

The Conservatives in Coalition Government: Principles, Policy and Power

Richard Hayton introduces the start of a series of posts by contributors who participated in a recent '*Conservatives in Coalition Government*' conference. These posts intend to provide a stimulating discussion about Conservative ideology, strategy, tactics and policy under Cameron's premiership and in their current partnership with the Liberal Democrats.



The coalition government has now been in office for over two years. By surviving this long it has defied the predictions of some political scientists who regarded it as '[little more than a grubby shotgun wedding](#)' likely to collapse before its first anniversary. While others were more circumspect about predicting the new government's imminent demise, the [scale of the task](#) facing Messrs Clegg and Cameron were clear. Two years on the challenges for both coalition parties are even more acute. Each needs to demonstrate to its supporters that it is achieving at least some of its own key objectives in office, whilst simultaneously justifying the government's programme as a whole. In benign economic circumstances this would be far from easy. In the current climate of recession at home and yet more economic storm clouds gathering abroad the coalition is sailing from rough seas to even choppier uncharted waters.

This would prove taxing for any party in office. For the Conservatives, returning to power following their longest ever period in opposition, it has raised a host of testing questions. Should they seek to drive forward a radical policy agenda, using the current crisis to justify far-reaching social and economic reform? How deeply should they commit themselves to the cause of coalition as a mechanism for effective governance (something they previously expressed deep scepticism about)? How might they develop a strategy for winning the next general election, and how should they seek to combat the rise of Labour in the opinion polls? Which policies and principles should they seek to uphold and pursue, and which should they be ready to compromise for the sake of coalition and power?

For scholars interested in examining Conservative politics, how the party is trying to manage these and a host of other issues makes this a fascinating time to be studying the subject. In conjunction with the [Centre for British Politics at the University of Hull](#), the Political Studies Association [Specialist Group](#) for the study of Conservatives and Conservatism held [a conference](#) in June to discuss some of these issues, bringing together academic experts from across the country and beyond. Over the coming weeks a selection of blog posts by contributors to that conference will showcase some of the research they are undertaking.

In forthcoming posts, Simon Griffiths (Goldsmiths) [examines David Cameron's political philosophy](#), arguing that when it comes to 'progressive conservatism' it is the Conservative means that are dominant, not the 'progressive' ends. Judi Atkins (University of Leeds) [delves further into Conservative rhetoric](#) in relation to the 'Big Society' agenda and the Conservatives' commitment to 'mend broken Britain', arguing that they borrow from New Labour's anti-social behaviour narrative. On a related theme, Pete Redford (University of Birmingham) [questions the extent](#) to which the Conservatives are fulfilling Cameron's promise of 'liberal conservatism' through a consideration of coalition welfare policy.

A further aspect of the Prime Minister's conservatism is his repeated defence of the Union with Scotland and the integrity of the United Kingdom. Yet, as Alan Convery (University of Strathclyde) argues, under his leadership the state-wide Conservative Party has so far [failed to articulate a compelling vision for the future of Scotland](#) in the UK, and faces an enormous electoral struggle north of the border. David Cameron might though take heart from Katharine Dommett's assessment that there is some ideological coherence to the coalition's agenda, and that it is largely blue in hue. At least relative to the Liberal Democrats, Dommett (University of Sheffield) suggests that the [Conservatives have some reasons to](#)

be cheerful.

Analysing the pattern of ministerial appointments under the coalition, Tim Heppell (University of Leeds) shows how David Cameron's room for reshuffles has been restricted and how this is [causing resentment amongst some of his backbenchers](#). How the Conservatives are seeking to oppose Ed Miliband's Labour is the subject of a post by Andrew Crines (University of Huddersfield), who suggests that coalition has helped sustain a rhetoric of national interest which draws on traditional Conservative themes to try and [marginalise Labour from debate](#).

Together these posts provide a stimulating discussion about Conservative ideology, strategy, tactics and policy under Cameron's premiership. What unifies all of them is the undeniable importance of the dynamics of coalition government, and we can conceive of the coalition as having three key phases. The first phase was *civilised partnership*. Following the garden nuptials Cameron and Clegg enjoyed a brief honeymoon, vowing to create a new politics and a united coalition. Close working relationships were developed across party lines in many areas of the government, and as the [Constitution Unit reported](#): 'The coalition's big achievement in the first year has been to establish a government which is remarkably harmonious, effective and decisive.'

The second year of the coalition saw this civilised partnership give way to a second phase, *uneasy cohabitation*, which we are currently in. In this phase the leadership of both parties continue to calculate that their interests are best served by sustaining the coalition, but are also mindful to demonstrate that they are 'different parties', and to differentiate themselves sufficiently to satisfy their own backbenchers and supporters. Research highlighting the [unprecedented level](#) of rebellion under the coalition reminds us that while Ministers might have to work co-operatively with their coalition partners, backbenchers certainly do not.

The third and final phase of the coalition will be *divorce*. Whether this will prove acrimonious or amicable, how protracted it will be, and quite when it will occur, remain unanswered questions. But in Patrick Dunleavy's words '[all coalitions unzip from the end](#)', and as [Tim Bale has also argued](#) it is more likely than not that the coalition partners will go their separate ways before May 2015. A tipping point will be reached when at least one of the coalition parties calculates that it is time to cut and run, to create some pre-election distance from the other. For many Conservatives and Liberal Democrats the coalition is not built on ideological attraction but is a marriage of convenience. The decision to coalesce was justified by those involved as the only credible response to the financial and economic crisis, and reducing the budget deficit was enshrined in the coalition agreement as its *raison d'être*. However, even commitment to this objective (as the latest U-turn on fuel tax indicates) is beginning to fray. Divisions over many other issues – the NHS, Europe, Lords reform, school's policy, and the recent budget to name just a few – indicate that when the time comes for annulment neither side will have difficulty identifying grounds for a divorce.

This is the first in a series of posts by contributors to the recent 'Conservatives in Coalition Government' conference organised by the [Political Studies Association Specialist Group for the study of Conservatives and Conservatism](#) and the [Centre for British Politics at the University of Hull](#). The views expressed are those of the author alone and not those of the Political Studies Association or the University of Hull.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the author

Richard Hayton is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Huddersfield, and Convenor of the [Political Studies Association Specialist Group for the study of Conservatives and Conservatism](#). He is the author of *Reconstructing Conservatism? The Conservative Party in Opposition, 1997-2010*, published by Manchester University Press. His website is www.richardhayton.com. He can be reached on his e-mail address: r.hayton@hud.ac.uk.

You may also be interested in the following posts (automatically generated):

1. Conservatives in Coalition Government series: concluding remarks (33.4)
2. The Conservatives in Coalition: "How the Tories are opposing Miliband's Labour Party" (27.1)
3. The Liberal Democrats need to build a narrative of better governance, democratise their policy-making and must not be afraid to disagree with the Conservatives in public (22.8)
4. The Tories have dominated the policy agenda and delivered on their ideology much more successfully than the Lib Dems in coalition (22.3)