

The coalition currently occupies a rhetorically higher ground

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*With much of the country swallowing austerity and blaming the previous Labour government for profligacy, the Conservative party has been successful at framing the narrative regarding fiscal policy and the causes of economic hardship. Now that the economy has shown tentative signs of recovery, George Osborne has been able to claim a logical basis for austerity as the route to a successful recovery. **Andrew Scott Crines** explores the coalition's rhetoric, and how it has come to centre the debate on the dose of austerity rather than between alternative economic strategies.*



It is well remembered that during the run up to the 2010 general election the politics of crisis came into play. The fallout from the Eurozone, the increasing violence in Greece, and the growing expectation by some political pundits that the Euro would not survive came together to create an uncertain political environment.

As a result of this crisis Britain's exposure to the economic 'bloodbath' on the continent was used as a rhetorical tool by Labour's opponents to undermine Brown's *ethos*, both as Chancellor and Prime Minister. During the election Labour's opponents implicitly argued that state-centric economic investment and [Alistair Darling's willingness to assist in European bailouts](#) was damaging to the British economy. Vince Cable, amongst others, also [argued that a Greek-style crisis could happen in Britain](#) unless an alternative course was found. Because of this economic 'chaos', the Conservatives and, to a lesser extent the Liberal Democrats, argued that spending/investment and Labour's economic imprudence had been partial causal factors of the crisis and that an alternative was needed to inform their economic objectives of the next government *vis-à-vis* [austerity](#).

A key part of the argument legitimising the formation of a coalition was how unusual the economic crisis was and that solving it went beyond traditional party politics. As a consequence, the rhetoric of '[the national interest](#)' emerged and is subsequently used to remind the electorate of the moment of crisis at the election. Reminding the electorate of 'the national interest' also implicitly reminds them of Labour's economic failures in government, thereby generating *logos* for Osborne's austerity drive. Put simply, this moment of crisis informs the Coalition's national interest rhetoric and with it the economic strategy it adopts up until 2015. As a result it rhetorically creates a clear break between the economic strategies of both Labour and the coalition, and equates alternatives to austerity with the failures of the past.

But it is important to also consider how economic recovery can be useful as a rhetorical tool. Given the crisis any form of recovery carries strong weight for Osborne and the coalition because it validates their ideological argument. Moreover the credibility of the coalition is predicated upon '[solving Labour's mess](#)' and any demonstration of a successful strategy confirms that austerity is the correct path. Put simply, [0.7% recovery is rhetorically sufficient to make that argument](#) because it confirms that, although small, the coalition is following a [more successful economic strategy](#) than [that proposed by Labour](#). Given this they allow the implicit expectation that future recovery [may be stronger](#) provided austerity continues to inform their strategy.

Needless to say opponents of this strategy [find themselves without a strong enough argument](#) to counter it. Granted the weakness of the recovery is [hardly what Osborne predicted in 2010](#), however that misses the significance of any rate of growth and the value it has for the narrative being established by the coalition ahead of 2015. Ed Miliband is [no longer able to rhetorically claim austerity and, by proxy the coalition, is failing](#) because Osborne and Cameron now argue [the economy is entering a period of greater success](#). Moreover, Ed Balls' broad embrace of the coalition's economic narrative prevents Labour from now presenting a distinctive alternative. Such a message will enable both parties in the coalition to argue that [Labour's economic record and future plans may risk the fragile recovery](#) and that should they return to government the prospect of a future crisis increases.

In summary, this leads to the conclusion that the coalition currently occupies a rhetorically higher ground. Given their *ethos* comes from the national interest narrative that they have successfully established and ensuring the civil unrest caused by the economic crisis in Europe is not replicated in Britain, they are able to claim a logical basis for austerity as the route to a successful recovery. Put simply, their *ethos* is now supported by *logos* which makes it even harder for Labour to challenge. Indeed, since 2010 Labour's response has been to call for [alternative ways of approaching austerity](#) rather than to present an alternative economic strategy entirely. Given that the *logos* of Osborne's prescription for deficit reduction has been increased by the signs of recovery it is even less likely to be contested by other mainstream political parties. Indeed, the debate is more likely than ever to be rhetorically centred on the dose of austerity, rather than presenting a truly dynamic alternative economic strategy.

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