

# Unity and distinctiveness: What future junior coalition partners can learn from the Liberal Democrats

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*A key lesson that future junior coalition partners should take from the Liberal Democrats' first experience in government is that the costs of being embedded across government are substantial, whilst the benefits in terms of clear influence on policy are small, writes [Libby McEnhill](#).*



Coalition government brings challenges for the parties involved, notably the 'unity/distinctiveness' dilemma: how to govern together, whilst still maintaining individual party identities. Both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives have had to negotiate this since 2010, but it presents more of a problem for the Lib Dems as the less visible and less influential junior partner. One important aspect of the unity/distinctiveness dilemma concerns the allocation of ministerial posts. The fortunes of the Liberal Democrats in coalition suggest that their approach to this was misjudged.

During negotiations the Lib Dems pursued a strategy of 'breadth' over 'depth' in allocations. The party appeared to emerge from the negotiations in a slightly stronger position than might have been expected: for the 16 per cent of seats that Liberal Democrats contributed, they received 22 per cent of ministerial posts. However, they experienced a trade-off between quantity and quality. The party was able to place [ministers across government](#), and just four departments did not contain any Liberal Democrats in 2010. Very often, however, these were single junior ministerial 'watchdogs' within Conservative-dominated departments. Additionally, of the five cabinet-level posts that they received, only two (BIS and DECC) were Secretary of State positions, and relatively low-profile ones at that.

Depth as an alternative would have entailed concentrating Lib Dem ministers in one or more departments closely related to the party's policy priorities so as to gain overall control over these. This would reduce the range of policy areas that the Lib Dems had direct input on, but might have enabled them to carve out a more distinctive set of policy contributions. Education, as both a classical ministry and a Liberal Democrat priority, would have been a good target.

The breadth strategy necessitated close intra-party co-operation across government. Whilst satisfying the conditions for governing unity effectively, this can afford the smaller party even less opportunity to voice public dissent with coalition policies, and hence may cause it to struggle to retain its distinctiveness. Ultimately this is likely to cost it support, as the Lib Dems have discovered.

This seems to render the Lib Dem decision to opt for depth somewhat unusual. However, as [Nick Clegg identified](#), if the coalition could demonstrate that it was capable of governing as effectively as a single party, it would buttress both the case for further coalitions and for the Lib Dems' inclusion within them. This was a primary motivation. It also provided a means of establishing the Lib Dems as a credible party of government, capable of engaging with the full range of policy areas.

For this to work in terms of retaining support as well as gaining credibility and providing stability, it required the Lib Dems to assert influence throughout the coalition's time in office. Otherwise, decoupling would leave them with little to say for their contribution to the coalition's legacy beyond the fact that their personnel had been in government (which could also work against them).

Welfare policy is one area where the Lib Dems have attempted to exert a distinctive influence, presenting themselves as a moderating influence on the Conservatives. The allocation of ministerial posts within the DWP followed the pattern for most other departments. The Conservatives took Secretary of State and three junior posts (Employment, Disabled People and Welfare Reform), while the Liberal Democrats received one junior post

(Pensions), allocated to Steve Webb.

Much of the welfare reform agenda has been characterised by unity. Pensions stands out as an area of overlap, but the Lib Dems have also been supportive of Universal Credit and the Work Programme. Other reforms, such as the benefit cap and 'bedroom tax', have been more contentious amongst both MPs and supporters. Accordingly, it is around these that the Lib Dems have attempted to distinguish themselves from the Conservatives. The effectiveness of this has been weakened by both the direct and indirect implications of the position of the Lib Dems in government.

One strategy has been to reject elements of the welfare reform agenda: for example, in 2014, the Lib Dems [voted with Labour](#) to amend the 'bedroom tax'. This is problematic as it renders the party open to accusations of inconsistency. It also suggests that if the Lib Dems were concerned about this policy while it was being formulated, then the presence of one of their number within the DWP was not enough to substantially alter its content. Moreover, Webb has frequently been called on to defend the policy to the House. The Conservatives have not missed the opportunity to foist responsibility for this unpopular measure on their coalition partners following its implementation.

A second strategy has been to emphasise where the Lib Dems have restrained their coalition partners, resulting in a 'less nasty' coalition. They claim to have prevented the Conservatives from removing housing benefit from under 25s, and [won concessions](#) over the benefit cap. This is more tenable, but again the effectiveness of it is debatable. One of the examples – of under 25s and housing benefit – was never a substantive policy proposal: [Danny Alexander claimed](#) that it was merely Cameron 'setting out his own thinking'. The concessions on the benefit cap do appear to be a genuine example of influence, but they fail to challenge the fundamental structure of the policy, instead simply delaying its impact for some families.

It is also notable that the benefit cap concessions were reportedly brought about by Simon Hughes, the Liberal Democrat deputy leader, and not Webb acting in his capacity as a junior minister. This serves firstly as a reminder that it is not impossible to win policy concessions from 'outside' a department. It also further suggests that the direct association between the Lib Dem ministers and policies that are likely to be unpopular with some of their supporters may not have been a price worth paying for the amount (or lack) of policy influence that they were able to wield as a consequence of this.

Both of these strategies are quite limited and 'thin'. They give a (somewhat inconsistent) impression of what the Lib Dems do not support, but they contribute little to a more positive impression of what, or who, the Liberal Democrats are. Ultimately, the wider problem is that there has been too much emphasis on unity in the belief that this would prove that coalition could work. Unfortunately, the result for Lib Dems in this important and sensitive policy area is that they have become too closely identified with the Conservatives and coalition identity, diluting their own identity in the process.

The Lib Dems had reasons for going for breadth across government in 2010 although, in respect of the influence that they would be able to achieve as a result of this, the reasoning may have been somewhat naïve. A key lesson that future junior coalition partners should take from the Liberal Democrats' first experience in government is that the costs of being embedded across government are substantial, whilst the benefits in terms of clear influence on policy are small. For the sake of carving out a distinctive governing legacy whilst distancing themselves somewhat from areas on which the senior partner will inevitably exercise greater influence, future junior UK coalition partners should seriously consider strategies of depth should they find themselves in negotiations after May 7th, or beyond.

**A [longer version](#) of this article can be read in the [latest issue](#) of the journal *The Political Quarterly*.**

*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. Featured image credit: [Innotata](#) CC BY 3.0*

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