

Conservatives in Coalition Government series: concluding remarks

Peter Munce concludes the series of posts by contributors who participated in a recent 'Conservatives in Coalition Government' conference. The posts were intended to provide a thought provoking discussion about Conservative ideology, strategy, tactics and policy under Cameron's premiership and in the current partnership with the Liberal Democrats.



The challenges faced by David Cameron over the past few weeks stand in stark contrast to the wave of hope, optimism and promise that has overcome the nation in light of the success of the London Olympics. As with most other coalitions Cameron is fighting on two battlefronts: with his own party and with his coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats.

Both these battlefronts are neatly illustrated by two events that have unfolded during the course of these blogs over the past few weeks. Firstly, the battle with his own party is exemplified by the [wave of publicity](#) that has followed the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson over the past 10 days. [Talk of Boris as Prime Minister](#) and speculation that he could replace Cameron as Conservative Party leader says less about his capacity to govern and more about the problems Cameron faces internally within the Conservative Party. Secondly, the struggle with his Coalition partners is illustrated by [Nick Clegg's very public rebuke](#) of the Tories for failing to honour part of the Coalition Agreement over reform of the House of Lords forcing Clegg to withdraw his party's support for changes to the Westminster electoral boundaries. [As one academic put it](#) the Coalition may limp onto the next election but 'in terms of how it is presented to the public, it looks grubby, incoherent, very divided, a bit of a mess'.

Over the past few weeks this blog has featured a number of posts from scholars who participated in a recent '[Conservatives in Coalition Government](#)' conference organised by the [Centre for British Politics](#) at the University of Hull and the Political Studies Association's (PSA) [specialist group](#) for the study of the Conservative politics. In the first post of this series, [Richard Hayton](#) helpfully outlined the key questions both the conference and the contributions to this blog wanted to consider. The posts were intended to provide a thought-provoking discussion about the nature of contemporary Conservative ideology, strategy, tactics and policy.

Indeed, whilst the contributions examined different areas of Conservative politics, what they shared, in their own way, was an analysis of the challenges facing Cameron as leader of both the Conservative Party and of a coalition government. Furthermore, what the conference wanted to achieve was an examination of the Conservative Party and the dynamics of coalition government through what [Arthur Aughey and Philip Norton have called the 'situational context'](#). As they argue; 'the Conservative Party does not exist in isolation but participates in a real world of political competition which one may call the "situational" context. Party activity is therefore subject to circumstance and to practical experience, which are crucial in the Conservative schema of things' (1981, p.10).

An extended version of some of these contributions will feature in a future special section of the academic journal [Parliamentary Affairs](#) and, it is hoped, will make an important and insightful contribution to study of Conservative Party politics and the coalition. However, the questions considered by the conference and these contributions were obviously not exhaustive and significant questions remain for academics, policy makers and commentators to consider.

In his [contribution to this series](#), Richard Hayton set out how one can conceive of the Coalition in three phases. In terms of the challenge Cameron faces internally within the Conservative Party, he is confronted with three competing but overlapping Conservative narratives about the Party's present electoral fortunes and their continued coalition partnership with the Liberal Democrats: the traditionalist, modernist and realist narratives. The central argument of the narrative articulated by traditionalist Tory

MPs is that the coalition government with the Liberal Democrats has diluted orthodox Tory values and that traditional Tory policies on tax, criminal justice must become more prominent. Most traditionalists reluctantly accepted that there was no alternative to coalition with the Liberal Democrats and remain profoundly uneasy with the partnership. However, there were a few traditionalists who didn't even accept this and believe Cameron should have formed a minority government and then held another election 6 months later.

Secondly, the narrative articulated by the Conservative modernisers is, in most cases, comfortable with the coalition partnership in both practical and intellectual terms. Its main line of argument is that in addition to the instrumental and practical benefits of the coalition partnership, there is also a significant ideological convergence between Cameron's conservatism and the 'orange book' liberalism of Liberal Democrats like David Laws. One Conservative MP, associated with the Conservative modernisers around Cameron, Nick Boles, even went as far to suggest [a formal election pact](#) between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats at the next election in a book published a few months into the coalition agreement.

Thirdly, the realist narrative suggests that the only pragmatic option for the Conservatives at the last general election was to form a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats. It is more concerned with getting on and making the coalition work as practically and realistically as possible. Cabinet Minister such as the Foreign Secretary, William Hague and the Home Secretary, Theresa May could, arguably, fit this description. How Cameron deals with these narratives is crucial. In many ways his response will be guided not only by what he stands for but the 'situational context', as he seeks to balance the relationship with his coalition partners with the management of his own party and the vagaries of political life.

This is the final post in a series 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.

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3. [The Conservatives' arguments against electoral reform \(19.1\)](#)
4. [The Barnsley by-election suggests that the collective health of the Coalition government is now in jeopardy. On current polls the Liberal Democrats will do badly in the May local elections \(19.1\)](#)