

Nick Clegg's performance at the Liberal Democrat party conference proves that he has won the match for now, but for this 'government of two halves', the season is a long one.

Following a torrid year in government, Nick Clegg has faced down his party's conference without any embarrassing policy reversals. Disaffected Lib Dems might be placated by the string of promises laid out by the party's big brass, which will be unpalatable to their partners in government, but if a week is a long time in politics, Nick Clegg has a painfully long fight against the threat of end of season relegation yet to come, argues [Matt Cole](#).



An odd coincidence on Saturday morning found the Liberal Democrat top brass sharing the lobby of their conference hotel with the first eleven of Queen's Park Rangers, up for an away fixture. The team recently promoted to the top flight had been finding it hard to make an impact against bigger, more experienced outfits, and were looking uncertain; QPR, by contrast, seemed in good spirits. If the press were to be believed, whilst Neil Warnock's men were about to play Wolves, Nick Clegg's feared being thrown to them when conference began later that afternoon. Controversial QPR captain Joey Barton even tweeted that he was available to give Clegg advice if he wanted, and as one BBC reporter remarked, if Barton is offering you his services for conflict resolution, you know you're in trouble.

Clegg has suffered a torrid first year in government: [university tuition fees have been raised](#) in a bare-faced breach of a pledge made by all Lib Dem candidates which won them many votes last year; the campaign for the introduction of the [Alternative Vote was a damp squib](#) in which Clegg himself was accused of breaking promises by the 'No' campaign, and the only chance to escape First-Past-the-Post for a generation slipped away. George Osborne presides over [unprecedented cuts in public spending](#) and a stagnant economy with Lib Dem support, and now [drags his feet on bank reform](#) whilst musing about tax cuts for the super-rich.

The game is all about results these days, and the Lib Dems have been running poll ratings between nine and thirteen per cent since last December. In May they lost 747 council seats and nine councils. In four parliamentary by-elections this year, Lib Dem candidates have achieved results ranging from a 0.3% increase on their 2010 vote at Oldham East and Saddleworth in January, to a drop of 13.2% and sixth place at Barnsley Central two months later. In Leicester South, which the Lib Dems won in a 2004 by-election, they struggled to keep a fifth of the vote in May, and the end of June saw the Party's candidate suffer a lost deposit with a bewilderingly tiny 2.2% of the vote at [Inverclyde](#).

Last month, a YouGov poll found that whilst most voters compare Cameron and Ed Miliband to snakes, [Clegg reminded the largest group of respondents of a sheep](#). As the conference opened, the *Independent on Sunday* claimed that only [47% of last year's Lib Dem voters still support the Party](#), and only a minority can see any impact they have made on the government. The leader needed to give the equivalent of a rousing half-time talk; but there are longer-term issues of strategy which will need to be addressed in due course.



Credit: Liberal Democrats (Creative Commons SA)

Most press and broadcast reports have rightly (if irritatedly) depicted delegates as being in resilient mood, philosophical about unpopularity and optimistic about future prospects. Liberal Assemblies of the past had a reputation for standing up to Leaders when they were tempted from the true faith by offers of power and the Lib Dem conference does still control Party policy, but at Birmingham the Party leadership suffered no serious reverses in conference debates.

A poll of supporters conducted by the leading party discussion forum Lib Dem Voice showed [84% still back coalition](#), although 59% think it is harming them electorally. This closely corresponds with the figure of 83% in response to the same question in January and April, suggesting the May elections have done little to dint the membership's commitment to the government. Mischievous reports in the right-wing press that Clegg's wife is insisting he stand down as Lib Dem Leader at the end of the current parliament, or that his Party President Tim Farron is preparing to succeed or even challenge him, were [quickly and effectively dismissed](#).

However, this tranquillity is neither cost-free nor permanent. Clegg had to signal concessions to his uneasy supporters, and some remain to be impressed. A string of gauntlets was theatrically cast down before the absent Conservatives by Lib Dem leadership figures on issues of economic and social equality: Danny Alexander unveiled [2,000 new inspectors to chase tax evasion](#) by high earners; Vince Cable attacked ['rewards for failure' in the City](#), threatening greater power for shareholders over executive bonuses and reviving the idea of a tax on properties worth £2m or more; and Clegg himself opened the conference warning that any attempt to end the 50p tax rate on earnings over £150,000 would meet resistance from Lib Dem Cabinet members. He even told a fringe meeting sponsored by a venture capital firm that the British economy will be 're-wired' to spread co-ownership in industry and promote social mobility. Most tantalisingly, BBC Political correspondent Nick Robinson claimed on the last day of the conference that unnamed (presumably Lib Dem) Cabinet sources had expressed to him their hope that [£5bn could be found within existing budgetary plans for new capital expenditure projects](#) to boost prospects of growth.

These gestures had their origins in the need to respect the balance of opinion within the Party as well as in the public's disaffection with the Lib Dems or in the hearts of the leadership themselves. Throughout the five days, fringe meetings and press interviews – particularly those involving the Lib Dems always sceptical about the coalition – were peppered with warnings and demands to the leadership. Lord Oakeshott told the media that without economic growth the Lib Dems will be 'slaughtered'; Baroness Shirley Williams urged the government to be ready to undertake a job creation programme based on a hypothecated tax, and said the Party must not 'accept what we're given and walk through the division lobbies.' Reminding the Liberal Democrat History Group of the legacy of Keynes and the lessons of the 1930s, she warned that 'we've got to think more.'

Tim Farron had to insist that he believed the government will last five years after comparing it to a marriage which ends in divorce after three or four. One former MP now representing the Party at a different level said confidentially that many activists were holding their tongues, that ministers were too preoccupied being in government to listen to Party opinion, and that it will be necessary to find a way out of the coalition long enough before the next election to re-establish Liberal Democrat identity.

Clegg's speech ending the conference sought to draw a line under this discourse by insisting that the deficit must be conquered whilst recognising the 'grace under pressure' shown by suffering Party colleagues. But the debate is important, and the conference gave it controlled expression. It has subsided for now, but the need for economic growth and the question of an exit strategy from the coalition will not go away. It was, we should note, only the break between the end of the Lib-Lab Pact and the 1979 election which saved the Liberals from the electoral damage done by that arrangement – which at its greatest far outstripped the Lib Dems' current dip.

Queen's Park Rangers left Birmingham with a relatively comfortable win under their belts at the weekend; Clegg could feel similarly reassured that he had seen off the wolves, but he has survived only one match. As promoted clubs in the Premier League usually find, the season is long, and the tension grows as its end nears.