

from being unrealistic dreamers as was sometimes suggested, those who had survived and prospered were those who had a good feel for what works to win votes. Tempering feelings of protest and detachment from conventional politics into support for a party which was pragmatic on policy and humble in accepting that it had no right to anyone's vote (a big distinguishing factor from Labour) was their job and they were good at it.

This pragmatism meant that most active members could understand the argument for forming the coalition in 2010, so there was little outright opposition to it within the party. However, the overselling of the coalition, the attempt to use it to push a permanent shift to the economic right by some who had plenty of funding but little practical political experience, and the domination of the party's national image and strategy by a leadership which was disconnected from the party's activist base led to many serious mistakes being made in party tactics and presentation. Failing to understand how some of the lines used would be misinterpreted, and failing to learn the lessons from Ireland and New Zealand on how small parties are often damaged by coalitions, suggested a considerable naivety among those directing the

party's public relations at the top. The coalition was always going to be a difficult situation for the Liberal Democrats, but this made it much worse.

(Note, it has been suggested that the author of this article is making these points in 'hindsight'. In fact these are points he was making throughout the time of the coalition in comments on *Liberal Democrat Voice*. See, for example, <http://www.libdemvoice.org/opinion-agreeing-with-nick-25352.html#comment-184883> where the main point made here was made at the time of the 2011 Liberal Democrat party conference.)

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1 Richard Reeves, 'The Case for a Truly Liberal Party', *New Statesman*, 19 Sept. 2012.

The Liberal Democrats in coalition: owners of all and nothing

Anthony Seldon and Mike Finn (eds.), *The Coalition Effect 2010–2015* (Cambridge University Press, 2015)

Review by David Howarth

ONLY WHEN A historical period is over can we truly understand it. The Owl of Minerva, as Hegel said, takes flight only at dusk. And so any attempt to understand recent political events, events whose consequences are still being worked through, is inevitably not so much an exercise in history as an intervention in the politics it describes. That applies without qualification to the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition of 2010–2015, whose effects on every party in British politics, and indeed on the political

existence of 'Britain' itself, are still very much in train. One perhaps paradoxical merit, however, of *The Coalition Effect 2010–2015*, a collection of essays organised and edited by Anthony Seldon and Mike Finn, is that it was completed and published just before the end of events it describes, which means that its assessments are free from any of the dubious benefits of hindsight. It stands as a document of what a group of eminent scholars and commentators thought were the important features of the coalition era just before the general election of 2015,

Finn suggests that ... Liberal Democrat secretaries of state could have been deployed in departments better suited to promoting the distinctiveness of the party ... The problem with that suggestion, however, was not just that Clegg was too little interested in distinctive-ness, but also that he was uninterested in civil liberties and constitutional issues ...

the result of which presumably surprised them as much as it surprised its victors.

The book is divided into three parts. The first examines the constitutional and institutional aspects of the coalition; the second looks thematically at a number of policy areas; and the third encompasses its political effects, principally on the main parties but also on the media and includes a very useful contribution from John Curtice on elections and referendums.

For students of Liberal history, the central chapters will be two by Mike Finn himself, on the coalition agreement in the institutional part of the book and, especially, on the consequences for the Liberal Democrats in the political part. Some of the other contributions are distinctly less useful, since they seem to forget that the government was indeed a coalition rather than a Conservative administration. One can, however, gain much from, for example, Howard Glennerster's clear account of the coalition's health reforms and Nicholas Timmins' admirable chapter on social security and pensions policy. Peter Riddell's chapter on 'The coalition and the executive' is notably well informed (and notably positive about how the coalition functioned within Whitehall).

Much is also to be learned, in a different way, from Martin Loughlin and Cal Viney's chapter on 'The coalition and the constitution'. It gives an account of unremitting hostility to the Liberal Democrats' attempts at constitutional reform, which the authors characterise as an illegitimate attempt by a minority party to impose its agenda on an unwilling nation. Admittedly, the AV referendum and House of Lords reform were total failures, but their assessment of the one Liberal Democrat success, the Fixed Term Parliaments Act, is based on a misunderstanding. They adopt Vernon Bogdanor's criticism that, contrary to the populist spirit of the age, the Act introduces a system under which parliaments make new governments rather than the electorate in general elections. But that fails to understand both the arrangements before the Act and those under it. During the twentieth century, the political composition of the British government changed several times in the course of a parliamentary



term. Whether the new government called an election was not automatic but entirely a matter for them. In 1940, for obvious reasons, no election ensued, but even in 1931 an internal debate raged about whether to call an election – a debate that caused the first of that decade’s many Liberal splits. The difference under the Fixed Term Parliaments Act is that the decision whether to call a new election lies not with the government but with parliament.

The failures over AV and the House of Lords also feature in Mike Finn’s chapter on the coalition and the Liberal Democrats. He makes it the centrepiece of what he calls the government’s second phase, from 2011 to 2013. He pays more attention, however, to the catastrophic first phase, 2010 to 2011, concentrating in particular on the tuition fees debacle. Finn points out that the party never recovered from the loss of support it suffered in 2010–11 and that subsequent policy successes in taxation, schools policy and even economic policy failed to offset the loss of trust and credibility that happened early on. He argues convincingly that although the party hierarchy might claim that the party’s manifesto had stressed promises

the party in the end kept, such as the pupil premium and raising the income tax threshold, the party had let the public down on what its own voters regarded as its unique selling points, in particular abolishing tuition fees.

One might question, however, whether Finn is right on a related point. He identifies as crucial the U-turn on nuclear power. It seems unlikely that nuclear power was anywhere near as significant for the Liberal Democrat electorate as fees. At the time Chris Huhne, the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, expressed surprise at how just little resistance or objection it had generated. One can make a case instead, looking at the detail of the party’s opinion poll rating decline in 2010, for saying that the issue that almost rivalled tuition fees in its negative effect was economic fairness, from the point at which Nick Clegg was seen to slap George Osborne on the back after a budget that reduced income tax for the wealthy and cut benefits for the poor.

More generally Finn argues that Nick Clegg’s central mistake was to give very low priority in the early years to maintaining the party’s distinctiveness, preferring instead to show that ‘coalition works’ by ‘owning’ every coalition policy. Once the public had fixed in its mind that the Liberal Democrats were merely an appendage to the Conservatives, later attempts at differentiation looked insincere or contrived. Consequently, even policies that really were distinctively Liberal Democrat, such as the increase in the income tax threshold, could not be convincingly claimed for the party. By ‘owning’ everything it ended up ‘owning’ nothing.

Finn suggests, as others have, that the party might have done better had it chosen to dominate specific ministries rather than dotting single ministers around many departments. But he adds that, even within that strategy, Liberal Democrat secretaries of state could have been deployed in departments better suited to promoting the distinctiveness of the party. That might be unfair in the case of the Department of Energy and Climate Change, where Liberal Democrats’ USP’s were at stake, but it is certainly a plausible idea that

the party’s liberalism would have emerged much more clearly had it taken the Home Office or the Ministry of Justice. The problem with that suggestion, however, was not just that Clegg was too little interested in distinctiveness, but also that he was uninterested in civil liberties and constitutional issues, habitually referring in this reviewer’s hearing to the former as ‘traditional’ – as if preserving them was similar to supporting Morris Dancing – and to the latter as ‘legal niceties’.

Finn also identifies as a serious problem the growing distance between the party in government, particularly Clegg, and the party in the country. Finn explains the process by which, as he puts it, Clegg came to despise his own party. Of course, for much of the party that feeling was mutual, with serious consequences for the party’s capacity to campaign. The biggest puzzle, however, is how Clegg survived as leader. His failure was complete at the point the AV referendum was lost in 2011, but no challenge to his leadership occurred until 2014, at which point the failure of the parliamentary party to act doomed the attempt almost as soon as it started. Finn’s explanation for the failure of the 2014 coup was lack of a convincing new leader – Vince Cable was implicated in the fees debacle and Tim Farron was unwilling at that stage to move – together with a prevailing mood of fatalism both in the parliamentary party and in the party at large. Finn is right that both factors were important. The parliamentary party failed to act because no one would lead it into action and those who might have led it feared that if they tried no one would follow them; and the degree of fatalism was so great that in some quarters it amounted to a feeling that the party needed to do penance for its sins. But one wonders what new information will come to light in the coming years about other possible factors affecting the parliamentary party, including the power of patronage, especially promises of peerages, and gullibility, particularly about private polling arranged to make the position of sitting MPs look far better than it really was.

Finn’s conclusion (for which he relies on a recent article in this

journal by the current reviewer) is that Clegg's desire to present the Liberal Democrats as a reliable coalition partner and thus as a 'party of government' undermined the party's definition

of itself as a party built above all on values. He describes the 'coalition effect' on the Liberal Democrats as 'devastating'. That looked right in April 2015 when this book came out.

It looks even more right now. Whether it will still look right when the Owl of Minerva at last takes off remains to be seen, but the old bird's wings are already twitching.

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Which Way Back? The Liberal Democrats and the 2015 election in its historical context

One-day conference, Birmingham, Saturday 28 November

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- Campaigning – what messages were the Liberal Democrats trying to communicate during their period in office and during the general election; how was this done and how effectively?
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Confirmed speakers include Martin Horwood (MP for Cheltenham, 2005–15), Peter Sloman (author of *The Liberal Party and the Economy 1929–64*) and Andy Denham.

Registration £20 (students and unwaged £15). Payment will be taken on the day, but please register in advance – send your details to:

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