COMPARING

The Liberal Democrat – Conservative coalition of 2010–15 was not of course the only coalition the Libera
the party's experience in coalition in Scotland from 1999 to 2007, while **David Dutton** draws parallels fro

Jim Wallace and Scottish Labour leader Donald Dewar agree the first coalition in Scotland, in 1999

Reflections on two coalitions

Jim Wallace

When I was asked to serve as Advocate General for Scotland in the coalition government formed in May 2010, it was to be my second experience of coalition, having been deputy first minister in the Labour–Lib Dem government formed after the first election to the Scottish parliament.[1] Indeed, one of the main reasons for my appointment was that I had experience of having been in coalition government. I have often been asked to compare and contrast the two experiences. This is never as easy as it sounds, not least because of differences in circumstances. However, the *Journal of Liberal History* is as good a place as any to try and commit some of these thoughts to paper.

The biggest difference in circumstances probably relates to the creation of the coalition. In Scotland, in 1999, there was some expectation that the outcome would be a Labour–Lib Dem coalition. That did not make it a certainty, as I was always prepared to walk away from an agreement if the terms were not acceptable. But given that the PR system used for the election was not expected to produce a majority outcome, and given that in a number of policy areas, there was reasonable compatibility between our respective parties, a coalition was widely seen as more likely than not.[2]

By contrast, whilst polls during the 2010 campaign pointed to a parliament where no one party would command a majority, such expectations had been confounded in the past. Moreover, there did not appear to be any natural political affinity between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservative Party. Intuitively, a coalition between these two parties seemed less likely than not. Consequently, in both public and party eyes, there were more difficulties in 2010 in

COALITIONS

l Democrats or the Liberal Party has ever participated in. **Jim Wallace** compares the UK coalition with
om history.

achieving if not legitimacy, then at least acceptance.

If the background was different, there was a ready comparison in the preparations made by the party in the run-up to the election. Based on work done by Philip Goldenberg for Paddy Ashdown before the 1992 election, Scottish Liberal Democrats had prepared well for coalition talks. I had asked David Laws to distil our manifesto into a possible programme for coalition government; whilst preparatory work in 2010 by Andrew Stunell and Danny Alexander ensured that the negotiating team entered talks having given careful thought as to our coalition goals.

The contrast was with our respective opposite numbers. In 1999, the Labour Party had given precious little thought as to what a coalition government might do. Donald Dewar's opening pitch to me was that two Lib Dems should join his cabinet and, with a couple of junior ministers, we would, to all intents and purposes, be a continuing Westminster Labour government in Scotland. Interestingly, they do not seem to learn, as UK Labour's attitude in 2010 did not seem all that different!

However, it was evident from the speech which David Cameron made on the day after the 2010 election that the Tories had been as diligent as we had in making preparations for the eventuality of a 'hung parliament'. I believe this was the experience of our negotiating team, when they got down to serious discussions. That we achieved a coalition agreement which incorporated the key pledges from the front page of our manifesto together with a referendum on voting reform and other cherished policies besides is a tribute to the negotiating team.

I do wonder whether a row or two over a significant policy issue, such as we had in Scotland over university tuition fees and personal care for the elderly … or landing a big policy prize … would have been helpful in raising the profile of a battling junior coalition partner.

What we possibly lacked was a good-going row, and a threat to break off the talks. Admittedly, the circumstances were again very different. In 1999, I did not have to negotiate against a background of international financial turmoil and turbulent markets (a coalition for a devolved administration was never going to trouble the markets). Walking away was an option in 2010, but the downside was immense.

But more generally, I do wonder whether a row or two over a significant policy issue, such as we had in Scotland over university tuition fees and personal care for the elderly (from which we emerged successful), or landing a big policy prize such as STV for Scottish local government elections, to which Labour was considered to be instinctively opposed, would have been helpful in raising the profile of a battling junior coalition partner. Indeed, because the tuition fees issue was not resolved by the partnership agreement in Scotland and was remitted to an inquiry chaired by Andrew Cubie, that tension was evident from the outset. Working relations were good, but there was not what, after 2010, has sometimes been described as a 'Rose Garden phase'. And that lack of honeymoon period was not always to our advantage. In the Hamilton South Westminster by-election in September 1999, our candidate came sixth behind the Hamilton Accies FC Supporters candidate! But once the Cubie committee had reported and ministers (Nicol Stephen, in particular) had worked out implementation, it was generally accepted that the outcome reflected that the Lib Dem view had prevailed.

Moreover, we were assisted in establishing a separate identity by the futile efforts of the SNP opposition to drive wedges between the coalition parties. Initially, they often used their Opposition Days to debate issues reserved to Westminster where the two parties were not in agreement. As our coalition agreement did not extend to reserved issues, I insisted that there could not be a government line, and we often responded by tabling a coalition amendment which acknowledged the respective positions of the two coalition parties – and our contributors to the debate could articulate a distinctive Lib Dem line.

This is not to underestimate the 2010 achievement of policies such as the minimum income tax threshold, the pupil premium or the green policies which are now being unstitched on a daily basis. I know just how much effort was put in by ministerial colleagues to secure these; but they were all delivered without a major public fall-out, and so became more difficult to badge as distinctively Liberal Democrat.

Another difference between Scottish government and UK government is scale. After all, prior to devolution, the Scottish Office was one government department among many. This led to shorter lines of communication, which undoubtedly facilitated quicker decision-making. One of my frustrations as a minister in charge of a bill in the Lords was the need for a lengthy paper chase before I could accept an amendment which was self-evidently sensible. The theory is that it is that which secures collective responsibility – fair enough, but there must be a more efficient way of doing it!

Coalition government also requires its own structures and processes. The UK civil service is instinctively uncomfortable about these. It is a system which has increasingly been built around a prime minister, who is the source of all authority. The need to be sensitive to and even accommodate the views of two parties in government is more challenging than taking the cue straight from the top.

On the day of the Rose Garden, Oliver Letwin and I – and our respective teams – sat in a room in Downing Street, trying to fill in some of the gaps in the primary coalition agreement which the negotiations were never going to be able to cover. I remember being quite pleased with a compromise which I thought had diluted the Tories' more punitive proposals on knife crime. Oliver thought he had better check out the wording with the newly appointed justice secretary, Ken Clarke. He returned saying, 'Ken doesn't think it's liberal enough!'

One issue which we did attempt to grapple with that day was a dispute resolution process. In Scotland, I sometimes became exasperated by the number and nature of the issues which would quickly escalate to first minister–deputy first minister for resolution.[3] I reckoned that with considerably extra pressures on the prime minister and deputy prime minister, some filtering process was needed. We proposed a Coalition Committee to which any disputes that could not be resolved at departmental level could be referred. Only if that committee could not broker a solution would the prime minister and deputy prime minister be called in. The committee never, to my knowledge, met. Instead the 'Quad' emerged. Whilst it undoubtedly made demands on the PM, DPM, chancellor and chief secretary (and did not remove the need for bilaterals between David Cameron and Nick Clegg) I believe that it was more effective in reaching decisions which were the 'last word', than a compromise hammered out at a lower ministerial level could have been. Viewed from within government, Quad decisions had a finality, which everyone, ministers and officials, understood and could act upon.

But, as already alluded to, the primary responsibility on resolving difficulties lay at the door of departmental ministers. It was essential that junior ministers were the Lib Dem eyes and ears throughout their respective departments. In turn, that required Conservative secretaries of state to recognise that their Lib Dem junior ministers had a legitimate role in representing the party's interests across the board, and not just within their allocated departmental portfolio. Whether or not this worked very much depended on personalities.[4] But where it did work, it ensured that a policy could command support across the coalition. Where it did not, a good deal of time was taken up in protracted negotiation and dispute resolution.

As already noted, the scale of government and the pressured environment of Whitehall are different from the situation in Scotland. My workload as deputy first minister was very substantial; but it would have been physically impossible for Nick Clegg to have maintained the scaled-up overview of the whole of government which I could do in Scotland. That Nick was able to cover as much as he did is a great testament to his resilience and capacity for work. But it did underline the important role of Lib Dem ministers in their respective departments. Some commentators have argued that we should have focused on three or four departments; but the nature of our political culture is that government as a whole is held accountable, and we need a handle on what is going on in each department.

Negotiations were not exclusively within government. Many of the real challenges of coalition, both at Holyrood and at Westminster, were the need to get our backbenchers on board. I do not think it was ever recognised just how much interaction there was at Westminster between minsters (of both parties) and backbenchers to try and satisfy specific concerns. Both as a minister who had to take some contentious bills through the Lords, and latterly as the leader of our Lib Dem group in the Lords, I was aware of just how much time and effort was made by ministers of both coalition parties (including Commons ministers) to meet coalition peers (of both parties) to try and identify legislative solutions.

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Important in these efforts was the role of special advisers (Spads). Writing a piece for the Institute for Government on the first anniversary of the coalition, I said,

> My experience of coalition government in Scotland underscores the importance of these advisers. They provided a vital channel of communication with the backbenches and the wider party, both to explain decisions, and to inform decision-making with the knowledge of what our MSPs would wear.

At that time (May 2011), I do not think as much use had been made of special advisers as could have been, but their role undoubtedly developed. I am not in a position to judge their engagement with Commons' backbenchers, but in the Lords, Elizabeth Plummer[5] performed a sterling job in keeping Lords ministers, and the wider ministerial team, aware of what our backbench peers were thinking and what would carry and what needed more work and attention.

From a ministerial perspective, as well as Elizabeth, I was fortunate to benefit from the advice and hard work of Tim Colbourne and Verity Harding when taking the justice and security bill through the Lords, and the patience, wisdom and perseverance of Matt Sanders and, again, Tim Colbourne, as we navigated the tricky waters of giving substance to the Leveson proposals on the press. This latter cross-party exercise involved not only contact with our own party colleagues, Conservative ministers and their advisers, and departmental officials, but also the Labour Party and the important interested lobby groups. They each fulfilled, in an exemplary way, the role which falls to a Spad of keeping relevant colleagues in the loop, passing on intelligence about who was thinking what, and testing waters with those the minister has to deal with, so that ministerial time is well used.

Concluding reflection

I joined the Scottish Liberal Party in 1972 after reading Russell Johnston's pamphlet, *To Be A Liberal*, because I readily identified with the principles and values which Russell so clearly articulated. We did not even have eight MPs, and so I did not entertain a realistic expectation of becoming an MP, let alone a minister in a Scottish parliament (although the ambition of a Scottish parliament within a federal United Kingdom undoubtedly motivated me) or a minister in a United Kingdom government. I count it a privilege, almost beyond belief, to have done both. What I particularly resent is a view that whilst it is perfectly acceptable for Labour, Conservative or even SNP politicians to aspire to government office, there is something unseemly about a Liberal Democrat wishing to do so. If you are in politics, it must surely be to do something – to put into practice your principles; not take them home every night to polish up from the comfort zone of opposition.

That is why I believe that we were right on both occasions – on acceptable terms – to have gone into coalition government. Undoubtedly there were things that we could have done better; but I firmly believe that on both occasions we left government with the country in a better place than when we went into power.

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Jim Wallace (Lord Wallace of Tankerness) was MP for Orkney & Shetland from 1983 to 2001, and MSP for Orkney from 1999 to 2007. He led the Scottish Liberal Democrats from 1992 to 2005. Following the first election to the Scottish parliament in 1999, he became deputy first minister and minister of justice in the newly established Scottish executive. He was later (2003–5) minister for enterprise and lifelong learning. On three occasions he assumed the role of acting first minister. He stood down as Scottish party leader and deputy first minister in 2005. Lord Wallace was introduced into the House of Lords in 2007 and appointed advocate general for Scotland in the 2010 coalition government. In 2013, he was elected leader of the Liberal Democrat peers and appointed deputy leader of the House of Lords. He was re-elected as Lib Dem leader in the Lords after the 2015 election.

1 I am sometimes told that my experience is unique, but, of course, my Lords colleague, Baroness Jenny Randerson, was minister for culture, sport and the Welsh language in the Welsh Assembly government from 2000 to 2003, and at Westminster, was parliamentary under secretary of state for Wales from 2012 until May 2015.
2 Even then, there was still hostility to the very idea of Lib Dems in government; to the extent that my wife stopped buying daily newspapers as she thought that exposing our children to some of the abusive attacks on their father was a form of child abuse!
3 On my final night in office as DFM, Jack McConnell and I literally resorted to a Thesaurus to find wording acceptable to both parties on the issue of third-party rights of appeal in planning decisions for a White Paper which had to go to the printer the following morning.
4 One can never underestimate the importance of personalities and relationships in oiling the wheels of coalition government. That was my experience in both Scotland and Westminster. On the Monday following the heavy defeat of the AV referendum and disastrous results in Scotland and local government, commentators were predicting stormy relationships between coalition ministers. My Westminster office was next door to that of my 'opposite number' in the coalition, the attorney general, Dominic Grieve. Having heard me return to my room, Dominic knocked on the door and said, 'Come and have a drink, you'll be needing one!'
5 Because special advisers were technically assigned to cabinet ministers, Elizabeth was appointed as a Spad to the (Conservative) leader of the House of Lords, albeit she worked for Tom McNally and subsequently me as deputy leader of the House.

Something about coalitions? Historical reflections on the Liberal Democrat experience of government 2010–15

David Dutton

Historians are likely to debate for some time to come the origins of the Liberal Democrats' decision to enter a coalition government with the Conservatives in 2010 and also, as many would see it, the shared origins of the party's disastrous performance in the general election of 2015. One possible starting point must be the election to the party leadership of David Steel as long ago as 1976. Though Steel's own natural inclinations were towards the political left and a possible realignment with Labour, he made it a clear objective of his campaign to succeed Jeremy Thorpe that the broader issue of coalition must be addressed head on. Interviewed by *The Guardian* within weeks of becoming leader, Steel insisted that Liberals had to 'start by getting a toe-hold on power which *must* mean some form of coalition'. Then, in a well-received speech to the party conference in September, Steel stressed that if the Liberal Party wished to move from the periphery to the centre of the electoral argument, 'we must not give the impression of being afraid to soil our hands with the responsibilities of sharing power. We must be bold enough to deploy the coalition case positively.'[1] This represented a clear repudiation of the 'long-haul' strategy of earlier decades – that the Liberal dawn would eventually come without the need to contaminate the party's ideological purity. By 'simply pretending to be an alternative government in exile we would continue to fail'.[2] Participation in a Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition between 2010 and 2015 must be seen as the fulfilment of Steel's strategy.

Yet the electoral denouement of 2015 can only raise uncomfortable questions for Liberal Democrats about coalitions in general. Granted the rise of the SNP (fifty-six MPs from 4.7 per cent of the vote) and UKIP (just one MP but 12.6 per cent of the vote), 2015 was the first general election in the Liberal Democrat/Liberal Party's history in which it could not claim even third place in the electorate's preferences. Historians must necessarily turn to the past for guidance. Contrary to the popular saying, history does not repeat itself; but it does offer informative and revealing parallels and similarities.

Coalitions and more informal inter-party arrangements were less alien to the norm in the history of twentieth-century Britain than is sometimes supposed. Formal coalitions existed between 1915 and 1922 and again between 1940 and 1945. On both occasions they represented a natural response to the demands of war and the need to repress domestic differences in the face of a graver external threat. A less broadly based coalition was formed in 1931 and lasted until 1940. In addition, more informal arrangements sustained a Liberal government, which had lost its parliamentary majority, between 1910 and 1915, two minority Labour governments in 1924 and between 1929 and 1931, and a Labour government which had been reduced to minority status in 1977–8.

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At first sight the formal coalitions might seem to offer the most relevant comparisons with what happened after 2010. In each case Liberals, in their willingness to share power with other parties, were responding to a national crisis, albeit that of 2010 fell short of European war. But in terms of impact on the party, these earlier coalitions provide less exact parallels. The actual creation of a coalition in 1915 and again in 1940 was broadly accepted. Indeed, both wars ended with a widespread belief that coalition had been a successful innovation in the practice of government. It is true that it is easy enough to find contemporary assessments that Asquith's acceptance of Conservatives into his government would result in catastrophic consequences for Liberalism. 'Among Liberal intellectuals', reported the *Manchester Guardian*, 'there is a melancholy feeling, very frankly expressed, that this is probably the end of the Liberal party for many years to come.'[3] John Simon had already warned that a coalition would be 'the grave of Liberalism'.[4] Charles Hobhouse was now ready to agree. 'Nothing will persuade me', he wrote, 'that this is not the end of the Liberal party as we have known it.'[5] But while Asquith may be legitimately criticised for shrouding the whole process of coalition-making in an unnecessary veil of secrecy, leaving many of his followers bewildered and upset, the Liberal Party itself survived the upheaval. Indeed, it remained in broad control of the overall direction of the government. The real damage to the party, culminating in the catastrophic electoral outcome of 1918, derived from the later split between the supporters of Asquith and those of Lloyd George.

Similarly, after the entry of the party into Churchill's coalition in May 1940, many Liberals worried about their loss of an independent identity, fearing that their leader, Archibald Sinclair, had fallen almost totally under the prime minister's masterful spell. Again, the subsequent general election in 1945 saw the party badly mauled, with just twelve MPs returned to parliament. But it is doubtful whether membership of the wartime coalition was the critical factor. Quite simply, the Liberal Party seemed irrelevant to the political debate of the time, notwithstanding the fact that individual Liberals, most notably Keynes and Beveridge, had helped shape that debate. More relevant, then, to the experience of 2010–15 are earlier periods in which Liberals were damaged by the decision to sustain minority governments in power. In this short essay, the example of the minority Labour administration of 1924 will be used to illustrate the author's argument.

Broadly speaking, the Liberal Democrats' decision to join the coalition in 2010 seems to have alienated three distinct groups within the party's support base. The first, and probably the smallest, consisted of those for whom ideological purity remained all-important – those, in other words, who had never accepted the strategy propounded by David Steel and followed in differing ways by his successors, that coalition was a necessary step in the party's evolution. Such voters believed, however unrealistically, that the party could eventually prevail under its own colours, even in a first-past-the-post electoral system, and that the differences between Liberal Democrats and the other main parties were too profound for coalition to be an acceptable option. Among MPs, party activists and members, this sort of thinking was almost entirely absent in 2010. All the party's MPs, except Charles Kennedy who abstained, supported the decision to go into government; the Federal Executive voted 27 to 1 in favour; and only a handful of the more than 1,500 delegates at the special conference called to consider the coalition deal withheld their support. Moreover, there was surprisingly little pressure within the party hierarchy to pull out from the coalition over the years that followed.

A second, and altogether more significant, group comprised those voters who accepted the broad proposition of coalition, but regarded themselves as ideologically closer to Labour than to the Conservatives. A dilemma of choice had been inherent in Liberal politics for several decades, ever since in fact the party fell into third-party status, but the arithmetical outcomes of the British electoral system had largely kept it at a theoretical level. Back in 1926, Keynes argued that, forced to make the choice, Liberals would divide into those who would vote Conservative and those who would back Labour.[6] Now the choice had had to be made. Many leading Liberal Democrats shared a preference for Labour. Figures such as Vince Cable and Paddy Ashdown missed no opportunity to stress that they had spent their political lives fighting the Tories and that sharing power with them did not come easily. But the practical realities of 2010 – not least that a Liberal Democrat–Labour coalition would not have commanded a parliamentary majority – forced them to abandon their preferences and work in the national interest. For some Liberal Democrat voters, however, it seems that this was a step too far. Their support was lost, at least when it came to the 2015 election. Yet this argument should not be exaggerated. The logic that such voters would now shift their allegiance to Labour is only partially sustained by the evidence of what happened. Inner-city seats such as Bermondsey did see significant swings to Labour, but in the swathe of lost constituencies in the Southwest, the Conservatives were the overwhelming beneficiaries of Liberal defection. Furthermore, preliminary research suggests that Labour was singularly unsuccessful in attracting erstwhile Liberal Democrat voters in those key marginals that it needed to win to have any chance of forming a government.

The third element may be the most important in explaining the disaster that befell the party in 2015. Ever since the beginning of the Liberal revival in the mid-1950s, the party has drawn heavily upon the support of floating and protest voters. Such citizens tend either to be inherently antagonistic to the parties of government, thereby giving rise to the 'none of the above' vote, or incurably fickle in their allegiance, withdrawing their support when their (usually unrealistic) expectations of government performance remain unfulfilled. Liberal Democrat partisans have sometimes been reluctant to acknowledge the importance of such voters in their party's success. The belief in a solid phalanx of committed 'Liberal opinion' is obviously more gratifying. Yet the evidence for their importance is strong. It has been shown that, over the general elections between 1959 and 1979, less than 50 per cent of those who voted Liberal at one election confirmed this preference at the next. The corresponding figures for both Labour and the Conservatives were around 75 per cent. Even more revealingly, just 2 per cent of the electorate gave the Liberals consistent support in each of the four general elections of the 1970s.[7] Similarly, a striking feature of the years of Liberal revival was the party's ability to secure record swings in by-elections, usually at the expense of the incumbent government, performances which the party found it difficult to replicate at subsequent general elections. None of this suggests a strong and reliable core Liberal vote. But, by entering government in 2010, the Liberal Democrats largely forfeited their claims to the electorate's anti-establishment and protest votes. It was their misfortune in 2015 that UKIP and, north of the border, the SNP were well placed to fill the resulting void.

After the general election of 1923, as after that of 2010, the Liberal Party made a conscious decision to install a minority party in office. In 1923 Labour was not even the largest party, but their Conservative opponents (like Labour in 2010) had indubitably lost the general election. That of 1923 had been fought specifically on the issue of protection and had left the combined Liberal and Labour parties holding a clear 'free-trade majority'. Asquith believed that Labour, as the larger of these two parties, now had the right to form a government. He argued that, if a Labour government was ever to be tried, 'it could hardly be tried under safer conditions'. Yet, like Nick Clegg in the early days of the 2010 coalition, Asquith overestimated the strength of his party's position. 'It is we,' he insisted, 'if we really understand our business, who control the situation.'[8] Clegg, however, at least had the advantage of a formal coalition agreement. As Labour took office at the beginning of 1924, no vestige of an agreement existed with the Liberals on the content of the new government's programme. In particular, no effort had been made to secure a promise of electoral reform, which perceptive Liberals already recognised as pivotal to their chances of revival in British electoral politics. In 2010 Clegg at least won a commitment that the coalition government would hold a referendum on the Alternative Vote. But AV proved a difficult proposition to sell to the electorate, lacking the compelling, if somewhat questionable, simplicity of earlier campaigns in which Liberals had equated PR with 'fair votes'.

Yet the Liberal position in 1924 was almost as constrained as that which Clegg and his party accepted nearly a century later in a five-year, fixed-term parliament, with an agreed policy programme which involved the abandonment of key manifesto pledges, including that on university tuition fees. Asquith's Liberals were not in a position to assess the individual policies of the Labour government on their merits. Only the positive support of the Parliamentary Liberal Party could ensure Labour's survival. Even abstention would involve the government's defeat and possibly another general election which the Liberals, for financial reasons, were keen to avoid. As the period of Labour government proceeded, Liberals seemed surprised that Labour insisted on behaving in a partisan manner, showing little gratitude for Liberal support. In Lloyd George's memorable words, 'Liberals are to be the oxen to drag the Labour wain over the rough roads of Parliament for two to three years, goaded along, and at the end of the journey, when there is no further use for them, they are to be slaughtered. That is the Labour idea of cooperation.'[9] In fact, Ramsay MacDonald's long-term strategy of seeking to destroy Liberalism as a necessary precondition of his own party's further advance was as ruthless, and in purely party terms as justified, as the Conservatives' decision in the 2015 general election to target Liberal Democrat seats as the most promising route to winning a Commons majority. Many Liberal Democrats felt that Clegg had been as naïve as Asquith before him in seemingly embracing the coalition with enthusiasm rather than as a slightly distasteful necessity. The bonhomie of the rose garden press conference on 12 May jarred with many. Figures such as Vince Cable sought, by contrast, to maintain a certain distance from their new Tory colleagues. But Clegg seems to have felt the need to dispel the prevailing sentiment, not least in the world's markets, that hung parliaments were bound to lead to weak, divided and ineffectual governments.

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Also instructive are the reactions of prominent Conservatives to the Liberal–Labour alignment which installed Labour in office. Austen Chamberlain, former party leader and future foreign secretary, offered the most eloquent commentary. Speaking on 21 January 1924 in the no-confidence debate which formally brought down Baldwin's government, Chamberlain warned that Asquith had:

> taken his choice and he has by that choice constituted his own immortality. He will go down to history as the last Prime Minister of a Liberal administration. He has sung the swan-song of the Liberal Party. When next the country is called upon for a decision, if it wants a Socialist Government it will vote for a Socialist; if it does not want a Socialist Government it will vote for a Unionist. It will not vote again for those who denatured its mandate and betrayed its trust.[10]

The situation in 2010 was significantly different, but Chamberlain at least understood that, by coming down on one side of the fundamental political divide, the Liberals were likely to lose a section of their electoral support. Indeed, writing to Samuel Hoare a week later, he suggested that two-thirds of the Liberal Party was now Labour in all but name and that the Conservatives should strive to absorb the remainder.[11] The evidence from the general election of 1924, with three-quarters of Liberal MPs going down to defeat, is complicated by a significant reduction in the number of the party's candidates, but does point to a marked drop in its underlying electoral support.

Rather than explaining what happened between 2010 and 2015, history can do no more than offer interesting lines of enquiry and discussion. Important questions remain to be answered. Were Liberal Democrat voters, as has been suggested, so frightened by the prospect of a Labour–SNP 'arrangement' as to turn in large numbers to the Conservatives? The party's poll rating was poor from the first year of the coalition onwards. Observers expected the actual outcome in 2015 to be somewhat better than opinion polls suggested; in fact it was worse. Liberal Democrats argued that loyalty to well-regarded sitting MPs would outweigh national trends; it didn't. The party held on to Chris Huhne's old seat of Eastleigh in the by-election of February 2013, when anger at the 'betrayal' over tuition fees was still relatively fresh in the electorate's mind, but lost it by over 9,000 votes just over two years later. The debate over this latest strange death of Liberal England (and Wales and Scotland) may well run and run.

David Dutton is currently researching the career of Percy Molteno, Liberal MP for Dumfriesshire, 1906–18. His vote in the recent general election failed to halt the SNP landslide in Scotland.

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2 Ibid., p. 16.
3 *Manchester Guardian*, 20 May 1915.
4 C. Addison, *Four and a Half Years*, vol. 1 (London, 1934), p. 35.
5 University of Newcastle, Runciman MSS 136, Hobhouse to Runciman 28 May 1915.
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8 C. Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party: The Road back to Power* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 94–5.
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11 University of Birmingham, Chamberlain MSS, AC25/4/19, Chamberlain to Hoare 28 January 1924.

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