

# Marriage from hell: what can Australia's coalition tell us about the Tory-DUP government?

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*For the first time in British history, the Conservatives will be forced to rely on the hardline, illiberal Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to push through legislation. It is also the first time in the modern era that the British government will be forced to rely on a party with a strong sense of regional identity and be required to make hyper-parochial concessions in exchange for confidence and supply. **Patrick Leslie** and **Maria Taflaga** look at what we can glean from Australia's experience of right-wing coalitions.*



Pork-barrel politics?

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Although unprecedented in the UK, we can look to other Westminster-based systems for insights. In Australia, for instance, right-wing coalitions are considered business as usual.

Australia and the UK are both Westminster democracies with similar political cultures and share many of the same conventions, including a confidence-based parliamentary system, dominated by two major parties with an adversarial political culture. Australia differs somewhat as it is a federal system, delegating many responsibilities to the state level, although as the importance of regional politics in the UK has increased as devolution has progressed.

Unlike the in UK, Australia's Conservative Party equivalent — the Liberal Party — has rarely been able to govern alone. The Liberals have relied on the National Party, a socially conservative, right-wing party focused on agriculture, mining and rural communities. Known as the Coalition, these two parties have governed together since the 1920s.

## What can we expect from a Conservative/DUP agreement?

### Social traditionalism

The DUP's reputation as a hard-line, socially conservative, unionist party sparked outrage and protest at the Conservatives' desire to strike a deal — the DUP remain staunch opponents of decriminalising abortion and marriage equality.

In the Australian case, the Nationals have consistently sought to slow the pace of social change. In 2015, socially conservative Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, [used](#) the National party's opposition to gay marriage as a tactic to block a push for a free vote on the issue. The tactic worked: gay marriage remains illegal in Australia.

## But should we be concerned?

Currently, there are few religiously controversial policy issues on the national legislative agenda. While Arlene Foster's vow to [retain the ban on abortion](#) in Northern Ireland is of concern to mainland voters, the issue remains confined to Stormont for now. Likewise in Australia, abortion remains a state-based policy domain with minimal impact at the federal level. The Nationals remain more focused on securing resources for their regional constituents than pursuing their social policy objectives.

A review of the DUP's 2017 [Westminster manifesto](#) reveals a distinct lack of references to social policy, let alone morally contentious issues. Considering the amount of anxiety generated by the DUP's social conservatism, we see little evidence of the party's intent to impose Northern Irish social policies onto the mainland.

## Brexit and pork-barrel politics

It is far more likely that the DUP will have significant impact on government spending both within Northern Ireland and nationally. Past experience has suggested that the DUP will have a "shopping list" of demands for Northern Ireland ([Cowley and Kavanagh 2015, 145](#)), as well as wanting to influence Conservative Party plans to cut [social care policies](#) such as the 'triple lock' on pension increases and the winter fuel allowance.

Looking to Australia, the Nationals have a long history of influencing economic policy. The party has successfully secured funding directly targeted towards regional and rural Australia, such as a [\\$3 billion](#) rural telecommunications fund, and the [relocation](#) of entire government agencies to National Party Leader, Barnaby Joyce's, own district.

Until their position in parliament was diminished at the 2007 federal election, the Nationals continuously held the trade ministry, which they used to [shape](#) Australia's trade policy to suit its agricultural base. In its current term of office, the Nationals have successfully blocked foreign takeover [bids of agricultural companies](#), introduced stricter foreign [investment rules](#) and favourable treatment for [Australian agricultural products](#) in free trade deals despite opposition within the Liberal party.

While it's not yet clear what the DUP's nuanced position on Brexit will be, their position is less extreme than the Conservative '[no deal is better than a bad deal](#)' position. The DUP favour a [frictionless border](#) with the Republic, in addition to a comprehensive customs and free trade agreement with the EU. Northern Ireland [stands to lose the most](#) of all of the UK's constituent regions as a result of a hard Brexit. The DUP has, therefore, both the votes and every incentive to pull the Conservatives towards its Brexit position.

## King-making

Evidence from Australia suggests that the DUP could also influence the leadership of the Conservative Party. Throughout their history, the National Party have [acted as king-makers](#). In 1922, they forced Prime Minister Billy Hughes to stand down to make way for the Nationals' preferred candidate. After the [disappearance](#) of Prime Minister Harold Holt in 1967, National Party leader, John McEwan black-balled the leadership ambitions of Billy McMahon. In 2009, the Nationals were instrumental in the downfall of Opposition Leader Malcolm Turnbull. And in 2015, the Nationals [imposed a written agreement](#) on Turnbull, now a prime ministerial challenger, severely constraining his capacity to set his own policy agenda as PM. In the UK context, should Theresa May's premiership falter, the DUP

could use its balance-of-power position to back the most accommodating leadership candidate.

## **The legacy of the Troubles**

While there are many insights that can be drawn from the Australian experience, the DUP's history as a key player during the Troubles presents specific challenges for any parliamentary working arrangement – namely, how to safeguard the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement and the ongoing Northern Irish peace process.

In so far as the Conservative-DUP relationship is successful, we believe it is more likely to be characterised by attempts to secure increased funding for Northern Ireland, rather than by social policy campaigns. However, as the working partnership of the Australian coalition demonstrates, it's not enough for the Conservatives and DUP to settle their policy differences: they must also institutionalise effective inter-party relationships. But the parties' capacity to work together remains an open question, complicated by the DUP's unique position in Northern Irish politics.

*This post represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit.*

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