By exaggerating and boasting about the power and influence they had in a government whose policies

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WHY DID IT GO WRONG?

very much reflected its five-to-one Conservative–LibDem balance, the Liberal Democrats gave the impression that either they were much more right wing than their supporters supposed, or that they were rather pathetic, overawed and so too easily satisfied by the minor concessions they were given by the Conservatives.

People who had voted Liberal Democrat because they were against what the Conservatives stood for, and saw the Liberal Democrats as the main opposition to the Conservatives where they lived, felt betrayed. People who voted Liberal Democrat because they were against what the Conservatives stood for, but lived in a Labour-dominated area and felt that Labour had become tired and complacent and the Liberal Democrats offered a fresh way forward, felt betrayed.

A common line among some who had gained influence in the Liberal Democrats was that this did not matter. Was it not bad that the Liberal Democrats were over-reliant on those voting for it as a ‘protest party’, and would it not be better if the Liberal Democrats had more voting for it because they supported its ideology? Those pushing this line tended to have an ideology they thought the Liberal Democrats should adopt, or that it was always the underlying ideology (hence they liked to call it something like ‘classical liberalism’ or ‘nineteenth-century liberalism’) of the Liberal Democrats and needed to be enforced to make the party more distinctive. It was a ‘small state’ ideology, incorporating much of what the previous generation of Liberal Democrats called ‘Thatcherism’. This was a turnaround from times in the past when it tended to be those on the left of the Liberal Party who argued for a more distinctive ideological approach, and those on the right who argued for pragmatism.

The coalition was not the time to engage in factional argument in the party. Activists who tended to the left would be the most discomfited by the fact of the coalition and the policies that were emerging from it, and so needed reassurance that there was still a place for them in the party. The message from the top was often the opposite. The idea was put across that the party had fundamentally changed in

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becoming a ‘party of government’, with this meaning a shift to the economic right. The most eloquent case for this was an article in the *New Statesman* written by Richard Reeves on the eve of the 2012 party conference.¹ He dismissed many of those who had voted previously for the Liberal Democrats as ‘borrowed from Labour’ and suggested that the party should abandon them and seek new voters. Reeves had worked as ‘director of strategy’ for Nick Clegg for two years prior to writing the article. Clegg made no effort to disassociate himself from its sentiments, and made disparaging remarks about those unhappy with this direction in an interview in *The Independent* newspaper at that time. Reeves’ remarks were deeply insulting to those who had spent decades building up support for the party, with many of those votes ‘borrowed from Labour’ deriving from activity as long ago as the 1970s Liberal revival and remaining there since, not won over in 2010 as he claimed.

Activists who might have been willing to defend as necessary compromises the positions taken by the party in government that were upsetting long-term supporters were undermined by a leadership unwilling to join in with that defence. The notion that they were what those leading the party secretly wanted in the first place was allowed to grow. Again, the tuition fees policy is an example. Instead of putting out the message that the compromise reached was because the Conservatives would not agree to the Liberal Democrats’ ideal, the leadership suggested it was a ‘mistake’ to have adopted our original policy and hinted that it was all the fault of naïve party members for pushing it. This boosted the party’s attackers who argued that the Liberal Democrats were untrustworthy because they had campaigned on a policy they never really believed in. Attempting to put the blame on party members ignored the fact that it was a decision of the party’s leadership to highlight this policy in the election campaign, and it was this highlighting with a ‘pledge’ to vote against tuition fee rises which made it particularly difficult when the party had to compromise on it.

An important role of the Liberal Party in its twentieth-century

revival was to be a voice for the voiceless. Starting with its historical survival in remote parts of the UK whose population felt neither the Conservative Party nor the Labour Party knew or cared about their particular issues, it built support among the less-well-off in southern, small-town and rural England who might once have been Labour voters but felt alienated from a Labour Party which seemed completely urban based. It then achieved success in urban areas, where Labour had been dominant, among people who felt Labour had taken their support for granted. This bedrock of support for the Liberal Democrats was thrown away during the time of the coalition in the belief that there was an untapped source of support from people who liked the economics of the Conservative Party, but wanted something with a little more of a liberal attitude on social issues, and had hitherto disregarded the Liberal Democrats as ‘not serious’. However, if there was such a source, joining the coalition and promoting the image of the Liberal Democrats as this sort of party did not tap it.

The underlying theme in the 2015 general election was dissatisfaction with British politics. The SNP was successful in tapping this in Scotland; the obvious inadequacies of UKIP and the Green Party meant they were not so successful in England. Most parties of protest are not liberal in instinct – that is often why they fail, and it is why it is best that they do. A liberal party of protest is a rare thing. Protest means challenging established power, which in the twenty-first century has moved from the state to big corporate business. The survival of the Liberal Party as a relic of the old pre-socialist left revived by local enthusiasts meant it was well placed to take on this challenge. Yet the Liberal Democrats during the time of the coalition seemed determined to throw away that role as well.

Much of the rhetoric coming from the top of the party during the time of the coalition put across the idea that it was ashamed of its old role of being a party of protest. It ignored the fact that the electoral system meant that local activists had passed through a brutal ‘survival of the fittest’ process. Far

from being unrealistic dreamers as was sometimes suggested, those who had survived and prospered were those who had a good feel for what works to win votes. Tempering feelings of protest and detachment from conventional politics into support for a party which was pragmatic on policy and humble in accepting that it had no right to anyone's vote (a big distinguishing factor from Labour) was their job and they were good at it.

This pragmatism meant that most active members could understand the argument for forming the coalition in 2010, so there was little outright opposition to it within the party. However, the overselling of the coalition, the attempt to use it to push a permanent shift to the economic right by some who had plenty of funding but little practical political experience, and the domination of the party's national image and strategy by a leadership which was disconnected from the party's activist base led to many serious mistakes being made in party tactics and presentation. Failing to understand how some of the lines used would be misinterpreted, and failing to learn the lessons from Ireland and New Zealand on how small parties are often damaged by coalitions, suggested a considerable naivety among those directing the

party's public relations at the top. The coalition was always going to be a difficult situation for the Liberal Democrats, but this made it much worse.

(Note, it has been suggested that the author of this article is making these points in 'hindsight'. In fact these are points he was making throughout the time of the coalition in comments on *Liberal Democrat Voice*. See, for example, <http://www.libdemvoice.org/opinion-agreeing-with-nick-25352.html#comment-184883> where the main point made here was made at the time of the 2011 Liberal Democrat party conference.)

Matthew Huntbach joined the Liberal Party as a university student in the 1970s. He was an active campaigner in various parts of the country, standing for local elections first in his home county of Sussex, and later in the London Borough of Lewisham where he was a Liberal Democrat councillor 1994–2006, and leader of the council opposition 1998–2004. He is an academic in computer science at Queen Mary University of London and at Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications.

1 Richard Reeves, 'The Case for a Truly Liberal Party', *New Statesman*, 19 Sept. 2012.

The Liberal Democrats in coalition: owners of all and nothing

Anthony Seldon and Mike Finn (eds.), *The Coalition Effect 2010–2015* (Cambridge University Press, 2015)

Review by David Howarth

ONLY WHEN A historical period is over can we truly understand it. The Owl of Minerva, as Hegel said, takes flight only at dusk. And so any attempt to understand recent political events, events whose consequences are still being worked through, is inevitably not so much an exercise in history as an intervention in the politics it describes. That applies without qualification to the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition of 2010–2015, whose effects on every party in British politics, and indeed on the political

existence of 'Britain' itself, are still very much in train. One perhaps paradoxical merit, however, of *The Coalition Effect 2010–2015*, a collection of essays organised and edited by Anthony Seldon and Mike Finn, is that it was completed and published just before the end of events it describes, which means that its assessments are free from any of the dubious benefits of hindsight. It stands as a document of what a group of eminent scholars and commentators thought were the important features of the coalition era just before the general election of 2015,

Finn suggests that ... Liberal Democrat secretaries of state could have been deployed in departments better suited to promoting the distinctiveness of the party ... The problem with that suggestion, however, was not just that Clegg was too little interested in distinctive-ness, but also that he was uninterested in civil liberties and constitutional issues ...

the result of which presumably surprised them as much as it surprised its victors.

The book is divided into three parts. The first examines the constitutional and institutional aspects of the coalition; the second looks thematically at a number of policy areas; and the third encompasses its political effects, principally on the main parties but also on the media and includes a very useful contribution from John Curtice on elections and referendums.

For students of Liberal history, the central chapters will be two by Mike Finn himself, on the coalition agreement in the institutional part of the book and, especially, on the consequences for the Liberal Democrats in the political part. Some of the other contributions are distinctly less useful, since they seem to forget that the government was indeed a coalition rather than a Conservative administration. One can, however, gain much from, for example, Howard Glennerster's clear account of the coalition's health reforms and Nicholas Timmins' admirable chapter on social security and pensions policy. Peter Riddell's chapter on 'The coalition and the executive' is notably well informed (and notably positive about how the coalition functioned within Whitehall).

Much is also to be learned, in a different way, from Martin Loughlin and Cal Viney's chapter on 'The coalition and the constitution'. It gives an account of unremitting hostility to the Liberal Democrats' attempts at constitutional reform, which the authors characterise as an illegitimate attempt by a minority party to impose its agenda on an unwilling nation. Admittedly, the AV referendum and House of Lords reform were total failures, but their assessment of the one Liberal Democrat success, the Fixed Term Parliaments Act, is based on a misunderstanding. They adopt Vernon Bogdanor's criticism that, contrary to the populist spirit of the age, the Act introduces a system under which parliaments make new governments rather than the electorate in general elections. But that fails to understand both the arrangements before the Act and those under it. During the twentieth century, the political composition of the British government changed several times in the course of a parliamentary



term. Whether the new government called an election was not automatic but entirely a matter for them. In 1940, for obvious reasons, no election ensued, but even in 1931 an internal debate raged about whether to call an election – a debate that caused the first of that decade’s many Liberal splits. The difference under the Fixed Term Parliaments Act is that the decision whether to call a new election lies not with the government but with parliament.

The failures over AV and the House of Lords also feature in Mike Finn’s chapter on the coalition and the Liberal Democrats. He makes it the centrepiece of what he calls the government’s second phase, from 2011 to 2013. He pays more attention, however, to the catastrophic first phase, 2010 to 2011, concentrating in particular on the tuition fees debacle. Finn points out that the party never recovered from the loss of support it suffered in 2010–11 and that subsequent policy successes in taxation, schools policy and even economic policy failed to offset the loss of trust and credibility that happened early on. He argues convincingly that although the party hierarchy might claim that the party’s manifesto had stressed promises

the party in the end kept, such as the pupil premium and raising the income tax threshold, the party had let the public down on what its own voters regarded as its unique selling points, in particular abolishing tuition fees.

One might question, however, whether Finn is right on a related point. He identifies as crucial the U-turn on nuclear power. It seems unlikely that nuclear power was anywhere near as significant for the Liberal Democrat electorate as fees. At the time Chris Huhne, the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, expressed surprise at how just little resistance or objection it had generated. One can make a case instead, looking at the detail of the party’s opinion poll rating decline in 2010, for saying that the issue that almost rivalled tuition fees in its negative effect was economic fairness, from the point at which Nick Clegg was seen to slap George Osborne on the back after a budget that reduced income tax for the wealthy and cut benefits for the poor.

More generally Finn argues that Nick Clegg’s central mistake was to give very low priority in the early years to maintaining the party’s distinctiveness, preferring instead to show that ‘coalition works’ by ‘owning’ every coalition policy. Once the public had fixed in its mind that the Liberal Democrats were merely an appendage to the Conservatives, later attempts at differentiation looked insincere or contrived. Consequently, even policies that really were distinctively Liberal Democrat, such as the increase in the income tax threshold, could not be convincingly claimed for the party. By ‘owning’ everything it ended up ‘owning’ nothing.

Finn suggests, as others have, that the party might have done better had it chosen to dominate specific ministries rather than dotting single ministers around many departments. But he adds that, even within that strategy, Liberal Democrat secretaries of state could have been deployed in departments better suited to promoting the distinctiveness of the party. That might be unfair in the case of the Department of Energy and Climate Change, where Liberal Democrats’ USP’s were at stake, but it is certainly a plausible idea that

the party’s liberalism would have emerged much more clearly had it taken the Home Office or the Ministry of Justice. The problem with that suggestion, however, was not just that Clegg was too little interested in distinctiveness, but also that he was uninterested in civil liberties and constitutional issues, habitually referring in this reviewer’s hearing to the former as ‘traditional’ – as if preserving them was similar to supporting Morris Dancing – and to the latter as ‘legal niceties’.

Finn also identifies as a serious problem the growing distance between the party in government, particularly Clegg, and the party in the country. Finn explains the process by which, as he puts it, Clegg came to despise his own party. Of course, for much of the party that feeling was mutual, with serious consequences for the party’s capacity to campaign. The biggest puzzle, however, is how Clegg survived as leader. His failure was complete at the point the AV referendum was lost in 2011, but no challenge to his leadership occurred until 2014, at which point the failure of the parliamentary party to act doomed the attempt almost as soon as it started. Finn’s explanation for the failure of the 2014 coup was lack of a convincing new leader – Vince Cable was implicated in the fees debacle and Tim Farron was unwilling at that stage to move – together with a prevailing mood of fatalism both in the parliamentary party and in the party at large. Finn is right that both factors were important. The parliamentary party failed to act because no one would lead it into action and those who might have led it feared that if they tried no one would follow them; and the degree of fatalism was so great that in some quarters it amounted to a feeling that the party needed to do penance for its sins. But one wonders what new information will come to light in the coming years about other possible factors affecting the parliamentary party, including the power of patronage, especially promises of peerages, and gullibility, particularly about private polling arranged to make the position of sitting MPs look far better than it really was.

Finn’s conclusion (for which he relies on a recent article in this

journal by the current reviewer) is that Clegg's desire to present the Liberal Democrats as a reliable coalition partner and thus as a 'party of government' undermined the party's definition

of itself as a party built above all on values. He describes the 'coalition effect' on the Liberal Democrats as 'devastating'. That looked right in April 2015 when this book came out.

It looks even more right now. Whether it will still look right when the Owl of Minerva at last takes off remains to be seen, but the old bird's wings are already twitching.

David Howarth is Professor of Law and Public Policy at the University of Cambridge and served as Liberal Democrat MP for Cambridge from 2005 to 2010.

Which Way Back? The Liberal Democrats and the 2015 election in its historical context

One-day conference, Birmingham, Saturday 28 November

10.00am – 4.00pm

University of Birmingham Campus B15 2TT (accessible from the University train station)

The Liberal Democrat–Conservative coalition government of 2010–15 was the first peacetime British coalition since the 1930s. Whatever the Liberal Democrats may have achieved in government, their electoral reward was the most catastrophic in the history of the party or its predecessors.

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- Policy and ideological direction – getting Liberal Democrat policy implemented in government, the relationship with the Conservatives and how this played during the election.
- Parliamentary strategy – keeping the parliamentary party together, 2010–15; how the Liberal Democrat presence at Westminster was used to reinforce the wider messages the party was seeking to promote to the public and inside the government.

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Registration £20 (students and unwaged £15). Payment will be taken on the day, but please register in advance – send your details to:

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