



DEBATE: HOLDING THE BALANCE

In his review of Mark Oaten's *Coalitions: The Politics and Personalities of Coalition Government from 1850* (Harriman House, 2007) in the summer 2008 issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*, **Duncan Brack** concluded that 'Oaten deserves credit at least for raising a series of good questions. Let's hope that the hung parliament that might provide the answers isn't too long coming.' The author **Roy Douglas** wrote to take issue with this viewpoint. We have developed this exchange of views into a debate between the two.

Roy Douglas to Duncan Brack

Dear Duncan,
I disagree profoundly with the concluding words of your recent book review:

Let's hope that the hung parliament that might provide the answers isn't too long coming.

If this means a parliament in which Conservatives and Labour have approximately equal representation and the Liberal Democrats will be invited to choose which of them takes office, I cannot conceive of a more certain cause of disaster.

When the Liberals held the balance of power in 1924 and allowed a Labour government to take office, the party's representation was quartered after less than a year. When they held the balance of power in 1929–31, and Lloyd George tried to squeeze a deal out of Labour, the parliamentary party split down the middle, with half of them going into permanent alliance with the Tories. When the Liberal Party almost, but not quite, held the balance of power in 1950, again there was a deep split, and it was soon reduced to its lowest representation ever.

The balance-of-power position in the late 1970s would soon have shattered the party if the rank and file had not pulled their leaders out of the 'Lib–Lab Pact'. The mind boggles as to what would have happened if there had been a balance of power in 1997 and Ashdown had gone into Blair's Labour government; or if Clem Davies in 1951 or Jeremy Thorpe in 1974 had succumbed to Tory blandishments and accepted ministerial office in a Conservative administration. The one certainty is that there would have been massive secessions.

The whole idea of balance of power is predicated on the view that the Liberal Democrats are in some sense intermediate between the other two parties. This is fundamentally flawed. It would be difficult to drive a sheet of paper between Brown and Campbell, still less a political party. The most impressive Liberal Democrat action so far this century was to vote against the Iraq war, when the official line of both the other parties was to vote in favour. The next most impressive action was their principled vote against

forty-two days' detention without charge.

As Liberal historians, we should delve into what the Liberals did, and tried to do, in the days of their glory, and consider how far it is still applicable today. We could give far more emphasis to land value taxation, to replace many existing taxes. LVT was immensely popular before 1914 and is even more appropriate now than it was then. We could revive Gladstonian ideas of public finance as a trust and commence a thorough-going attack on the squander, bureaucracy and often plain dishonesty prevailing today. We should consider the Liberal plans of 1929 to conquer unemployment, and the relevance of Beveridge at a time when unemployment is twice the 'frictional' level he envisaged. We should take up the ideas of Cobden and Bright both on the question of free trade and on avoiding unnecessary 'defence' expenditure and unnecessary wars. The Tories and Labour would be united against us; only the electorate would be on our side.

To return to the 'hung parliament', the wisest course for Liberal Democrats in such circumstances would be to refuse membership of or support for any Conservative or Labour ministry, but to judge each issue that arises on its merits. Where possible, we should seek to divide parliament on distinctly liberal issues where both other parties will vote together against us.

Duncan Brack to Roy Douglas

Dear Roy,

I have to admit that I concluded my review with the phrase you object to more in an academic than a political spirit: it would just be very interesting to see what would happen if the Liberal Democrats held the balance of power. And it's in the same spirit of political-historical analysis that the History Group

is organising its fringe meeting at this year's autumn Liberal Democrat conference, looking at what actually happened in the 1920s, 1970s and 1990s/2000s (in Scotland) when the party found itself in that position (for details, see back page).

It's precisely because of the historical experience of the Liberal Party, however, that I stand by my argument. When a party finds itself genuinely holding the balance of power – i.e. being a third party in terms of seats but able to put either of the bigger two parties into power, either by supporting it in government or by participating in a coalition – it has a tricky, but immediate, choice to make. If it decides not to try to negotiate a coalition deal, or is not offered one, it has to decide what to do on the Queen's Speech presented by the minority government (I'm assuming here that the two larger parties don't negotiate a coalition between themselves, and also that no other 'third party' is able to put one of the bigger parties into power – which both seem a reasonable bet in current circumstances). It either has to vote for the Queen's Speech, vote against it or abstain.

The problem with either voting for, or abstaining, is that the party immediately risks being seen as a mere appendage of the government without reaping any of the potential benefits of actually being in power. As you point out, this is what happened in the 1920s: the Liberals supported Labour's King's Speech in 1924 (when Labour was the second party), and abstained in 1929 (when Labour was the biggest party). In both cases, in the Parliaments that followed, the Liberals were perpetually placed in the position of either voting with the government, and appearing as a mere accessory to it, or voting against it, probably on an issue which most Liberals supported anyway, and facing an election which they

could ill-afford to fight. In practice they split, repeatedly and disastrously.

It would be nice to think that the party would have the option, as you suggest, of 'judging each issue ... on its merits ... [and seeking] to divide Parliament on distinctly Liberal issues' – but in practice the Liberal Democrats wouldn't often have this choice. The government would control the agenda, not the Liberal Democrats. To look at another example from history, the minority government would hold off from implementing anything particularly controversial, stick to legislating on topics that the Liberal Democrats probably more or less supported, and then call another election a few months later when it thought it could win. This worked (just) for Labour in 1974, when they converted their minority following the February election into a slim majority following the October contest. The Liberals lost votes in the second 1974 election, even though they fought more seats.

The other option would be to vote against the minority government's Queen's Speech, which would certainly avoid the problem of being seen as its hanger-on. What happens then is not completely clear, and is largely without precedent, but presumably the next largest party would be offered the chance to form a government, and the Liberal Democrats would be faced with the same dilemma all over again. Would the party be prepared to vote down *both* the other parties' attempts to form a government? If so, it risks forcing a second election, perhaps just weeks after the first, with no money left in the bank and with exhausted activists and candidates.

Of course, the other parties would be in the same position, so possibly one of them would abstain on the crucial vote, allowing a minority government to be formed, with the Liberal

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Democrats clearly opposed. But that just ends up in much the same position as before, with the government determined to avoid doing anything too controversial, and trying to achieve a majority in a second election following a few months later.

I'm not saying I look forward to these eventualities, but if the Liberal Democrats continue to gain votes and seats, arithmetically it's almost certain that they will be faced with this position at some point; it seems highly implausible to assume that the party can leap straight from third position to largest party in one election.

If a coalition can be negotiated (and I accept that's a big if), I believe it offers a much more desirable outcome: Liberal Democrats taking part in government, having a say in legislation and actions, implementing at least some Liberal Democrat policies, and demolishing the image of the party as one doomed to perpetual opposition. That's what the Scottish Liberal Democrats aimed for in 1999, and achieved. I don't believe that they would have been better off in opposition for the following eight years, and I don't believe that it would be the best outcome at a UK level should the party end up holding the balance of power after a general election.

Roy Douglas to Duncan Brack

Dear Duncan,

Considering your reply to my initial letter, I am not sure that we really disagree that a 'balance of power' situation would be disastrous to the Liberal Democrats if they allowed the other two parties to make the political agenda. Where we disagree is whether the Liberal Democrats should do all in their power to make the agenda themselves.

Consider the 'balance-of-power' situation presented at the beginning of 1924. The Liberals rightly backed the motion

of no confidence in Baldwin's Conservative government. They had no alternative: he had called the election on the issue of Protection, and they profoundly disagreed with him. Winston Churchill, still a Liberal, suggested that they should have followed this up with a resolution condemning socialism, which the Tories would have had to support. There would have been strong majorities against both parties, and the King would have been bound to invite a Liberal to form a government. When they failed to do so, disaster was sure to follow – as it did.

In 1929–31, again, there was a 'balance-of-power' situation. The Liberals could have divided the Commons again and again on their 'Green', 'Red' and 'Yellow' Book policies, and on the theme 'We can conquer unemployment', which had played such an important part in their election campaign. They could easily have pointed out the failure of both the Labour government and the Conservative opposition to advance useful policies to contain the developing slump.

Coming to the 1997 Labour government, the Liberal Democrats rightly opposed British participation in the Iraq war, which was supported by both the Labour government and the Tory opposition. Where they missed an important trick was in failing to make full public use of the need for Britain to withdraw from Bush's war. Today they could usefully campaign against British participation in Afghanistan. What they have said about the current recession has been good and helpful, but they should now press strongly for Britain to follow the traditional Liberal policy of land value taxation in order to prevent a recurrence. Issues like these put the Liberal Democrats on one side and both other parties on the other.

If tacit external support for a government of a different party

Coalition or opposition; I don't see a viable third way.

is unwise, actual participation in a mixed ministry in which the Liberal Democrats were the smaller party would be catastrophic. Constitutional practice requires ministerial solidarity. It follows, therefore, that Liberal Democrats would be forced to vote with the larger government party for policies determined by that party. The public would give credit for all that it liked to the larger party and visit blame for what it didn't like on the Liberal Democrats. It would be 1924, only more so.

Duncan Brack to Roy Douglas

Dear Roy,

I certainly agree with you that holding the balance of power could well be a perilous experience, and should the Liberal Democrats find themselves in that position they would need smart leadership to avoid catastrophe.

My preference in that situation is a coalition, if negotiating one should prove possible. I disagree with the arguments in your last paragraph: if the coalition is negotiated intelligently, Liberal Democrats would *not* simply be forced into accepting whatever the larger party decides. As in Scotland in 1999, the coalition partners need to agree a full programme for government, lasting for a given number of years with an agreed set of objectives, and agreed procedures for dealing with new issues, which give as near equal weight as possible to both parties. (And needless to say, one of the objectives, in the Westminster situation, would have to be PR.) There's no reason why the public should see such a set-up as the larger party dominating the smaller – although, as I argued above, such an outcome *is* quite possible if the Liberal Democrats allow the other party to form a minority government, by abstaining on or voting for the other party's Queen's Speech.

Coalition or opposition; I don't see a viable third way.

From what you've argued, your prescription seems to be permanent opposition, at least until the party finds itself holding a majority in parliament. I'm afraid I don't see this as an attractive proposition either. If the Liberal Democrats are to grow significantly – as they may well do, at Labour's expense, in the next one or two elections – sooner or later the party is almost certain to find itself holding the balance. The same thing happened twice between 1918 and 1945, when Labour was effectively replacing the Liberals as the main anti-Conservative Party. (The Liberal Democrats could in theory leap straight to majority status, but it seems highly

unlikely, particularly given the targeting strategy that the party has followed since the 1990s, which has led to a much greater concentration of the Liberal Democrat vote than hitherto.) Given such an eventuality, is the party really best advised to refuse any chance of putting its programme into practice? What, after all, are we in politics for?

Not that I think a coalition deal is likely to be offered; far from it. A hung parliament is such a rare outcome at a UK level that most politicians would not expect it to last. Instead, one of the two bigger parties is likely to pursue the minority government option I outlined above: avoid doing anything controversial, dare the other parties to vote it

down and then call another election as soon as it looks likely it could win one. Only if the Liberal Democrats end up holding the balance of power again, after the *second* election, do I think that coalition would become a serious possibility. But, in the mean time, that would require the party to vote against the minority government's Queen's Speech (even if it risked another election immediately – a need for strong nerves there!), making it clear that they oppose the government. And then, assuming the minority government does take power, putting forward a strong, consistent and distinctive Liberal Democrat position on what would be better. And on that note I think we completely agree.

Duncan Brack is the Editor of the Journal of Liberal History, and co-editor of all four of the Liberal Democrat History Group's books (Dictionary of Liberal Biography (1998), Dictionary of Liberal Quotations (1999), Great Liberal Speeches (2001) and Dictionary of Liberal Thought (2007), all published by Politico's).

Roy Douglas is the author of several books on political and diplomatic history, including The History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970 (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1971), Liquidation of Empire: The Decline of the British Empire (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), and Liberals: The History of the Liberal and Liberal Democrat Parties (Hambleton & London, 2005).

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 3) for inclusion here.

Letters of Richard Cobden (1804–65)

Knowledge of the whereabouts of any letters written by Cobden in private hands, autograph collections, and obscure locations in the UK and abroad for a complete edition of his letters. (For further details of the Cobden Letters Project, please see www.uea.ac.uk/his/research/projects/cobden). Dr Anthony Howe, School of History, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ; a.c.howe@uea.ac.uk.

The Lib-Lab Pact

The period of political co-operation which took place in Britain between 1977 and 1978; PhD research project at Cardiff University. Jonny Kirkup, 29 Mount Earl, Bridgend, Bridgend County CF31 3EY; jonnykirkup@yahoo.co.uk.

'Economic Liberalism' and the Liberal (Democrat) Party, 1937–2004

A study of the role of 'economic liberalism' in the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats. Of particular interest would be any private papers relating to 1937's *Ownership For All* report and the activities of the Unservile State Group. Oral history submissions also welcome. Matthew Francis; matthew@the-domain.org.uk.

The Liberal Party's political communication, 1945–2002

Research on the Liberal party and Lib Dems' political communication. Any information welcome (including testimonies) about electoral campaigns and strategies. Cynthia Messeleka-Boyer, 12 bis chemin Vaysse, 81150 Terssac, France; +33 6 10 09 72 46; cynthia.boyer@univ-jfc.fr.

Liberal policy towards Austria-Hungary, 1905–16

Andrew Gardner, 17 Upper Ramsey Walk, Canonbury, London N1 2RP; agardner@ssees.ac.uk.

Liberal Unionists

A study of the Liberal Unionist party as a discrete political entity. Help with identifying party records before 1903 particularly welcome. Ian Cawood, Newman University College, Birmingham; i.cawood@newman.ac.uk.

The Liberal Party in the West Midlands December 1916 – 1923 election

Focusing on the fortunes of the party in Birmingham, Coventry, Walsall and Wolverhampton. Looking to explore the effects of the party split at local level. Also looking to uncover the steps towards temporary reunification for the 1923 general election. Neil Fisher, 42 Bowden Way, Binley, Coventry CV3 2HU; neil.fisher81@ntlworld.com.

Recruitment of Liberals into the Conservative Party, 1906–1935

Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. Cllr Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk.

The political career of Edward Strutt, 1st Baron Belper

Strutt was Whig/Liberal MP for Derby (1830–49), later Arundel and Nottingham; in 1856 he was created Lord Belper and built Kingston Hall (1842–46) in the village of Kingston-on-Soar, Notts. He was a friend of Jeremy Bentham and a supporter of free trade and reform, and held government office as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Commissioner of Railways. Any information, location of papers or references welcome. Brian Smith; brian63@inbox.com