

# The Coalition Government's rhetoric promotes individualism and seeks to reduce the role of the state

By Democratic Audit

*In democracies, governments shape and manipulate public opinion to further their various political and policy agendas. In a recently published [article](#) summarised here, **Andrew Crines** argues that the rhetoric of the current government revolves around austerity in economics, and remoralisation in social policy, which combine to represent an embrace of social and economic individualisation.*

The coalition government was formed at a point of economic and so-called social crisis in the UK. The fallout from the Eurozone crisis was in full flow, whilst 'broken Britain' predicated Cameron's drive for reform of social welfare. In short, the 'politics of crisis' was in full flow. Indeed, even the creation of a coalition government rhetorically bought in to this sense of urgency. It was nothing short of a national emergency that may require extraordinary action.

The coalition was also partly enabled by an ideological alignment between the Cameron Conservatives and the Orange Book Liberals. Together, they formed an ideological quad that enabled a retreat of the state, the adoption of austerity, and the embrace of individualism.



*Orange book liberals and the Defence Secretary (Credit: The Prime Minister's Office: CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)*

## Communicative Theories

To better appreciate the rhetorical impact of leading political figures within the coalition it will be necessary to briefly introduce a selection of theories that underscore communicative analyses. It is first worth remembering that rhetoric and oratory are distinct. Put simply rhetoric is the content of a speech, whilst oratory is its delivery. The most impressive speakers tend to be effective in both, however it is possible to excel in one whilst lacking in another.

To analyse both there are six interdependent techniques – for rhetoric these are ethos (the credibility/character of a speaker); pathos (appealing to an audiences emotions); and logos (presenting a logic argument). For oratory they are deliberative (debate-led); judicial (forensic) and epideictic (a dramatic performance). These classical techniques have been the subject of analysis by a number of noteworthy scholars, both classic and contemporary.

Whilst the rhetorical devices are more interdependent in their use, the oratorical style depends on the type of audience being addressed. For example, *logos*-driven rhetoric and deliberative oratory would be more suited to the Commons, whilst *pathos* and *epideictic* oratory is more appropriate for the party conference. Of course there are exceptions. The leaders of the respective party's may be more inclined towards an emotional performance at PMQs, whilst more deliberative debate is held back for a less partisan audience. As such the type of communicative techniques adopted is predicated upon the expectations of the audience.

## **Economic**

The moment of crisis alluded to above is key in understanding the coalition's economic rhetoric. The uniqueness 'the national interest' being pursued by two different parties aims to create a *logos*-based justification for austerity. Moreover, such uniqueness strives to position the coalition above the usual party politics given two parties with distinctive ideological identities are prepared to put to one side their differences in order to 'clear up the mess left by the last Labour government'. In effect this aims to isolate austerity from opposition because 'the national interest' is rhetorically very strong. Indeed, Labour have partly bought into this narrative by opposing the pace of austerity rather than questioning the fundamentals of the policy.

Participation in the coalition also enables the Liberal Democrats to demonstrate governing competence. The hope of the party elite is by making 'the tough decisions' they will demonstrate to the electorate their rhetorical impact upon the Conservatives and show that they a credible and trusted party of government. Indeed, this is arguably an attempt to mimic Labour's 'moment of credibility' during the wartime coalition government. However, this expectation could be premature given the Conservatives have positioned themselves through careful ministerial allocation to dominate the key departments. Indeed, although numerically high, the Liberal Democrats occupy few departments that are likely to demonstrate governing competence given the Treasury, Ministry of Defence, Home Office, and Foreign Office are dominated by Conservatives. Contrasting this during the 1940s coalition, Labour occupied far greater departments of significance including the Home Office. As a consequence, the Liberal Democrats will have few opportunities to rhetorically position themselves as a party capable of effective governance.

## **Social Morality**

Rhetorically both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats have a broadly defined preference for individualism over the collective. This taps into *pathos*-driven rhetoric that, for the Conservatives and Cameron in particular, embraces a strong moral dimension. Volunteering, self-help, and retreat from the state underscore much of the coalition's social welfare rhetoric. It is interesting to note that Cameron strives to claim universal appeal for his understanding of morality through rhetoric that claims it applies to all regardless of religious faith (or lack of). However, Cameron does not shy away from embracing the Christian tenets of his own morality that he uses to inform social policy rhetoric. Ideologically speaking, this form of moralistic rhetoric conflicts with the changing nature of morality. For example morality can shift over time, both individually and at state-level. These shifts make a constructing a single set of moral values that become definitive highly problematic. However, it is Cameron's orthodox values that inform key social policies.

For example the Big Society is predicated upon local action to tackle poverty, and though critics often argue it is simply a cover for cuts, it is in reality an ideological repositioning of welfare at the most fundamental level. Put simply, philanthropy, faith groups, and volunteering emerge as the dominant providers of welfare whilst the state takes an increasingly background position. This *pathos*-driven rhetoric buys in to the idea that givers of aid can foster a sense of moral self-worth by being charitable, whilst the receiver is given temporary assistance in a moment of need. This rhetorically constructs a definition for what it means to be a moral citizen: self reliant, charitable, and free from the state.

The rhetoric of the coalition revolves around two key areas: economic policy (austerity) and social policy (remoralisation). Whilst the first has a more *logos*-based argument predicated upon the need for tighter fiscal constraints, the second is much more *pathos*-orientated. Combined, they each represent an embrace of economic and social individualism that reduces the role of the state. The rhetoric of ‘the national interest’ acts as a ‘one size fits all’ justification for these ideological shifts provided the earlier ‘politics of crisis’ is maintained.

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