

Could Labour and the Liberal Democrats merge? If so, they should look to Canada for inspiration

 democraticaudit.com/2015/07/01/could-labour-and-the-liberal-democrats-merge-if-so-they-should-look-to-canada-for-inspiration/

By Democratic Audit UK

2015-7-1

*The Labour and Liberal Democrat Parties are both currently reeling from disastrous 2015 election results, with both in the process of electing new leaders following the resignations of Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg. But could the two parties, until recently at loggerheads, ever become one? **Alex Marland** argues that the two parties should look to Canada for inspiration both on why and how if they are minded to travel down this path.*



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British politics has been a déjà vu of the Canadian scene as of late. When David Cameron and the Conservatives sought to get the government's financial house in order, it is said that they [looked at what Canada did](#) to get that country's budget deficit under control in the 1990s. When the Scottish referendum was in play, ideas were plucked from the [1995 Quebec referendum on sovereignty-association](#). The rise and fate of the Scottish National Party is comparable to the [Bloc Québécois](#), a regional party that only runs candidates in Quebec and has likewise profited from the first past the post electoral system.

Canada is also a source of information for anyone contemplating what must happen when Britain's political parties get serious about merging. Multiple parties contested the 2015 British general election, pulling votes away from parties that were contenders to form a government. A similar multiparty environment [existed in Canadian elections](#) in the period surrounding the Quebec referendum. This will not go on forever. Eventually, fringe parties fizzle out as the anger that catapulted them forward subsides; this is arguably happening with the UK Independence Party. Regional tensions pass through ebbs and flows as hot nationalism becomes dormant, though for now the SNP will likely be a dominant force in Scotland for years to come. In a competitive multiparty environment, particularly one with a formidable regional party, the prospects of a change of government increase when two major opposition parties formally align forces. We are not talking coalition here, nor electoral cooperation. We are talking a formal merger.

The benefits of fusing two parties into one entity are manifold. They include cost savings, the maximisation of votes,

and the opportunity to reposition a political offering. There is [some speculation](#) that the time has come for Labour and the Liberal Democrats to discuss marriage. The next leaders of those parties would be well advised to authorize senior party strategists and regional party bosses to begin holding informal meetings with their counterparts to lay the groundwork. This is where the [recent Canadian experience with party mergers](#) offers yet another roadmap.

We need not get into the particulars of the history of the Canadian Alliance Party and the Progressive Conservative Party, which dissolved in 2003 to become the Conservative Party of Canada. Suffice it to say that Stephen Harper, the leader of the Canadian Alliance, agreed to most of the demands of the Progressive Conservatives in order to facilitate a merger. Harper went on to win the new party's leadership contest, and since 2006 he has been Prime Minister of Canada. Research about that merger suggests that the following four-step process could lead to a bargained party merger in the UK:

1. **Opposition parties go through a prolonged war of attrition:** Over time a series of shocks and public embarrassments including poor results in elections are needed to jolt both parties into a realization that radical change is needed. There will be disputes and turmoil as stalwarts defend their party's history and the values that they identify with. To move forward it is necessary for a number of high-profile people in the party to leave. The movement of top ranking personnel shakes the party up and contributes to building an internal movement for change. This takes time, because whenever there is some sort of success, particularly better than expected election results, stalwarts have reason to fight for the status quo.
2. **Party leaders come to accept that a merger is necessary:** The leaders of both parties must be open to considering a merger. Party leaders are veto players: as long as they are opposed there is no way forward. A growing proportion of the party rank and file, not just MPs, need to accept that the leadership circle must get over the hump of turf protection. This is why the shocks of electoral defeats and other public embarrassments are necessary conditions.
3. **Merger negotiations begin in earnest:** Brokering a merger in public is noble in principle but problematic in practice. Instead, political parties should designate emissaries to bargain a deal without the pressure of media drama. They must do so with the absolute understanding that any deal must be formally supported by both party leaders and be ratified by both parties' membership. Details such as the new party's name, a constitution, and general principles must be worked out, along with the resetting of constituency associations and the mechanics of a leadership selection process. Some of these points are more contentious than others, while some expected areas of dispute will find surprisingly quick agreement. For a deal to be consummated, the larger of the two parties should be prepared to concede to many of the demands of its more vulnerable counterpart. Here's looking at you, Labour.
4. **A merger proposal is ratified by the parties and implemented:** The announcement of a deal prompts internal reorganization and firefighting. Party leaders must assuage concerns that the proposed agreement is subject to the formal endorsement of party members. Once ratified, [the unified party must be branded](#), and preparations for a united undertaking in Parliament and elections must be initiated. A leadership contest for the new party is one of the first orders of business. Expectations of immediate success must be tempered, because the party realignment will cause some voters to switch allegiances, and attachment to the new party must be built. Supporters may be disappointed by the initial election results of the combined unit's initial foray. If the Canadian example is any indication this restructuring and realignment will increase the prospects of leaving behind the opposition benches for government.

Candidates to become the next leader of Labour and the Lib Dems should discuss the possibility of merger during their leadership contests. Generally speaking, running on a pro-merger platform is likely a recipe for disaster, given that party members will see such a candidate as disloyal. However even if an anti-merger leader is crowned it would be foolhardy to dismiss the option of initiating informal talks. Over in Canada, if the Liberal Party and the New Democratic Party are unable to unseat the Harper Conservatives in the upcoming October 2015 federal election, those opposition parties will have gone through another shock that should lead to them [discussing a merger](#). In both

countries, party elites and party members must tire of the folly of turf protection and embrace working towards a shared vision. Eventually they will realize that the formal merger of their parties is essential in order to provide electors with an alternative to the governing party. Such is life under the single member plurality electoral system and the parliamentary system of government.

This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of Democratic Audit, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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