

The coalition effect on the Liberal Democrats: Driven to the edge of Europe

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Throughout the coalition, a gradual change of the Lib Dems' approach to the EU in a number of areas can be seen. In this article, [Eunice Goes](#) analyses the mistakes the party made and what effect being in a coalition government has had on Nick Clegg's party.



When the Liberal Democrats joined the coalition government in 2010 they were expected to restrain the most Eurosceptic instincts of their Conservative partners, however this expectation proved to be misplaced. In the five years the coalition government lasted, the Lib Dems let the Conservatives lead the coalition's European agenda, and will be forever associated to the government that brought Britain closer to the exit door of the EU.

What can explain this surprising outcome? It turns out that the Liberal Democrats made a series of mistakes, some of them avoidable and others unavoidable. In terms of avoidable mistakes, the distribution of portfolios and the party's lax attitude to the coalition's oversight mechanisms stand out.

But the party also misjudged the electoral threat posed by UKIP and they clearly underestimated the electoral costs of joining a coalition with the Conservatives. When they were confronted with their sudden and drastic loss of popularity they reassessed their own approach to Europe.

Mistakes

One of the major mistakes made by the Liberal Democrats was to forego the post of foreign secretary, a position normally occupied by the junior party in coalition governments. It is unlikely that the Conservatives would have agreed to such a demand, but it remains the case that Lib Dems did not even ask for that post.

Instead, they tried to rely on junior ministers to monitor the Conservatives but in the case of European policy they were too lax. The only Lib Dem junior minister in the Foreign Office was Jeremy Browne, who saw his role as 'everything but Europe'. Then, for some mysterious reason, Nick Clegg left the FO as a liberal-democrat free-zone following the 2012 reshuffle. The only Lib Dem voice left was that of Lord Wallace of Saltaire who did his utmost to carry the Lib Dem flag but who was unable to [refrain singlehandedly](#) the Tory Eurosceptics.

The Lib Dems relied as well in the different cabinet committees to correct any deviation from the programme of government but this monitoring mechanism did not always work. The Conservatives could – and did – bypass it to drive policy in a direction that challenged the spirit (though not the letter) of the coalition's agreement.

Finally, they could and did use the party's backbenchers and peers to monitor the passage of legislation on EU affairs. They also seemed eager to engage in legislative tit-for-tat. This was sometimes effective as the recent defeat of the [EU referendum bill](#) demonstrates. But they could only achieve so much through this monitoring mechanism.

Cold Feet About Europe

The Liberal Democrats' weak hold on the coalition's European agenda was also a result of the party's recalibration of its approach to Europe. This process started before 2010 but it intensified following the formation of the coalition government and is mostly explained by electoral considerations.

Since 2010 the party lost all but one of their 11 MEPs, roughly 40 per cent of its councillors and is expected to lose almost half of their seats at next week's election. As a result of these electoral trends, MPs representing marginal

seats in the South west of England were eager to dilute or hide the party's pro-European identity.

The fear of being perceived as a party of Euro-fanatics has thus informed a gradual change of the Lib Dems' approach to the EU in a number of areas, namely about the single currency, the direction of the European project, and most significantly, about the single market rules governing the freedom of movement of EU workers. Like the Conservatives and Labour, the Lib Dems [want to impose restrictions](#) in the access to welfare benefits to EU migrants.

Lessons for the Future

As a result of the interplay of the different factors outlined above, the Lib Dems' influence over the coalition's European agenda is practically invisible. Given this paltry track record, the party should consider adopting a more robust approach to the negotiation of the likely, new coalition government.

Firstly, it should select a wider set of policy priorities. Investing the party's silver in electoral reform and a few other token policies proved to be very costly from an electoral viewpoint. Hence, if they find themselves again in a coalition with the Conservatives, they should use the referendum on EU membership to extract concessions on a variety of areas.

Because the stakes are rather high, and the Lib Dems wish Britain to remain a member of the EU, they should also seek concessions at the level of the mechanics of the coalition government. In particular, they should demand a role that will enable them to participate in the negotiation of Britain's new terms of membership with the EU, which will precede the referendum. This could be achieved either by occupying the post of Foreign Secretary or by giving the Deputy Prime Minister (if Clegg insists on keeping this post) the co-responsibility of participating in equal terms in the negotiations of Britain's new terms of membership with the EU. Failure to do so may result in another five year of political marginalisation and maybe in Britain's withdrawal from the EU.

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

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