

The Liberal Democrats in government: Marching towards the sound of gunfire

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In 2010 many predicted that Britain's first post-war coalition government would not last to 2015 and that it would be the Liberal Democrats who would break first. **Tim Oliver** discusses why the party held on despite massive pressure, and what this can tell us about the performance of third parties in coalition government.



In bygone days, commanders were taught that when in doubt they should march their troops towards the sound of gunfire. I intend to march my troops towards the sound of gunfire.

– Jo Grimond, Liberal leader, Liberal Assembly, 1963.

We have been graceful under fire... we have put country before party.

– Nick Clegg, Liberal Democrat leader, BBC interview, 13 April 2015.

The formation of the coalition government in 2010 was accompanied by a stream of predictions that it would not last to 2015. For many it would be the Liberal Democrats who would break first. Having been out of government since 1945, the smallest of the UK's three main parties stood accused of being inexperienced and unprepared for the rigours of government.

Government has certainly taken its toll on the party. Having won 23 per cent of the national vote in 2010, with 'Cleggmania' briefly pushing the party above Labour in opinion polling, the party today finds its support somewhere under 10 per cent. In the forthcoming 2015 general election the party may find its support collapses to its lowest ever level reducing its number of MPs from 59 to a much lower number. In the 2014 European Parliament elections the party, the most pro-European of the UK-wide parties, lost all but one of its eleven MEPs. By 2015 the party had dropped to 2,257 councillors, down from just over 4,000 three years earlier. It has only 5 MSPs, down from 17. Membership has dropped from an estimated 75,000 to 44,000. The party's achievements in government are often dismissed or ignored. To say that Nick Clegg is unpopular would be an understatement; he may even lose his seat.

So why then did the party not quit the coalition or depose Nick Clegg? Was it because they had no alternative but to follow orders and keep marching towards the sound of gunfire? Did they fear the consequences of being shot of their captain? This is, let us remember, a party that was famed for a difficult – some said impossible – to lead activist base, was proud of its democratic party decision making structures and which had shown no qualms about deposing two leaders – Charles Kennedy and Ming Campbell – in quick succession.

The possibility of coalition (or minority) government looks set to become a norm of UK politics. Understanding the deals by which coalitions are formed will only be part of the future study of UK government. Just as important will be understanding coalitions as on-going relationships that change with time and are shaped by changes in trust and perceptions of risk and opportunities. This applies not only to the relationship between coalition partners but to those inside the parties.

What then can the UK's experiences tell us about how coalition government endures and how the participating parties hold on? Love or hate the 2010-2015 coalition, that it endured to the end shows that a lasting coalition government is possible in peacetime. Analysing why the Liberal Democrats hung on and made concessions to keep

the coalition going will be key to understanding the coalition given they were the ones many thought would break first. Did they keep going for reasons to do with their own internal make-up and beliefs, or was there something about the UK's political system, and Westminster especially, that meant the smaller of the two coalition partners had no option but to soldier on?

Party structure

The party's structure may have aided the leadership in pushing for and staying in coalition while also binding in the membership. While famed for having a complex and democratic structure, the Liberal Democrats have in the last ten years adopted more of a top-down style that has strengthened the position of the leadership. This allowed a leadership that came from the more economically liberal side of the party (sometimes referred to as 'Orangebookers') to sign-up to a coalition with the Conservative party, a party they were not as ideologically hostile to as others in the party.

However, as an explanation this can only go so far. The democratic structure of the party meant the party's members had to vote for the coalition (in comparison with the Conservatives who gave their members and MPs almost no say). A special conference, held only a few days after entering into the coalition, registered little disagreement with the idea. Was the party signing up for a done-deal given this vote happened after the coalition had been initially agreed and entered into? Not quite, the party having begun to prepare for such a vote when it still seemed possible that a coalition with Labour might happen or the Conservatives might form a minority government. The party's leadership and membership also had few other choices. Refusing to enter a coalition could have triggered another election, one the party could ill afford or which guaranteed a better result than that just achieved. The limited dissent shown at the conference bound the party to the leadership in an act of collective responsibility. Ditching Clegg would have led to the party being accused of trying to deflect blame. Adding to this was the trauma left from losing both Kennedy and Campbell. Losing yet another leader would have made the party look impossible to lead.

This does not mean dissent was not heard, the party's structures and famously rebellious conferences allowed those uneasy with the coalition to vent their feelings. The large number of Liberal Democrat peers, a large number of whom often rebelled, provided another avenue. But these were internal, lacked much unity and were rarely heard by the public. The resignation from the party of a large number of members opposed to the coalition limited the strength of opposition or the potential for a split. The conviction of Chris Huhne, the man who in 2007 ran against Clegg for the leadership, removed the most viable alternative leader. An attempted leadership challenge in 2014 fell apart in its early stages.

Inexperience

The Liberal Democrats often seemed to muddle through in government. Their ministerial team – which was almost half of the Commons party, meaning many MPs were bound into the government 'payroll vote' – were spread too thinly across government. The party itself was left in a weakened position to assist, it having experienced a sharp decline in funding and staff. A 2012 review by the Social Liberal Forum concluded that the party had been left unable to think of and put together new policy. The party might have prepared for a hung-parliament and coalition negotiations, but it was not so well prepared for being in government. Learning and coping therefore became the priority.

Philosophy

Muddling through would not have been sustained were it not for a deep-seated commitment – one central to Liberal Democrat beliefs – that coalition government is the future, especially if a more proportional electoral system were brought in for the Commons. Showing that coalition government was possible was one of the positive outcomes some in the party believed would be achieved by entering into a coalition. It would be a sacrifice, they believed, that in the long-run would change British politics in the way the Liberal Democrats success from the 1970s onwards had helped break the mould of two-party politics

The party had also done nothing but exercise power in coalitions and in more consensual political systems. It had been in coalition in Scotland and frequently in local government. It had held the balance of power in the House of Lords. Its MEPs were noted for being amongst the most adept performers in the Liberal group of the European Parliament where the group held the balance of power. The party's structures also made for an outlook that believed in consensus and negotiation as opposed to single-party majoritarian rule.

It would not have passed unnoticed for the party's leadership in the Commons that their colleagues in almost every other domain of UK politics were exercising power. They on the other hand seemed doomed to be locked out of UK government by the Commons two-party system. Adding to this was frustration in 2010 at seeing the party increase its share of the vote from 18.3 per cent to 23 per cent only to end up losing several seats. Determined to take the opportunity to show that the Commons party was more than a party of protest forever locked out of government, its leadership took it into the coalition thanks to a mixture of personal ambition, a determination to show the party could deliver, and to bring about a wider change to British politics.

Optimism

The coalition's honeymoon period might have led some to believe that British politics had indeed changed radically. The Liberal Democrats seemed to do very well in the coalition agreement. While public support for the party soon dropped to a level from which it has not recovered, the party could console itself with the thought that some of its key ideas were being delivered on and that, with time, they would see support grow as this was recognised. Commitments such as electoral reform and reform of the House of Lords could also cushion the party against drops in support. Bringing down the coalition early would have deprived the party of the chance to deliver on these promises and reap any rewards from entering government. So it was that the first period of the coalition, up until the Alternative Vote referendum in 2011, was marked by a more optimistic outlook and cooperation with the Conservative party. By the time some key proposals had failed to materialise, and with relations with the Conservatives now strained, the party found itself too far gone to back out. The party might well have helped restrain the right wing of the Conservative party, but a moderating role was never recognised by the public as something worth voting for.

So why then did the party not panic later on? In part enough MPs felt that even if the party was in trouble, they themselves were safe in their individual seats. The party is famed for digging in and holding what look like unwinnable seats in the first place. Polling that showed support holding up in local areas as opposed to the national level might have provided a false sense of comfort from which some MPs awoke too late. The party also has an in-built sense of optimism born from facing many dark days of low levels of support, of often being written off, belittled and ignored. During the coalition the party has entered its darkest ever period, but the party has not been able to shake off a sense that it can and will once again recover.

Constraints of government

Deposing of Nick Clegg would, like the Conservative Party getting rid of David Cameron, not only have entailed removing the leader of a party, but changing one of the leaders of Her Majesty's Government. This is not simply about the higher level and national ramifications involved. The institutions of government often limit what the partners in a coalition can and cannot do. The processes of government, aided by a unified civil service that seeks to serve a coherent executive, bind the leaderships of the parties together through meetings, minutes and shared experiences. According to some memoirs and comments in the press, personal and working relations, while sometimes stormy, were more harmonious than many in either party had expected. This was bolstered by the two leaderships sharing an ideological outlook on some issues, not least that of cutting the budget deficit.

Last, but certainly not least, was the effect of the fixed term parliament act. Even if the party had dropped out of the coalition, the Conservatives could have continued to govern as a minority government unless the Commons voted to trigger an early election. At no time did polling put the Liberal Democrats in a position to benefit from such a move. Discipline within the party was therefore helped by a sense that it was better to see the coalition through to the end

in the hope something would turn up to improve the party's standing.

Marching onwards

The party that broke the mould of two-party politics may find on May 7 that they have broken their back in going one further in trying to break the mould of single-party government. The party will survive, and could enter into coalition government again at some point given that for the foreseeable future it looks unlikely that any one party will secure an overall majority. Coalition government, its formation and its durability will therefore be a subject of much discussion and analysis. In studying the Liberal Democrats experiences in this coalition it will be important not simply to ask why they entered into coalition or what they achieved, but how it was that they helped deliver something many thought was impossible: a coalition government that lasted the course.

Disclaimer: Between 2007-2009 Tim Oliver worked in the Liberal Democrats Whips' Office in the House of Lords.

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