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# Conservative Party Statecraft and the Politics of Coalition

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**Abstract**

This article aims to evaluate the strategic positioning and ideology of the Conservatives in Coalition, under the leadership of David Cameron. In so doing, it seeks to shed light on the key drivers of the party's elite leadership strategy since entering government in 2010. The analysis is framed in terms of statecraft, namely the attempt to carve out elite control of the main fields of 'high politics', with the objective of devising a successful electoral appeal and image of governing competence. The analysis is structured around three phases of Coalition governance: civilised partnership, uneasy cohabitation, and divorce. The article argues that although the Conservatives have successfully dominated the government's agenda, key strategic dilemmas for the party remain ahead.

## Introduction

This article aims to evaluate the strategic positioning and ideology of the Conservatives in Coalition, under the leadership of David Cameron. In so doing, it seeks to shed light on the key drivers of the party's elite leadership strategy since entering government in 2010. The motivation for this article therefore lies in a desire to address a number of key disputes in both the academic literature and broader political commentary, and indeed amongst politicians themselves, about the nature of the contemporary Conservative Party. One central area of contestation has been the question of whether Cameron's leadership is essentially driven by pragmatism or whether it is underpinned by a robust ideological agenda. Cameron has variously been portrayed as lily-livered liberal lacking the necessary Thatcherite fibre to cut back the size of the state and tackle the deficit, and as latter-day disciple of Hayek eager to impose austerity (Wapshott, 2012). This debate stems from the one that emerged following Cameron's election as Leader of the Opposition in December 2005, over whether his arrival effectively marked the end of the ideological dominance of

Thatcherism within the Conservative Party, or the commencement of a further neo-Thatcherite phase (Hayton, 2012a; 2012b). As discussed in greater detail in the next section, this academic dispute is grounded in the wider literature in that it relates to the question of the extent to which the Conservative Party is by inclination an ideological one, or driven by a fundamental concern with statecraft – 'namely the art of winning elections and, above all, achieving a necessary degree of governing competence in office' (Bulpitt, 1986, p. 19).

Bulpitt's seminal article 'stresses the need to examine the activities of party leaders in terms of their statecraft' (1986, p. 19) and the analysis presented here is conducted with this approach in mind. The focus is on the party elite and its efforts to secure and hold on to power. Elsewhere, Buller and James (2012) have made the case for the suitability of the statecraft model for assessing political leadership in Britain, and it is particularly apt for in the case of the Conservative Party, given Bulpitt's original formulation. However, while the statecraft approach has significant value, it also contains an analytical bias against the role of political ideas. By contrast this article will attempt to locate Cameron's statecraft within its broader ideological context, arguing that the former is influenced in important ways by the latter. The aim here is also to evaluate the way that Conservative strategy and Coalition relations have evolved over time, and the organisation of the article is designed to help facilitate this analysis. As such, the blueprint set out by Buller and James (2012) analysing elements of statecraft in turn is not adopted. Instead an essentially chronological approach analysing the Coalition in three key phases is utilised. These are firstly *civilised partnership*, secondly *uneasy cohabitation*, and thirdly *divorce.* Before that, however, the following section provides contextual background by considering the period of opposition under Cameron's leadership prior to the 2010 election. An appreciation of this legacy of opposition is vital for understanding Conservative statecraft in office.

**Cameron's Conservatives in Opposition**

The thirteen year stretch of opposition endured by the Conservatives following New Labour's landslide general election victory in 1997 was one of the most unproductive and traumatic in the party's history. As I have discussed at much greater length elsewhere, for eight years the party was unable to accomplish the rudiments of opposition in terms of presenting itself as a viable alternative government or conveying an electorally appealing Conservative vision for the twenty-first century (Hayton, 2012a). The party became increasingly divided between modernisers who saw the need for a far-reaching reappraisal of Conservative policy, ideology and strategy, and traditionalists who saw little need for a significant change of direction. Unable to agree on a coherent approach, the party fell back into default positions reflecting the Thatcherite core beliefs of the dominant faction – the so-called core-vote strategy (see also Dorey *et al*. 2011; for alternative interpretations see Green, 2011; and Bale, 2010).

The election of David Cameron in 2005 on an explicitly modernising platform has rightly been portrayed as something of a 'triumph' for the modernisers (Heppell, 2008). Cameron was able to persuade his parliamentary colleagues (and the wider membership) of the merits of his candidature partly as the alternative approach had been shown conclusively to have failed, and partly as a consequence of his own obvious talents as a communicator

relative to his rivals, as exemplified by his pitch to the party conference (Denham and Dorey, 2006). Significantly, Cameron was the first leader since the eviction of Margaret Thatcher to be elected without her explicit endorsement during the campaign. He was also keen to detach himself from the Thatcher era – declaring himself an admirer rather than a devotee. Interestingly this was a position he maintained even during the outpouring of tributes following her death in 2013. Even though on the one hand he suggested 'we are all Thatcherites now', on the other he declined to identify himself as such and said he had 'problems with some of the Thatcher legacy' (quoted in Crampton, 2013, 28 April).

Yet Cameron's distancing from Thatcherism has been more symbolic than substantial. One of his most frequent refrains during his leadership election campaign was 'There is such a thing as society. It's not the same thing as the state.' As a play on probably the most memorable quotation attributed to Thatcher, this sound-bite was an effective piece of rhetorical differentiation. For Kerr, this amounted to 'post-Thatcherite cross-dressing' (2007, p. 49). However, in a newspaper interview at the time Cameron observed that the phrase 'has resonance, because the remark that Margaret Thatcher made was so taken out of context.' As his interviewer concluded, Cameron was 'not rejecting the Thatcherite concept of society… [but] seeking to rehabilitate it' (Rawnsley, 2005, 18 December). This theme was fleshed out during the 2005 parliament as 'the Big Society', a somewhat nebulous concept that would become the key narrative of the 2010 Conservative election manifesto. This document claimed that: 'our society is broken, but together we can mend it: we can build the Big Society' (Conservative Party, 2010, p. 35). At the heart of the Big Society is an opposition to 'big government' which is critiqued for 'inhibiting, not advancing, the progressive aims of reducing poverty, fighting inequality, and increasing general well-being' (*ibid.*, p. 37). As Kisby (2010) has demonstrated, to the extent that the Big Society has a coherent intellectual basis it is one that implies a retreat of the state and withdrawal from the provision of a range of social services. As with the Thatcherite view of the economy, it suggests that the state must be 'rolled back' to create the conditions and space for society to be rolled forward.

For Seawright, whilst 'the Big Society-Not Big Government theme worked perfectly well for the party's internal philosophical debate', it did not translate into a clear message that could be communicated effectively to the electorate, and consequently achieved little purchase during the election campaign (2012, p. 38). This was a problem for the Conservatives as the Big Society was meant to be the 'unifying theme' linking the various elements of Cameron's modernisation strategy together (Heppell and Seawright, 2012, p. 227). In short, in Bulpitt's terms it was an insufficiently robust and coherent narrative to achieve the political argument hegemony central to a successful statecraft strategy. This did not simply indicate the difficulty of communicating a complex philosophical position during an election campaign. It reflected a deeper issue, namely the limited extent to which the Conservatives under Cameron (and indeed his three predecessors) had reconstructed conservatism (Hayton, 2012a). The modernisation strategy pursued during Cameron's tenure as Leader of the Opposition amounted to an attempt to detoxify the Conservative brand by association with language (such as the claim to be progressive) and issues (such as poverty and climate change) not traditionally linked to the party. Another facet of the effort to change the party image was the so-called 'A-list', which was employed with some success to diversify the

range of candidates chosen to stand at the election. In sum, Cameron's prescription to ease his party's ills was premised on a diagnosis which saw presentation and public image rather than ideological outlook as the issue. The somewhat superficial Big Society narrative that resulted was ambiguous to voters and 'treated with suspicion within Conservative ranks' (Heppell and Seawright, 2012, p. 228).

While Cameron struggled to establish Conservative political argument hegemony, he did enjoy some success in terms of changing his party's image and appearing more in touch with contemporary society, particularly through cultivating a more socially liberal outlook (Hayton, 2010). His own stature and abilities as a party leader were also widely commended. Heffernan (2013) for example has argued that Cameron's considerable personal attributes enabled him to become a predominant (and not merely a preeminent) Leader of the Opposition, which is of considerable value in both electoral and party management terms in an era where evaluations of leaders' attributes are regarded as particularly important to electors. Bale (2012a) similarly suggests that these skills were an important part of the Conservative electoral revival, and also vital in the Coalition negotiations that followed the general election.

Against Bulpitt's criteria, we can conclude that Cameron enjoyed partial success in devising a winning electoral strategy, in that he was able to lead his party to first place in the general election. While the increase in the share of the vote won by the Conservatives (up 3.7 to 36.9 per cent in Great Britain) was 'modest' (Denver, 2010, p. 593), Cameron enjoyed a clear lead as the electorate's preferred Prime Minister (33 per cent, versus 25 for Brown and 22 for Clegg) and this was a key reason for the Conservative victory (*ibid*., p. 605). Being perceived as the more able Prime Minister also relates to the need for an image of governing competence as identified by Bulpitt. Whether this could be sustained in Coalition is explored in the following sections.

**Coalition formation: A civilised partnership?**

In the immediate aftermath of the 2010 general election results David Cameron was faced with two options. As the leader of the largest party by some margin he had a compelling claim to the keys for Downing Street, and could have sought to lead a minority government with a view to holding another general election in 12 or 18 months' time. Alternatively, he could look to forge a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. The third possible option, of a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition possibly supported by some of the nationalist parties was arithmetically difficult to achieve with any degree of stability. The Liberal Democrats were also keen to avoid been portrayed as propping up an unpopular lame-duck Prime Minister in Number 10 (Laws, 2010).

The option of a Coalition with the Liberal Democrats quickly emerged as Cameron's preferred outcome for a number of reasons. In party management terms it offered both immediate and longer term potential benefits. The economic circumstances meant the time was ripe for an opposition to argue that it was time for a change of government, and the failure to win the election outright sparked 'recriminations' from the right of his party

almost immediately (Kirkup, 2010, 8 May). Activists and senior figures such as Lord Ashcroft attacked Cameron's leadership clique for their inability to mastermind an effective electoral strategy, and called for his 'chums circle' to be broken up (Watt, 2010, 9 May). In short, 'the knives were out… by making a bold offer to the Liberal Democrats Cameron was able to deflect attention from the election outcome' (Stuart, 2011, pp. 47-8). As a way of seizing the initiative in the short-term Cameron's move was effective, and also offered the tantalising prospect of securing leadership of a government with a healthy majority of 80. Heppell and Seawright conclude that: 'For Cameron there was little attraction in a minority administration, not just because of its instability, but because he feared becoming a hostage of his own parliamentary right' (2012, p. 9). The modernisers around Cameron regarded working with the Liberal Democrats as a way to complete the project of transforming their party that they had begun in opposition (Stuart, 2011, p. 47). Within months of its formation one Coalition-enthusiast on the Conservative benches, Nick Boles, was advocating an electoral pact between the two parties in 2015 as a way of cementing this political realignment (Martin, 2010, 13 September). One Labour MP feared that the move 'has done more to rebrand and modernise the Conservative party than anything during my time in politics' and represented a 'Clause 4 moment' for Cameron (Lammy, 2010, 19 May).

A number of analysts have suggested that the positive outcome of the coalition negotiations reflected the fact that when they started talking the two parties realised they shared a sizable area of ideological common ground. Certainly under Nick Clegg the Liberal Democrats had drifted away from Labour and assumed a stance of equidistance from both main parties (Stuart, 2011). Beech has characterised the Coalition as a 'tale of two liberalisms' with a shared neo-liberal outlook on the economy and the state at its core (2011, p. 278). Analysis by McAnulla similarly concluded that 'Clegg and Cameron seem in strong agreement regarding the need for limited state intervention' (2012, p. 179). This collective position was certainly reflected in the coalition agreement, which prioritised deficit reduction over all other goals for the new administration. The document declared that the deficit was 'the most urgent issue facing Britain' and promised to 'significantly accelerate the reduction of the structural deficit over the course of a Parliament, with the main burden of deficit reduction borne by reduced spending rather than increased taxes' (HM Government, 2010, p. 15). While consistent with Conservative economic policy prior to the election, this marked a substantial shift on the part of the Liberal Democrats who had warned during the campaign of the dangers posed by cutting too quickly. Dommett characterises this change as 'ideological snapping', whereby an ideological position ruptures following the injection of 'previously alien ideas' (2013, p. 222). However, this would seem a curious outcome given the fact that (unlike the Conservatives and Labour) the Liberal Democrats had prepared meticulously for coalition negotiations, and had identified in advance the key policy positions they wished to secure (Stuart, 2011, p. 44). Furthermore, the junior partner had secured a disproportionate number of ministerial posts in the new administration (Heppell, 2013a, p. 12), and content analysis found the finalised agreement to be closer to the Liberal Democrat manifesto than the Conservative one (Quinn *et al.* 2011). As such, the rise of the 'Orange book' neo-liberal tendency within the Liberal Democrat party was crucial for finding common ground with Cameron's 'liberal' conservatism (Beech, 2011).

With hindsight we can safely conclude that the Conservatives did rather better than the Liberal Democrats in the coalition formation process. The elevation of deficit reduction above all other governing priorities was possible as it chimed with some of the more economically hawkish Liberal Democrats (Laws and Clegg in particular), but it also effectively ensured Conservative dominance of the overall Coalition agenda, as explored in the next section. Cameron can thus be credited with an effective piece of statecraft. Tim Bale has argued that on policy matters there was: 'little of real substance that the Conservatives had to give up' with Liberal Democrat 'wins' coming within parameters the senior partner was quite happy to live with (for example on raising the income tax threshold, abolishing ID cards, and the redirection of part of the education budget to the pupil premium). He consequently concludes that 'the coalition agreement shows what happens when vegetarians negotiate with carnivores' (Bale, 2012b, p. 328). While the most dramatic Conservative concession came in the form of a referendum on changing the voting system to the alternative vote (AV), this was far from the proportional system Clegg's party desired and was a 'calculated gamble' by Cameron who would fight for a no vote (Heppell, 2013a, p. 19). On this assessment, Cameron's action to forge a Coalition and the subsequent defeat of AV can be seen as an astute 'heresthetic move that aimed to structure the political game in a way that was more advantageous to the Conservatives' (2013a, p. 5). Not only did it provide insulation from the right of the party by providing a secure majority, it also held out the prospect of a realignment of the centre-right. For Heppell (as discussed later in this article) this relationship was fundamentally one-sided as from the outset the Conservative strategy aimed to exploit and manipulate their junior partner.

Though Heppell's assessment of Cameron's leadership in terms of heresthetics may well be accurate, in the first phase of the Coalition the exploitative dimension was covert. The relationship was based on courtesy, with the Conservatives' 'open-minded and flexible' attitude 'endearing them to the Liberal Democrat negotiating team' (Stuart, 2011, p. 49). The easy personal rapport between the new Prime Minister and his Deputy was clear for all to witness as they announced their new government in the Downing Street rose garden. Once in government, many Liberal Democrat and Conservative Ministers found that they were able to forge effectual working relationships. A report based on extensive research across Whitehall noted that 'The coalition's big achievement in the first year has been to establish a government which is remarkably harmonious, effective and decisive' (Constitution Unit, 2011, p. 10). Another analyst similarly agreed that 'it has proved remarkably cohesive and coherent in its various stances, with Conservative and Liberal Democrat ministers working well together' (Dunleavy, 2012, p. 36). At the Treasury the Chancellor George Osborne swiftly developed a strong bond with his Liberal Democrat second-in-command, which continued following the unscheduled change in personnel from David Laws to Danny Alexander (Forsyth, 2012, 18 February). These good relations did not, however, reflect a lack of activity. If anything the opposite was the case, instead 'the scale of this administration's ambition has been its biggest surprise' (Freedland, 2010, 18 August).

The Liberal Democrats were co-opted into an agenda of shrinking the size of the state which they would be forced to defend in principle, even if they fought for specific concessions and exemptions within the overall framework. This collective dipping of hands in the blood of cuts was quickly made absolute by George Osborne's June 2010 emergency budget, which

set the target of eliminating the structural deficit within a parliament. This was soon followed by the sacrifice of one of the Liberal Democrats' most sacred cows, namely their pledge to scrap university tuition fees. In a symbolic gesture of collective solidarity, 27 Liberal Democrat MPs (mainly ministers) voted to treble them (BBC News, 2010). The rapid establishment of 'the quad' made up of two Conservatives (the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer) and two Liberal Democrats (the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury) as the key decision-making forum in the Coalition also served to reinforce the primacy of the Treasury and with it the austerity agenda (Forsyth, 2012, 18 February).

In summary, the formation of the Coalition and its first year in office can be characterised as a exemplifying a successful statecraft strategy by the Conservative Party elite. Cameron was able to seize the initiative and control the political agenda, securing his position in Number 10 with Liberal Democrat votes in Parliament and a fixed-term parliaments act to help ensure a full term in office. His own personal charm undoubtedly played a part in establishing a civilised partnership across government from the top-down, with the Liberal Democrat leader buying into the need for a shared Coalition identity. Whereas the Conservatives conceded a disproportionate number of Ministerial posts to the Liberal Democrats (see the article by Heppell elsewhere in this journal) control of all the key departments remained in the hands of Conservative Secretaries of State, while no department had a concentration of Liberal Democrat ministers at more junior levels. Combined with the decision to enshrine deficit reduction in the Coalition agreement as the governing objective to trump all others this effectively handed control of 'high politics' (Bulpitt, 1986) to the Conservatives.

**Uneasy cohabitation**

The second phase of the Coalition's life-cycle – uneasy cohabitation – began to emerge during its first year, and had plainly supplanted the initial phase by the time of the government's first anniversary. While the leadership elites of both parties remained firmly committed to their alliance and continued to calculate that it served their best interests, they were increasingly mindful of the need to demonstrate that they retained distinct core identities. The Liberal Democrats in particular, wounded by the outcry over tuition fees, began to question whether they were getting a fair deal from the Coalition, or were being used as a shield to absorb more than their fair share of anti-government flak. In January 2011 Nick Clegg consequently announced his intention to air more of their disagreements with the Conservatives in public, to give the electorate a clearer view of the compromises governing in Coalition involved (Watt, 2011, 11 January). Acknowledging that the government would inevitably pass through several stages, Clegg noted that initially the primary challenge had been 'simply to show that coalition government can work', but that voters should expect 'a natural reassertion of the separate identities' as time wore on (quoted in Watt, 2011, 11 January). In doing so Clegg was also responding to concern amongst some of his parliamentary colleagues and party members that Liberal Democrat identity was being subsumed by the Coalition. His predecessor as party leader, Menzies Campbell, voiced this fear in a disparaging manner comparing the junior partner in the

Coalition to a pet dog, suggesting: 'there's a very grave danger you'll eventually come to look like it' (quoted in Russell, 2010, p. 522).

Growing Liberal Democrat anxiety about maintaining a distinct identity reflected a heightened awareness (as the initial euphoria of being in office wore off) that entering the Coalition represented a sizable gamble for the party. In this sense, we can detect a gradual awakening to the interpretation developed by Heppell that the Conservatives were seeking to manipulate their Coalition colleagues for partisan ends. Heppell suggests that by embracing the Liberal Democrats, 'Cameron has thus attempted to create a roadblock to the vision of a permanent realignment of British politics along progressive centre-left lines' (2013a, p. 19). Being in office facing a Labour opposition has certainly only served to entrench mutual suspicion between the two parties long regarded as the most likely to forge an alliance. The need for the Liberal Democrats to secure a clear policy 'win' that could not be claimed by the Conservatives was therefore acute (Russell, 2010).

Perhaps the most cherished objective of the Liberal Democrats since their formation has been the reform of the electoral system. Securing a vote for change in the referendum on AV would have been a dramatic and distinctive triumph for Clegg with the potential to re-shape party competition in Britain to his party's advantage. The Conservatives, however, viewed it as an unmistakable threat to their chances of obtaining a parliamentary majority in the future, and Cameron won plaudits from his backbenchers for mobilising energetically against it (Watt, 2011, 5 May). The emphatic victory by the No campaign damaged Clegg's standing both in his party and the country, and 'Liberal Democrat resentment of the way in which the No campaign had been conducted was marked' (Norton, 2012, p. 190). Former leader Paddy Ashdown said Liberal Democrats were 'exceedingly angry' and believed Cameron was guilty of 'a breach of faith' over how the campaign had been directed, and warned that the Coalition would henceforth be 'a transactional relationship' (quoted in Wintour, 2011, 5 May). For Cameron, the outcome preserved the status quo which he regarded as in his party's interests but also raised new strategic challenges in terms of keeping his junior partner on board whilst also keeping his own backbenchers happy. With respect to the latter, Cameron faced an 'extremely atypical' level of rebellion from his party in the Commons, with 35 per cent of whipped votes in the Coalition's first 18 months resulting in Conservative dissenters (Cowley and Stuart, 2012, p. 2). Such a level was unusual not only as new government's tend to enjoy a period of relative unity when first entering office, but also as the rebels included many newly elected MPs, who are 'normally much less willing to defy the whips' (*ibid.*, p. 3).

The divergence between these two groups hit crisis levels in July 2012 over the issue of House of Lords reform. Following the defeat of the AV referendum, reforming the upper house became the focus of Clegg's efforts to deliver a significant constitutional change for his party. Government legislation was brought forward which would have seen four-fifths of peers elected, but 91 Conservative MPs defied the whip in the largest rebellion to hit the Coalition (Cowley and Stuart, 2013, p. 5). Unable to secure the programme motion necessary for the bill's passage, the government withdrew the bill. In retaliation, the Liberal Democrats announced that they would vote against the government's proposals to cut the size of the Commons from 650 to 600 MPs. This latter measure, linked as it was to an

equalization of constituencies by population, was expected to lead to Conservative gains of around 20 seats. The editor of the influential *Conservativehome* website consequently bemoaned the loss of the changes as the Conservative Party's 'worst single electoral setback since Black Wednesday' (Montgomerie, 2012).

The death of the boundary changes hurt the Conservatives, and was a major setback for Cameron who had demonstrably lost control of the agenda on an issue of key strategic interest to his party. The whole episode illustrated the way in which inter-party disagreement could spill over into intra-party disputes and vice-versa, threatening to derail elite Conservative statecraft. Cameron was unable (or unwilling) to deliver his party on Lords reform as per the Coalition agreement, to the fury of Nick Clegg who regarded this as a breach of their mutual contract (BBC News, 2012). This in turn led to an ugly spat as members of both parties traded insults over what had been promised in return for what and variously accused each other of betrayal and hypocrisy (see for example, Jenkin, 2013).

The Lords reform/boundary changes episode is also a signifier of a trend that has gained momentum during the Coalition's second phase, namely Cameron's increasing willingness to let the sentiments of his own party take precedence over those of his Coalition partners. A notable example of this was his decision to veto the proposed EU treaty in response to the Euro crisis in December 2011, over which Clegg was 'bitterly disappointed' as it 'was bad for Britain' (BBC News, 2011). Another defining instance was the government's response to the Leveson Inquiry into press standards. Unable to agree on a shared response, Cameron made a statement to the Commons rejecting statutory regulation of the press, before Clegg then rose to speak in favour of such a move (HC Debate, 29.11.2012, col. 446 - 472). Persistent deadlock has also been a feature of Cameron's plans to introduce a tax-break for married couples. The Prime Minister has repeatedly reaffirmed his commitment to bringing forward the plans even as his Deputy has condemned them as 'patronising drivel that belongs in the Edwardian age' (BBC News, 2013).

A shift towards differentiation by both parties was perhaps inevitable as the Coalition wore on, and relations became increasingly strained by the challenge of governing in austere times. However, Cameron's approach to these and other issues also reflected two other important factors which have influenced Conservative strategic thinking. The first is the perceived need to pacify the party's more right-wing MPs, members and supporters, particularly in the light of a noteworthy rise in support for the UK Independence Party (Hayton, 2013). The fact that the Conservatives are in Coalition creates an opportunity space to the party's right, and 'enhances UKIP's prospects of attracting disaffected Conservatives' (Lynch and Whitaker, 2013, p. 3). The higher Nigel Farage's party has risen in the polls the more Cameron has seemingly felt the need to try to shield his right flank, culminating in his January 2013 promise of a referendum on membership of the European Union (Watt, 2013, 23 January). Secondly, this dimension of Cameron's leadership strategy confirms the analysis of the Conservatives in opposition which suggested that the party as a whole remained fundamentally wedded to a form of Thatcherite ideology, and that Cameron's modernisation project steered within, rather than against, Thatcherism's wake (Hayton, 2012). In this sense, the legacy of opposition has played an important role in shaping the contours of Conservative statecraft in office.

Despite the fraying of relations during the Coalition's second phase, the Conservatives retained their position of dominance over its central agenda. As noted above, locking the deficit reduction programme into the Coalition agreement as the principal mission of the administration side-lined any discussion of alternative approaches and permeated the entire policy-making process across government. As one analyst suggested, this was 'the price they needed to pay for concessions by the Conservatives on constitutional reform' (Kickert, 2012, p. 174). The focus on deficit reduction inevitably meant that other Liberal Democrat policies that were incompatible with this objective fell by the wayside (Dommett, 2013, p. 222-3). What is perhaps then surprising is the way in which the Liberal Democrat leadership has remained steadfastly committed to the deficit reduction strategy even as it has failed to deliver the promised economic growth (Hay, 2013) and as the constitutional reform agenda has crumpled. The explanation for this lies in the way in which the Coalition's rhetoric has redefined the national interest in terms of public sector austerity, conforming to a Thatcherite economic outlook (Crines, 2013). The parallel with the one of Thatcher's favourite watchwords TINA (there is no alternative) is obvious, but the fact that unlike in the 1980s this was a shared message across two parties helped to reinforce the claim that this was a matter of national interest rather than ideological positioning. Performing a U-turn on this – having been emphatically co-opted into it – would shatter any claim the Liberal Democrats might have left to a reputation for governing competence. Conservative statecraft consequently boxed the Liberal Democrats into a position whereby they must defend the collective stance and share the pain of the cuts, while the Conservatives themselves are best placed to claim any credit for an improving economic picture. Conservative statecraft has consequently been premised on securing an image of governing competence based on being the party most able to implement a strategy to deal with the deficit.

**Divorce: the end of the Coalition**

Any possibility of an electoral pact between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats has been firmly discounted by the leadership of both parties. As such, we know their marriage of convenience in the Coalition will end in divorce. Whether this will be amicable or ill-tempered, and indeed when it will occur, is yet to be seen. However, the two main scenarios are that the Coalition survives intact until May 2015, or breaks up sooner leading either to a minority Conservative administration for the remainder of the parliament, or an early general election.

The first outcome is expected by Andrew Heywood, who suggests that 'there are good reasons to believe that the coalition will endure for a full parliamentary term' (2013, p. 10). Heywood cites the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act 2011 as creating an expectation that the government will survive a full five years. In addition, while acknowledging the 'heavy electoral price' being paid by the Liberal Democrats he argues that withdrawing from the Coalition early could destroy what little credibility they have left. Finally, 'the Conservatives are unlikely to prematurely end a coalition that has brought them so much benefit at such little cost' (*ibid*., p. 11). To that we can add the hope of both Coalition parties that they will

benefit electorally from any upturn in the economy, so allowing the longest possible time for that to occur (and be felt by voters) appears logical. Finally, we cannot discount the sense of common purpose and ideological vision which helped bring the Coalition together in the first place. There are undoubtedly tensions and disagreements between the two parties on a variety of issues, as there are within them. Yet there is also shared understanding of the crisis the country faces and a perceived solution based on a smaller, less interventionist state (Smith, 2010).

However, the second scenario of an earlier separation remains on balance more likely. As Patrick Dunleavy (2012) has argued, 'all coalitions unzip from the end, unless the date of their termination remains uncertain'. The closer the Coalition gets to May 2015 the stronger the incentive becomes for one party or the other to break for cover. The likelier candidate is the Liberal Democrats, who as discussed above have paid a higher price for their co-operation and have more cause for alarm over losing their previously distinctive electoral appeal. Party President Tim Farron openly raised the possibility at the 2011 conference, arguing that 'divorce is inevitable' and that the Liberal Democrats should be prepared for it from 2014 onwards (Farron, 2011). If there is little evidence of recovery in his party's abysmal opinion poll ratings pressure for such a move will surely mount amongst MPs and activists as the election approaches. Moreover, this could manifest itself in the form of a coup against the incumbent leader. As Tim Bale graphically puts it, if MPs whose seats are at risk 'feel as if they are watching a slow motion car crash, then they will want either to jump out of the vehicle or to wrest the wheel from the driver' (2012, p. 334). The removal of Nick Clegg, whose close relationship with David Cameron has been at the crux of the Coalition since its inception, would send a decisive public signal that the party was seeking to move in a different direction and may also enhance the prospects of a future Coalition with Labour.

For his part, David Cameron will be keen to see the Coalition continue as long as possible. Indeed, should the benches of the Commons have a similar complexion in the next parliament as this, the prospect of re-forming the alliance with the Liberal Democrats for another five years could be an attractive one. It would for one thing help him wriggle out of the awkward corner he has created for himself regarding renegotiating Britain's membership of the EU, by providing a readymade excuse for not holding a referendum after all. Equally however, there will be limits to what the Prime Minister will feel willing (or indeed able) to concede to his Deputy in an effort to keep Liberal Democrats happy as the election approaches. With the two parties increasingly keen to highlight their differences in public, coalition politics becomes conflictual rather than consensual. For Cameron, conceding too much ground to Clegg not only risks inflaming tensions amongst Conservative backbenchers fearful of being outflanked by UKIP, but could also undermine his own efforts to present himself as a predominant leader and Prime Minister (Bennister and Heffernan, 2011). As such, a period of minority Conservative government of a number of months before the 2015 general election will not be a prospect Cameron will fear, and the motivation to preserve the Coalition will decline as the election approaches.

**Conclusion**

During the 2010-13 period, British politics has witnessed some relatively successful elite Conservative statecraft. David Cameron was able to transform the failure to win an outright majority into a position which enhanced his leadership autonomy within his own party and secured a stable government, defying the predictions of some commentators who predicted the Coalition's rapid demise. Furthermore, the Conservatives have been able to dominate the government's agenda across the major areas of public policy. The former Liberal Democrat Director of Policy complained in his explanation for leaving the party:

> I want to see coalitions in which both sides make compromises. That way, a broad range of views can be represented, there can be stable government, and we can learn from opponents. But what I cannot accept is that so long as one achieves something in government, a few small things, anything, then any compromise is acceptable when it comes to the big issues. That way lies Vichy France. Instead of achieving compromise, one becomes compromised. (Grayson, 2013).

The Conservatives have, as Heppell (2013a) suggested, been able to exploit the Liberal Democrats to facilitate the implementation of a programme for government in which key priorities for the junior partner (for example on constitutional reform) have been side-lined, whilst at the same time corroding their electoral support. Although the neo-liberal parameters within which the Coalition operates are ones which at least some Liberal Democrats are manifestly at ease with, if its ideology is one of 'muscular liberalism' is has proved in practice to be 'more muscular, or conservative, than liberal' (Lakin, 2013, p. 13). The very fact of being in coalition has, however, helped Cameron strengthen his claim to be an essentially pragmatic politician, and buttressed the discourse of national interest used to justify the cuts.

In terms of developing an election winning strategy for 2015, Conservative statecraft is based on fostering an image of governing competence as the party best able to secure economic recovery. Labour has accordingly been relentlessly portrayed as irresponsible and profligate, and therefore not to be trusted in office again. Cuts are equated with competence. Conservative success in redefining the centre-ground of political debate in terms of shrinking the state was illustrated by Labour's effective acceptance of the government's overall spending envelope following the June 2013 Comprehensive Spending Review. Through the focus on the public sector debt and deficit rather than growth a form of Conservative political argument hegemony has been established, which Labour has struggled to convincingly challenge. Allied to the austerity agenda has been a spotlight on the cost of welfare, which George Osborne has identified as a totemic dividing line where the Conservatives are on the popular side of the debate and Labour can be portrayed as backing 'scroungers' rather than 'strivers' (Hardman, 2012, 6 December). Opinion polls certainly indicate widespread public support for the government's welfare cuts (YouGov, 2013). Labour meanwhile has struggled to formulate a convincing response to this line of attack, which will surely form a key element of the Conservative campaign at the next general election.

Hence, we can credit David Cameron with finding a solution – at least temporarily – to the problem that has dogged all Conservative leaders since 1992, namely how to devise a form

of neo-Thatcherite statecraft capable of sustaining the party in office. In 2010 however he proved unable to capture the longed-for 40 per cent-plus vote share, and the historical portents are not encouraging for the Conservatives in 2015. It is unusual for governing parties in the UK to increase their share of the vote from one election to the next, and (starting as they are from a low base) Labour must be reasonably confident of recovering at least some of the ground they lost in their 2010 collapse. Labour could also secure an overall majority with a small lead – perhaps just 1 per cent in terms of vote-share – 'while the Tories require one of 7 per cent' (Eaton, 2013). The Conservatives' cause would have been significantly aided by the implementation of the proposed boundary changes to even the size of parliamentary constituencies, and the failure to achieve this measure is arguably Cameron's biggest error in terms of formulating an election winning strategy for 2015.

In the immediate future Cameron faces strategic dilemmas in terms of managing relations with the Liberal Democrats, with the right of his parliamentary party, and in countering the rise of UKIP as a populist full-blooded right-wing alternative drawing (in part) on core Conservative support. In party management terms the ideological divisions within the party (Heppell, 2013b) will continue to fuel discontent with the Coalition on the Conservative backbenches. In the longer term the dilemma facing the Conservative leadership remains the same as that left unresolved in 13 years of opposition, namely how to reconstruct conservatism to entice a sufficiently broad-based constituency of support to deliver a new era of Conservative electoral ascendency. On the latter, it appears that David Cameron, like his three predecessors, has few remedies.

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