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The Conservatives in Coalition: Principles, Politics and Power

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Abstract

The articles in this symposium examine Conservative Party politics in Coalition between 2010 and 2013, considering a number of key issues that have presented notable ideological and strategic challenges to the party leadership. These include the issue of European integration; managing territorial relations within the United Kingdom; the principle of humanitarian intervention in foreign policy; the debate over human rights; and party management concerns and electoral strategy. Together, the articles help to illustrate the ways in which the party has sought to achieve Conservative governing objectives whilst governing in partnership with the Liberal Democrats, and where principles have been sacrificed or compromised in the light of the more pragmatic business of governing.

While England, in Disraeli's words, may not love coalitions, for now at least the United Kingdom seems to have learnt to live with them. Can the same also be said for the Conservative Party? During the 2010 general election campaign, the Conservatives were keen to warn of the 'danger' posed by a hung parliament, suggesting that such an outcome would create 'indecision and weak government', and lead to economic paralysis (Conservative Party, 2010). A mock election broadcast on behalf of 'the hung parliament party' also suggested that 'yet another election' would occur within months rather than years should voters fail to deliver a majority

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Conservative administration (*ibid.*). Such a claim could be justified historically, as previous hung parliaments at Westminster had tended to produce 'short-lived minority governments, not coalitions' (Bogdanor, 2011, p. xi).

As such, the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition came as something of a surprise to many observers, even if (as Richard Hayton discusses elsewhere in this issue) it offered a number of strategic advantages to David Cameron. Although a small number of Conservative backbenchers have been vocal critics of this arrangement, calling instead for the party to govern as a minority (see for example Bone, 2012) most – in public at least – have maintained that they should honour the commitment to govern with the Liberal Democrats for a full parliamentary term. Moreover, some arch modernisers within the Conservative Party such as Nick Boles, elected as part of the 2010 intake of MPs, even went as far to suggest a formal electoral pact between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats at the next general election (Boles, 2010). By contrast, a survey of the Conservative grassroots found that with the benefit of hindsight the 'overwhelming majority' of party members wished that the Coalition had never been formed, and that looking towards 2015 most would prefer a minority Conservative government, or even a coalition with minor parties, over a renewal of the agreement with the Liberal Democrats. However, if the latter were the only way to stay in power 'a comfortable majority of rank-and-file Tories – including over two thirds of those who wish Cameron had never teamed up with Clegg in the first place – would do it all over again' (Bale and Webb, 2013, 17 July). Indeed, the leadership of the Conservative Party might need to prioritise this pragmatic approach in the coming decades, as there are good reasons to anticipate more hung parliaments resulting from future general elections (Bogdanor, 2011, pp. 123-44; McLean, 2012, p. 19).

As well as stretching the bounds of Conservative pragmatism, governing in Coalition has raised a number of ideological, strategic and policy challenges for David Cameron and his party. This symposium seeks to explore some of the key tensions and dilemmas facing the Conservatives in the context of Coalition. Initial academic judgements were provided based on the Coalition's first few months in office (Lee and Beech, 2011) and following its first full year (Heppell and Seawright, 2012; Hazell and Yong, 2012). Furthermore, the issue of who 'gained' and who 'lost' in terms of specific policy commitments in the Coalition's Programme for Government was examined, with analysts concluding that 'overall, both parties secured considerable gains on their own priority policies' (Quinn et al. 2011, p. 295).

After three years in office, the articles presented here aim to offer a mid-term assessment and, as such, make an important contribution to this emerging area of research and scholarship on the Conservative Party in Coalition. Doubtless others will follow in the coming years, but this collection affords the opportunity to consider the ways in which the Conservatives have attempted to deal with a number of key areas of friction and contestation encountered on returning to power after one of the longest periods of opposition in the party's history. Consequently the aim is not to provide a comprehensive assessment of all major areas of public policy, nor to examine in detail the inner mechanical workings of the Coalition government - rather the focus is the politics of the Conservative Party itself.

The central challenge faced by any office-seeking party is devising a successful election-winning strategy, and Conservative efforts in this regard are explored in statecraft terms by Richard Hayton. The formation of the Coalition was, Hayton suggests, a successful piece of statecraft by David Cameron, securing the party in office for a full parliamentary term and Conservative dominance of the government's policy agenda. Key Liberal Democrat objectives have been sidelined in office even as the junior partner has suffered a disproportionate public opinion penalty for its role in the Coalition. Nonetheless dilemmas remain for the Conservative leadership as it attempts to formulate its electoral strategy for 2015, particularly in terms of broadening the party's support base whilst satisfying activists and supporters tempted by UKIP.

The effectiveness of Conservative statecraft in office has also been brought into question more broadly in relation to two areas traditionally of vital concern to the party: territorial politics within the United Kingdom, and relations with the European Union. Alan Convery explores the first by considering the Conservatives' territorial statecraft in Scotland and Wales. The party's commitment to the Union may, he suggests, come under increasing strain as further devolution (notably in relation to financial matters) tests the limits of centre-autonomy management. European integration has provoked Conservative anxieties over the sovereignty of the Westminster parliament for several decades. While the degree of intra-party dispute over the issue cooled markedly while the party was in opposition, this newfound consensus rested on a vigorous Euroscepticism (Hayton, 2012) that would be strained not only by Coalition with the pro-European Liberal Democrats but also by the practical realities of governing. Eunice Goes analyses these tensions by examining the three most divisive European issues to face the Coalition since 2010 – namely the 2011 European Union Act, David Cameron's use of the veto at the December 2011 EU summit, and his announcement of the referendum on EU membership in 2013. She argues that while the Coalition's approach to the EU has been

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essentially driven by the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats have had some influence on the trajectory of European policy.

The European issue has perhaps been the most problematic David Cameron has faced in party management terms, and has been the subject of repeated backbench rebellions. However, a more general source of disquiet amongst ambitious Conservative MPs has been the impact of Coalition in terms of limiting the number of ministerial posts available, given the quota allocated to the Liberal Democrats. This is explored by Timothy Heppell in his discussion of ministerial selection and portfolio allocation. Heppell argues that Cameron secured his party a good deal in terms of the allocation of specific Cabinet posts, but that his ability to use the power of patronage as a party management tool has been restricted.

Another trigger for dispute between the Coalition partners has been the issue of human rights which, as Peter Munce discusses, has been the subject of extensive debate within the Conservative Party. The pledge made by David Cameron in opposition to repeal the Human Rights Act (HRA) and replace it with a British Bill of Rights (BBOR) was opposed by the Liberal Democrats and has not been fulfilled. Yet this issue also serves to illustrate the wider Conservative approach to constitutional reform issues, and the dominance of concerns over political positioning and party management in David Cameron's approach.

The final paper in this symposium also addresses an issue which often involves balancing matters of principle with more pragmatic concerns. Matt Beech and Tim Oliver advance an explanatory interpretation of the Coalition's approach to humanitarian intervention as a tool of its foreign policy. This analysis includes a case-study of the recent British involvement in Libya, and is contextualised in relation to the Conservative approach since the end of the Cold War as well as the influence of the Blair governments. Beech and Oliver conclude that this liberal Conservative approach retains realist elements, but has also incorporated a more idealistic ethical component.

In his foreword to a seminal collection of essays edited by Zig Layton-Henry in 1980, the former Conservative MP Ian Gilmour remarked that, 'The British Conservative Party is a very peculiar institution and British Conservatism is scarcely less distinctive' (Gilmour, 1980, p. xi). In many ways the context of Coalition government has served to remind close observers of the Conservative Party of its eccentricities and peculiarities without necessarily making British Conservatism any less distinctive. Together, the articles presented here help to illustrate the way in which the Conservatives have sought to achieve their key governing objectives and

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retain control of high-politics, and how the context of Coalition has hindered (or on occasion helped) this process. Any judgement at this interim stage of the Coalition's life-cycle is necessarily tentative in nature. However, as scholars of British politics and practitioners look forward with anticipation to the next general election, a large question mark still remains over the capacity of the Conservatives to secure an overall majority and recapture the electoral hegemony they once enjoyed. It is hoped that the collection of articles presented in this symposium will assist observers in considering this question and enhance understanding of the Conservative Party at this juncture in its history.

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