

# The coalition is at least as likely to end up shipwrecked as it is to sail through, or at least stay afloat, until 2015

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*Liberal Democrat MPs may soon find themselves watching a slowmotion car crash while their Conservative counterparts might feel that their 'business arrangement' has served its purpose. Either way, a parliamentary full-term, while not impossible, remains less likely than an early and potentially messy, dénouement, writes **Tim Bale**.*



Both [Patrick Dunleavy](#) and [Chris Hanretty](#) have recently had a stab at trying to puncture the common wisdom that the current coalition is somehow bound to see out its full term. In turn there has been some spirited support from [Mark Pack](#) for the view that a combination of institutional rule changes and sheer self-interest will ensure that we don't see a general election – or a new government – before 2015.

In a piece published by the [Parliamentary Affairs](#), I come down pretty clearly on the side of those who counsel against complacency. Based on what we know from cross-national research about what causes coalitions to break up, and remembering that the risk of break-up tends to increase rather than decrease over time, I argue that a full-term, while by no means impossible, remains less likely than an early (and for the Liberal Democrats potentially very messy) dénouement.

Coalitions come to grief because of so-called 'critical events'—domestic or international crises that 'come out of nowhere' but divide the parties involved—or else as a result of the slow agony endured as the economy goes belly-up or simply fails to improve. Overseas examples also suggest that less experienced, ideologically-ambivalent, junior partners find hanging on in there particularly difficult – and with good reason.

Cross-national research suggests that voters are rarely grateful to smaller, newer parties that 'act responsibly' or, indeed, to governments in general. Moreover, while a favourable economic scenario can reduce the electoral cost of incumbency, the benefits are normally felt only by the party of the Prime Minister (and the Finance Minister) rather than by any other parties within his or her coalition. Smaller, newer parties find it very difficult to claim the credit for anything that goes well but find it equally difficult to escape blame for anything that goes wrong.

This would be worrying enough even for a party that could lay claim to a comfortable cushion of support and to have secured the kind of high-profile policy-wins and cabinet portfolios that would allow it both to maintain its distinctiveness and to point to an impressive record of achievement. Neither, however, applies, to the Lib Dems – and it is unlikely to do so, let alone any time soon.

As a result, the party's MPs may well find themselves permanently polling in or near single figures. Since, as the election approaches, this will amount to them watching a slow motion car crash, it would hardly be surprising if some of them try either to jump out of the vehicle or to wrest the wheel from the driver – in this case Nick Clegg. Anyone summarily dismissing the latter as foolhardy needs to think about the consequences of inaction and look (as many Lib Dem MPs will no doubt look) to Labour for an example of what happens to parties which cling on to leaders who have lost (or never gained) the respect of the electorate.

Nor, of course, should we forget that pressure to escape coalition often comes from restive MPs belonging to its senior rather than its junior partner. There are plenty of Tory backbenchers, particularly on the right of the party, already chafing at what they believe are the constraints imposed on 'their' government by Cameron having to 'appease' the Lib Dems.

Alternatively, if the Conservative Party's poll ratings rise to the level at which a single-party majority government looks like it might be in sight, it will be difficult for David Cameron to resist the temptation to leave the Lib Dems—or at least some of the Lib Dems—behind. Despite the popularity of the analogy, coalitions are not marriages; they are business arrangements. Once one partner (particularly the most powerful partner) believes the arrangement has served its purpose, it will have little compunction about terminating it.

Finally, it is worth noting that countries which are new to coalitions—new to the 'new politics' if you like—tend, at least initially, to produce less stable, less durable coalitions. Pretty obviously, this does not well bode well for the UK's first peacetime coalition in this country for seventy years.

That said, the same finding also points indirectly to something that those who argue for the coalition's long-term survival might consider clinging onto – something which long-run cross-national averages inevitably disguise, namely that one of the most important drivers of government durability is political culture.

For reasons that political scientists don't always fully understand, there are some countries in which governments last longer than their counterparts in other places. Between 1945 and 2010, and excluding Italy and the UK, both of which (for opposite reasons) distort the figures, governments in Western European democracies lasted an average of 779 days.

Admittedly, of course, the figure may have been higher were not the maximum parliamentary term in most countries five rather than four years. But this is a distraction from the main point, which is that of the fifteen countries included in that calculation, there were nine where governments, generally speaking, outperformed the average.

Anybody who believes, as I do, that the current coalition is at least as likely to end up shipwrecked as it is to sail through (or at least stay afloat) until spring 2015, has to acknowledge the possibility that the UK might be the kind of country that outperforms the average, too. Keen mathematicians, however, will already have twigged that it would have to outperform it by well over a thousand days to clock up the full five years which fans of the coalition are hoping for. Good luck with that.

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