

The coalition starts its white-knuckle ride

On 7 December 2010, a British Academy Forum debated the “Implications of the present coalition for British politics”. One of the participants, **Martin Kettle**, of the “Guardian”, reflects on the forces that brought together – and still hold together – the coalition government.



THE FIRST PEACETIME British coalition government since the 1930s has now been in power for six months, and the novelty has worn off. Thus Professor David Marquand FBA, addressing a British Academy Forum at the end of 2010 on the implications of the Cameron-Clegg coalition. A couple of months later, few would disagree with Professor Marquand’s remark. Yet while the novelty of the coalition has indeed worn off, as novelty does, and has probably now worn off even more than when the Forum took place, it is nevertheless worth pausing to reflect on how relatively seamlessly British politics has adjusted to the advent of a type of government which seemed to many, less than 12 months ago, to be inconceivable, undesirable and unworkable.

Historical context

‘Single party government is the British norm,’ pronounced Sir David Butler in 1978. Few would disagree. British government in both Westminster and Whitehall is predicated on the assumption of single party peacetime rule. The collection of essays, to which Butler penned the conclusion that begins with the sentence just quoted, was titled *Coalitions in British Politics*. Even 33 years ago, and in spite of the then contemporary Lib-Lab pact between David Steel and James Callaghan, the subject of British coalitions seemed a somewhat recherché one, a fact enhanced by the portraits of Lord North and Charles James Fox alongside Steel and Callaghan on the cover.

Yet the message of the 1978 book looked forward rather than back. Single party government might be the norm, Butler went on to argue, but in fact Britain had rather more experience of coalition and minority governments than this might imply. Moreover, as Butler suggested, Britain ‘is likely to spend even more time under such rule in the future. The forces that have given the country predominantly single-party government have weakened. There has been a breakdown in the national homogeneity and the voter discipline which induced the nation to fit into a stable two-party mould. And the electoral system, which has so consistently turned minorities of votes into majorities of seats, is at least under some challenge.’

Over the following three decades, there must have been times when Butler wondered whether he had got this right. As large Conservative majority followed large Conservative majority, to be replaced in due course by large Labour majority followed by large Labour majority, single party government was not merely in rude health but also seemed stronger than ever. Four of the five ‘landslide’ single party majorities of more than 100 of the universal suffrage era (1983, 1987, 1997 and 2001) came after Butler’s 1978 remark, while only one of

them (1945) took place before it. Coalition government may have made inroads at local authority level, and in the devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. At the British government level, however, coalition remained an unknown and, for most, an unwelcome possibility.

Yet, in the end, Butler may feel he has been vindicated. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition of 2010 arose out of a general election in which the Tories polled 36 per cent of the votes, against Labour’s 29 per cent, the Liberal Democrats 23 per cent and others 12 per cent. The parties won 306 seats, 258, 57 and 29 seats respectively in the 650-seat House of Commons. A minority government might have been possible and even, in terms of constitutional and cultural norms, probable. The political system is, after, all geared to such an outcome and, prior to May 2010, there had been little sustained planning – though there had been some – for any alternative.

Decisive change

Yet, once the results were known, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats quickly agreed to negotiate a coalition, produced an agreement for a full term of parliament and formed a government. Even today, the decisiveness of those days is very striking. Less than two weeks after the 6 May general election, Britain acquired a fully-fledged new form of government. It was a country without maps, yet a way was found and followed. The change was major. In Philip Norton’s words, we were now to be governed, not by a party on the basis of a manifesto which had been put before the voters, but by ‘a coalition government with what amounted to a post-election manifesto, one that nobody had actually voted for.’ It was, as Norton correctly says, ‘an era of new politics.’

In retrospect, some friends and many opponents of the coalition have tried to argue that the new government was a coming together of two deeply compatible views of Britain. The core of this view of the coalition is that it was formed for a clear ideological purpose. It was formed with the overriding objective of rolling back the power of central government after years of failed Labour statism. (There is also, it should be added, a revisionist variant – more common among some liberal Tories than among Liberal Democrats – which sees the coalition as picking up the Blairite standard in public service reform policy after it had been dropped under pressure from Gordon Brown.) In this view, the coalition is a happy marriage of David Cameron’s liberal Toryism and Nick Clegg’s ‘Orange Book’ anti-state liberalism; its purpose is, first, to diminish the size and power of the



Figure 1. Lord Roger Liddle, Professor David Marquand FBA, and Baroness Shirley Williams, at the British Academy Forum on 7 December 2010.

central state in everything from public spending to civil liberties; and, second, to empower the individual, the local and the mutual in order to reinvigorate citizenship and communities.

It would be foolish to dismiss this view of the coalition altogether, not least because, as the government has gradually bedded in, many of its members, from both parties, have settled on this, *ex post facto*, as a comfortable explanation for the situation in which they find themselves. The coalition's critics often take this view too, however. They argue that the speed and depth of the government's public spending cuts, which are embodied in what is thus far its defining public act, the spending review announced by George Osborne in October 2010, prove the point. The Labour leader Ed Miliband is one such. As he put it in February 2011, the 'ideological heart' of the government is that its Big Society rhetoric is a cloak to conceal its determination in favour of a small state.

Yet this view is open to several objections. One important one is that government ministers still go out of their way to insist that the spending cuts are 'cuts of necessity' rather than 'cuts of choice'. Ministers also continue to say that their fiscal policies will, in the end, return the public spending share of GDP to what it was in around 2007-8, before the financial crash and recession. A further, more subtle and (for many) counter-intuitive criticism, is that there is a sharp ideological divide between Osborne and Clegg on the one hand, both of whom can be characterised as free-market liberals, and Cameron on the other, whose Big Society, far from being a cloak for cuts, is the expression of a kind of anti-statist socialism.

Practical politics

As so often in politics, though, the formation and continuation of the coalition owe at least as much to practical rather than ideological factors. One of these was surely the extremely effective way in which the civil service, led by the cabinet secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell, was able to facilitate the formation of what was, in reality, the only viable coalition emerging from the election result. O'Donnell's firmness in insisting that the markets would require the formation of a solidly-based government, not least in order to avoid the kind of sovereign debt crisis then destroying the Greek government, was clearly decisive in many minds. Was the warning true? Observers and

participants are divided. Was it believed? Undoubtedly. But it had little to do with ideology.

In his excellent assessment,¹ Philip Norton argues that objectives of policy (which is the practical embodiment of ideology) played relatively little part in the formation of the coalition. The Liberal Democrats did not have to enter government to be able to influence public policy in the new parliament; after all, they held the balance of power. Moreover, some 70% of Liberal Democrats identified themselves as being on the left, a factor which argues against a coalition with the Conservatives and in favour of one with Labour. For the Conservatives, on the other hand, minority government offered in many ways a clearer ideological or policy path than the compromises implicit in coalition.

In the end, the coalition owes much more to political and personal factors than it does to policy or ideology. The Conservatives wanted a coalition because it offered the prospect of office after a long period in opposition and the possibility of securing their economic programme; the spending review would surely have been more constrained if it had been put forward by a minority government, and might even (though unlikely) have been defeated in the Commons. A few around Cameron, and perhaps even Cameron himself, also thought that a coalition would provide a way of marginalising the influence of the party right. The Liberal Democrats, meanwhile, were simply faced with the prospect of power. They had to say yes to a coalition of some sort. To have said no would have been treated as proof that the party was not serious. The fact that Cameron and Clegg got on together more easily than either of them got on with Brown clinched the deal.

Even today, novelty or no, these political considerations still explain at least as much about the coalition as ideology can do. The coalition is held together by common interests in its own survival, much as it was when it was formed. For the Liberal Democrats, the overriding interest is in proving that coalitions work. If the coalition collapses, the claim of the Lib Dems to be a party of government is negated. For the Tories, the overriding interest is to retain power at the next election. Given the unpopularity of the government's fiscal policies – whether imposed by choice or necessity – the Conservatives must rely on time and recovery healing their current wounds. Like the

Tories, Labour still tends to think in majoritarian terms, but Miliband appears to recognise that, when an election comes, he needs to be ready for another hung parliament and be better prepared for it than Brown was in 2010. Many psephologists believe he has little option.

A minister to whom I spoke recently came up with a good metaphor. He compared the coalition to an aeroplane. Last May the plane hurtled down a potholed runway in heavy fog. To the surprise of the passengers and crew it got airborne. Today, as all those on board knew would certainly happen eventually, the plane has run into turbulent weather. Most of the passengers are good travellers, ready for anything. Others are nervous about the bumpiness, but are prepared for the white-knuckle ride. Some, having accepted in theory that it would be a rough ride, are nevertheless shocked and frightened by the violence when the plane hits an air pocket. A few on board don't want to be there at all. The flight is a long one and it is possible that the plane will crash. But the overwhelming common

interest of those on board is for the plane to land as safely as it took off. As indeed, the minister comforts himself, most planes do. Whether it lands where and when it wants to are, however, other matters.

Note

- 1 Philip Norton, 'The Politics of Coalition', in *Britain at the Polls 2010*, ed. Nicholas Allen and John Bartle.

The British Academy Forum on 'Implications of the present coalition for British politics' was held on 7 December 2010. It was chaired by Professor Anthony King FBA, and Professor David Marquand FBA opened the discussion. A full list of participants and the text of Professor Marquand's advance briefing note may be found at www.britac.ac.uk/policy/coalition.cfm



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