

THE IMPACTS

What were the impacts of coalition on the Liberal Democrats? **Craig Johnson** analyses Liberal Democrat membership on the Liberal Democrats in Scotland.



The coalition and Liberal Democrat members Craig Johnson

PARTY MEMBERS AND activists are vital to a political party's functions, and what party members think about key political issues is important for understanding political parties more broadly. More specifically, members and activists have particular importance for the Liberal Democrats, both in terms of campaigning and contributing to party policy.¹

The Liberal Democrats' experience since 2010 has been a turbulent one. On the one hand, they have implemented their policies in national government. On the other, they have lost many of their elected representatives, including forty-nine MPs and over 1,000 local councillors. Given the importance of members and activists to the Liberal

Democrats, this raises an important question: what did party members make of the coalition government's record and the Liberal Democrats' role within it? To answer this question, this article first highlights the importance of members and activists to the Liberal Democrats, and then presents survey data from Liberal Democrat members. It concludes with a brief assessment of membership attitudes, and what this might mean for future support for Liberal Democrat involvement in coalition with other parties.

The importance of members and activists

It was formerly commonplace to discuss political party members

Nick Clegg speaking to Liberal Democrat activists after the 2012 Budget announcement (photo: Liberal Democrats)

and activists as if they were irrelevancies. The argument was that the local context was not as important as it once was, and instead attention should be focused predominantly on the national campaigns and analysis of the parties in that context. There is good reason for such a view. Although the Liberal Democrats have enjoyed a bump in their membership since the 2015 general election, more generally party membership has been falling in representative democracies for quite some time.² It could be asked why national party elites should pay any attention to members and activists at all. After all, it can be expensive to maintain a national network of local parties; and members and

OF COALITION

t members' attitudes to the coalition government, and **Caron Lindsay** considers the impacts of coalition

activists might hold more radical views than you wish to present to the electorate.³ Time and money could be better spent elsewhere than keeping them happy.

However, in recent years this analysis has been repeatedly challenged by a revisionist literature. In short, the argument runs that party members provide candidates for local, sub-national and national elections, they provide democratic legitimacy to parties in communities, and they provide parties with the resources and labour to actually win elections.⁴ Each of these points applies strongly to the Liberal Democrats. In the absence of national media attention, winning votes and seats in local campaigns has been essential to the party's electoral advance and to establishing itself as a credible political party. Whilst the party has professionalised in recent years,⁵ members and activists continue to influence party policy and strategy more than in the Labour and Conservative parties.

Particularly in the 2015 campaign, the Liberal Democrats' targeted electoral strategy relied on the long hours and hard work of members and activists, as well as non-member volunteers.⁶ Without them, the dismal return of eight MPs might have been even fewer. That they campaigned so vigorously seems to denote resilience and a commitment to the party. However, a declining membership and a fall in local electoral representation suggests otherwise. This raises an important question. What did Liberal Democrat members and activists make of the coalition?

Membership attitudes to the coalition

The decision to enter government in coalition with the Conservatives

No matter how difficult the party's prospects became, following the change of policy on tuition fees, local election defeats or European parliament election defeats, members appear to have supported the party's participation in coalition throughout.

was easily passed by the Liberal Democrat special conference that convened after the 2010 general election. This is not so surprising. A Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition was the only realistic outcome that delivered a working majority in the House of Commons, and it allowed the Liberal Democrats, for the first time since the party's inception, to implement nationally a series of policies long argued for by its membership. For example, at the time of writing there are fixed-term parliaments, increased thresholds for paying income tax, a Green Investment Bank, and same-sex marriage. At the same time, the Liberal Democrats were able to scrap or prevent changes in legislation. The Human Rights Act remains, whilst identity cards are gone and the maximum detention without trial has been halved.⁷ Liberal Democrat members have been able to influence government policy more than ever before, and at the same time the party has contributed to showing that coalition government in Britain can function.

However, the decision to enter coalition was not an easy one for members and activists to support. Many had spent their political life opposing what the Conservatives stood for. And whatever the Liberal Democrats' achievements in government once in coalition, they failed to make an impact on voters' perceptions. The party's internal polling showed that fewer than 3 per cent of voters credited them with delivering 'a lot' of their policies.⁸ Between 2010 and 2014 the party's membership fell by 35 per cent, and coincided with the loss of over 1,000 local councillors.⁹ Whilst this could have been a lot worse, it represents a stark decline in membership. This had the effect not only of damaging the Liberal

Democrats' reputation nationally, but also of leaving the party without its former breadth and depth of activism and financial contributions from its members.

The most comprehensive collection of data on Liberal Democrat members' attitudes has been by the website, *Liberal Democrat Voice*. As well as being independent of the party, it is the most accessed website specifically about the Liberal Democrats. They conduct surveys of their Liberal Democrat member readership on a regular basis. Whilst the surveys are not wholly representative, participants are checked against the Liberal Democrats' database to ensure that non-party members cannot take part. Of course, this means that the surveys ignore any former members who have left the party, and who would potentially have more negative opinions. It is also possible, and perhaps likely, that respondents are overwhelmingly made up of committed activists, rather than the broader membership. However, the surveys' good response rates and regularity make them a very useful resource for getting a broad understanding of Liberal Democrat membership opinion.¹⁰

Figure 1 shows Liberal Democrat members' attitudes to coalition with the Conservatives. Throughout the entire coalition, support was never lower than 74 per cent (in October 2012 following the blocking of House of Lords reform) and generally hovered around 80 per cent. No matter how difficult the party's prospects became, following the change of policy on tuition fees, local election defeats or European parliament election defeats, members appear to have supported the party's participation in coalition throughout.

Support was also found for the coalition government's record

Fig. 1: Lib Dem members' attitudes to coalition with the Conservatives

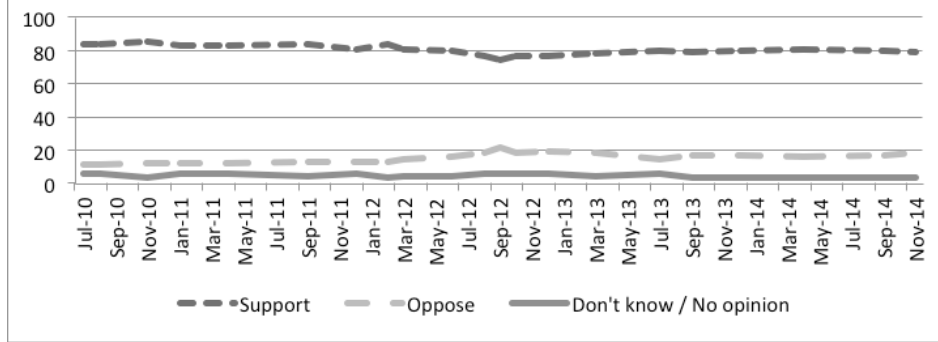


Fig 2: Lib Dem members' attitudes to the coalition government's record

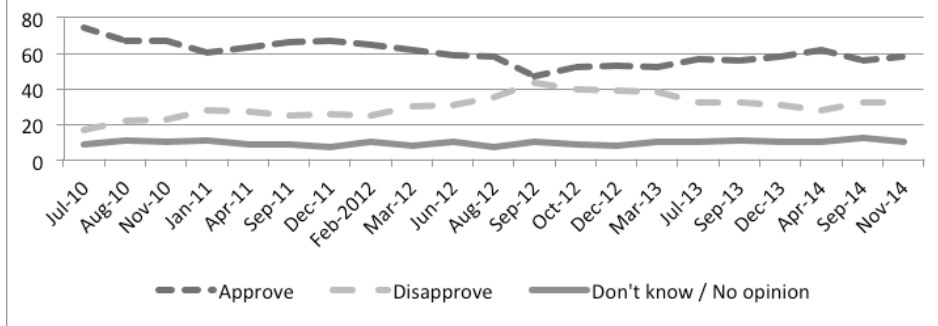
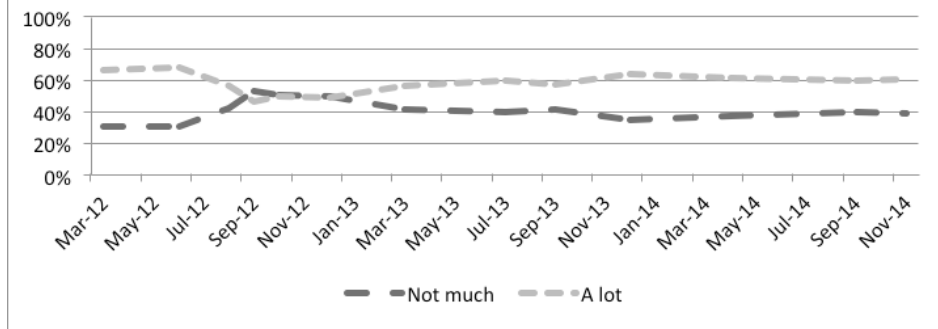


Fig. 3: How much influence do Lib Dem members think their party had in government?



(see Figure 2), although this did see a decline over the course of the parliament. Again, support fell as House of Lords reform was blocked by the Conservatives. And the Liberal Democrats' naive handling of the Alternative Vote referendum was another blow to political reform that appeared to cause unrest in the membership. More broadly, if Liberal Democrat members are suggesting disapproval of the government's record, it is not surprising that the

electorate's opinion was disapproving as well.

This is shown in more detail in Figure 3, where there was clear disagreement amongst party members over whether the Liberal Democrats had influence in government. During the second half of 2012 (once again, when House of Lords reform was blocked), respondents that felt that the Liberal Democrats lacked influence in government were in the majority. Having influence was a difficult task for

the Liberal Democrats. Throughout the course of the parliament, the party needed to find a balance between unity and distinctiveness.¹¹ Whilst this is the case for coalitions in any democracy, the Liberal Democrats were in a particularly tricky position. Participating in the first full Westminster coalition in the post-war period, the party needed to show that coalition need not lead to political instability. It can be argued they did this successfully.

However, in doing so they struggled to then present themselves as an entity distinct from the Conservatives. The coalition agreement document provided little of electoral value to the Liberal Democrats. As Tim Bale observes in a quote that should be repeated to any smaller coalition party in a future hung parliament, the coalition agreement shows 'what happens when vegetarians negotiate with carnivores'.¹² Where the Liberal Democrats tried to differentiate from the Conservatives on policy, such as on the bedroom tax, it looked not like distinctiveness but hypocrisy. On a number of issues, they left themselves open to the question of 'where was this at the start of the parliament'? More broadly, the party in government became known for what it was against rather than what it was for.

Finally, what are the thoughts of the Liberal Democrat membership on future coalitions? Should the party sufficiently recover its electoral position in the future, it will need membership support to join in any coalition. *Liberal Democrat Voice* also conducted a survey of party members after the 2015 general election. Seventy-four per cent still thought it the right decision for the Liberal Democrats to go into coalition. This gives hope to the party leadership that, should they get back into a position to enter coalition at some point in the future, they may still be able to rely on their membership for support.

Conclusion

Members and activists form the foundation of the Liberal Democrats. Without them, policy is not formed, elections are not won, and the party loses any presence it has in communities. The Liberal

Democrats now face a mammoth task to rebuild their support across the country, and members and activists will be vital if they are to have any chance of succeeding. This article suggests that the party elite still have the party membership generally on side. Throughout the parliament, Liberal Democrat members proved to be remarkably resilient, maintaining their commitment to the party's participation in coalition, despite successive electoral defeats and criticism from all sides. However, their support for the coalition's record and its party's influence within it is more debatable, and provides clues to where the party struggled with the electorate more broadly.

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The impact of coalition on the Scottish party

Caron Lindsay

A FEW WEEKS AGO, in the wake of our catastrophic election defeat, someone who is not a Liberal Democrat pointed out to me the irony that there was now a consensus around many Liberal Democrat ideas at the same time as we had suffered our biggest defeat in half a century. Why were we not reaping the benefits?

It is certainly true that the Smith Commission's recommendations, drawn up after the independence referendum, if implemented properly, lay the foundations for a federal state and that this was

one of the things that Michael Moore in particular contributed to the process as one of the Liberal Democrat representatives. Full federalism of course requires the cooperation of the other countries in the United Kingdom but this is a step forward.

It was not just that we were making the weather in establishing the consensus on the constitution; at Holyrood and Westminster, the Liberal Democrats were setting the agenda. At UK level our ideas on mental health, education and childcare were highly regarded. In

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Scotland, with just five MSPs, the Scottish Liberal Democrats had persuaded an SNP government with an overall majority to change policy by increasing college places, and providing free school meals and childcare for the poorest children. In the current Scottish parliament, our record of delivery on civil liberties has been particularly strong with justice spokesperson Alison McInnes forcing policy U-turns on stop and search and armed police. The party is now campaigning against SNP plans for a hugely intrusive ID database.

While Liberal Democrat ideas are being enacted, the Scottish Liberal Democrats are at their lowest ever ebb. The comparison between 2010 and 2015 is painful. We have gone from eleven MPs to one, wiped out in our Borders and Highlands heartlands, and are left hanging on to our stronghold in Orkney & Shetland by fewer than 1,000 votes. We are in second place in just nine seats. It is important to note, though, that in several seats, most notably East Dunbartonshire and Gordon, the party attracted more votes than in 2010.

The general election result was just the latest in a series of defeats that have reduced the party's capacity. The disaster started in 2011 when we lost two-thirds of our MSPs. This was followed by our local government base being more than halved in the following year. We went into that 2012 council election with 152 councillors and in administration in places such as Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, Edinburgh, East Dunbartonshire, Fife, East Lothian, Dundee, Perth and Kinross, the Borders, and Highland; we emerged with just seventy councillors. In 2014, we lost our MEP, George Lyon.

The die appears to have been cast in the first year of the coalition. Working with the Conservatives, still not forgiven for the havoc they wrought in Scotland in the 1980s, was always going to be a risk. The Rose Garden scenes, aimed at showing a deeply sceptical country that coalition government could work, looked far too cosy. In 1999, when the Scottish Liberal Democrats went into coalition with Labour, Jim Wallace and Donald Dewar acted with more professionalism and less exuberance, backed up with solid protocols to cover

THE IMPACTS OF COALITION

issues not in the coalition agreement. In 2015, the fact that the Scottish Liberal Democrats had prevented the introduction of tuition fees in Scotland counted for nothing as the party was punished for not keeping the promise it had made on the same issue south of the border. The rise in VAT, which we had campaigned against, and immediate cuts, only reinforced the 'betrayal' narrative used against us so effectively by our opponents.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats were acutely aware of the challenges raised by the coalition. Then-leader, Tavish Scott, was barely able to contain his impatience with the decisions being taken south of the border. A bad-tempered interview with the *Sunday Herald's* Tom Gordon, during the run up to the Scottish parliament election in 2011, hit the nail on the head:

But his fate is not his own; Nick Clegg has determined it for him by joining the Tories and performing a brazen U-turn on tuition fees.

In this election, Scott is trying to convince voters Lib Dems here are different from those in England because of his party's structure. 'It's all we can do.

What else can I do on it?' he says. 'It's tough. It's difficult.'¹

It was not just that the SNP took nine of our eleven constituencies in 2011 and that we had lost two of our five list seats, it is that we were wiped out everywhere else. In my home seat of Livingston (which became Almond Valley for 2011), fourth place in 2007 meant a relatively comfortable holding of our deposit. Four years later, we could barely manage 2 per cent. The number of seats in which we were in second place fell and we even came fourth in Argyll & Bute, a seat we then held at Westminster and had held until 2007 at Holyrood. This means that rebuilding our parliamentary strength could take longer, with no capacity even to build up list votes in these former areas of strength. The contraction of the party and its ability to fight future elections was profoundly affected by the loss of so many MSPs.

The SNP won an overall majority of four in that 2011 election and

had a mandate for a referendum on independence which dominated Scottish politics for the following three years. Had the Liberal Democrats and Labour been able to save just four seats between them, that referendum would most likely not have happened. You could be forgiven for thinking that our catastrophic result in 2011 might have been avoided if we had not been in coalition at Westminster. I am not so sure.

Our star had been waning for some time. We had gone into the 2007 election campaign with a manifesto containing some radical and reforming ideas on climate change, young people and the economy; yet our campaign seemed to concentrate on opposing a referendum on independence at all costs, and, other than that, all the media covered was our plan for extra PE lessons in school. We then gave the appearance of not even trying to enter coalition negotiations with the SNP, which many in the party saw as an opportunity missed.

Our voice during the 2007–11 parliament was not distinctive enough. Being the third voice saying 'No' to the SNP did not help our image and identity. We were often seen as truculent and intransigent, opposing the government for the sake of it. One particular issue was on minimum alcohol pricing where we did not follow the evidence when we had the opportunity to show that we could be both constructive and original. Likewise, when the SNP government released the Lockerbie bomber Abdelbasset Ali al-Megrahi, we could have supported them. There was certainly a significant view in the party that we should have done. By 2011, people had forgotten that we were responsible for such landmark policies as free university tuition, free personal care and free eye and dental checks between 1999 and 2007. There was not enough residual good will towards us to insulate us from the inevitable hit we would take on entering coalition with the Tories.

Coupled with that, the party had failed to articulate a compelling narrative behind our policies. There are so many lessons the national party could and should have learned from the experience of the Scottish Liberal Democrats

but this was the most important: if people do not know what you stand for and what your values are, why should they vote for you? Both Liberal Democrats and Labour have suffered from a lack of connection and clarity on that point and this explains the situation in which both parties find themselves. Back in 2008, Ross Finnie identified this during his leadership campaign:

My concern, however, is that, against the background of a fatally wounded New Labour Government, a SNP Government failing to deliver on key promises and the Conservatives showing little sign of a Cameron bounce, the Liberal Democrats are not making progress in electoral terms ...

The party has made a number of effective attacks on the SNP Government but we have failed to connect with the voters as to why they should turn to the Liberal Democrats.²

Had we taken Ross's advice in 2008, we may not have found ourselves quite so vulnerable in 2011. Instead, we repeated this mistake in this year's general election, and must not in next year's Holyrood election. We have to have that strong narrative which shows what we are for: if we cannot inspire with that, we will find it harder to get people to listen to the bass notes, where we hold the SNP to account for its many failings.

If we had not gone into coalition with the Conservatives at UK level, we may have held our own in 2011 in Scotland and, had a minority Conservative government called a second election in 2010, would have done comparatively well in Scotland where Conservative arguments about stable and strong government would not have had as much traction. I still think that Labour would have been as badly hit at Holyrood, and the SNP would have gained seats from them. They may not have had a majority, though. Denying the SNP a referendum for the second parliament in succession in those circumstances may well have seen us punished this year, but not to the same brutal extent. However, if a second general election in 2010 had resulted in a Conservative majority government, which was the most likely

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outcome, demand for a referendum may have reached fever pitch by this year.

The Scottish political landscape has been transformed in the past five years, but that is not all the fault of the coalition. 'Yes' may have lost the referendum, but they captured a lot of hearts while doing so. The future of the United Kingdom has never looked so bleak. Part of our party's demise was due, not to the coalition, but to the fact that our distinctive, much more optimistic voice just was not heard. The Liberal Democrats were never really welcome in the 'Better Together' campaign and were increasingly marginalised as the referendum approached. While 'Yes' was all about emotion, 'Better Together' was all about facts with nothing to grab the heartstrings at all. A better pro-UK campaign should have pushed the 'Yes' vote well under 40 per cent.

The decision, in October 2013, to bring in Alistair Carmichael to replace Michael Moore as Secretary of State for Scotland was presented as a response to the need for more of a political bruiser to deal with the rough and tumble of the campaign. Moore had spent three years being a much-needed voice of moderation and reason and had even been compared to James Bond and praised as the saviour of the union by John Rentoul:

Salmond has been underestimated before, although support for independence in opinion polls has rarely exceeded one-third of the electorate. But he may have met his match in Moore, as skilful in judging the politics of Whitehall as he is the mood of Scotland. It may be that, after the referendum, Moore will be counted the most successful Liberal Democrat in the Cabinet, and, even, the man who saved the United Kingdom.³

Carmichael's impact was never as strong. He never fully recovered after an early debate loss to Nicola Sturgeon and it was noticeable that the secretary of state was not as visible as he should have been during the referendum. In fact, it was Danny Alexander who seemed to be the most prominent Liberal Democrat. Given how fractious,

factionalising and febrile the debate and political atmosphere became, Moore's reasoned, moderate tone and forensic grasp of detail would have been a definite asset.

The catastrophe of 2011 was repeated and intensified in this year's general election. Outside the eleven formerly held seats, we failed to retain a single deposit. In Edinburgh South, a seat where we had come within 316 votes of winning in 2010, we managed a paltry 3.7 per cent and fifth place behind the Greens. However, there is a big contrast between the results for the Liberal Democrats and Labour.

It had become abundantly clear during the referendum that, in those seats in central Scotland where Labour had altitude-sickness-inducing majorities that they did not have to work for, they had no campaign infrastructure. Those MPs were swept away and replaced by SNP MPs with equally high majorities, won on the back of a stellar-quality air war. The message discipline of the SNP was rock solid. Even though Nicola Sturgeon struggled on specific policies in leaders' debates, it did not seem to matter as her 'Stronger Scotland' message galvanised those who had voted Yes while the fragmented No vote did not. However, in contrast, the Liberal Democrats remain relatively close seconds in most of our formerly held seats, but particularly in places like Edinburgh West and East Dunbartonshire, because of the strength of their local campaigns and infrastructure.

These footholds are helpful, but in the Holyrood elections, we have to maximise our core vote everywhere. The advent of almost 1,000 new members all over the country will help with that, but we should be under no illusions about the massive task we have ahead of us.

Frustration with the coalition meant that our membership fell from around 4,500 around the time of the 2010 general election to just over 4,165 by the end of 2010, and then to a nadir of just 2,700. We had a modest recovery from 2013, but the influx of new members since the general election leaves us with just under 4,000 members at the end of June 2015. However, their geographic spread means that we will be able to revive local parties in some derelict areas. It has

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been a long time since there has been a packed Liberal Democrat meeting in Coatbridge, but that is exactly what happened recently at a manifesto roadshow, part of Willie Rennie's 'democratic listening exercise'.⁴

The judgement of the electorate on the Scottish Liberal Democrats has been severe in recent years. The coalition was always going to have a major impact on our fortunes. Even if you give the Scottish parliament an unprecedented level of power and do lots of good things, the very act of working with the Tories is never going to go down well in Scotland. We made some major strategic errors early on which cost us dearly. However, we were vulnerable even before the coalition. We were already meandering backwards. The coalition accelerated and intensified that process.

The Sunday after the election, 200 Liberal Democrat members met in an Edinburgh hotel to discuss what had happened. It could have been an angry, bitter meeting, but, in fact, everyone was determined and up for the fight. If we can articulate a gut-grabbing message of good old-fashioned liberal hope, we should be able to recover. A new federal leader who specialises in gut-grabbing will help. The first test is less than eight months away.

Caron Lindsay joined the SDP at the age of 16 in 1983. She is now Editor of Liberal Democrat Voice and Treasurer of the Scottish Liberal Democrats.

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