

The ideological basis of a Liberal - Conservative pact

Written by Gavin Cleaver

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GAVIN CLEAVER, MAY 12 2010

There has been much wringing of hands over the recent formation of a coalition government for the United Kingdom in both the local right- and left-wing presses. Conservative affiliated newspapers object to having to join up with a small, centre-left party in order to attain the majority they need to govern, and liberals are horrified at the prospect of their vote helping David Cameron into Downing Street. Presumably the primary basis for this unrest is the fact that our government is now led by two parties seemingly at opposite ends of the political spectrum, with little to no common ground for policy formation. In fact, this assumption rests on an over-simplified view of the ideologies at work in British politics, which have a complex heritage unsuited to a traditional, static analysis of 'right versus left'.

To begin with, quite aside from policy making, letting national politics devolve into a deeply tribal affair in which both these sides are seen as incompatible, or 'enemies', is a danger in itself. America is the perfect example of the sort of electorate the UK needs to avoid. Deeply divided into two warring camps after the administrations of consecutive Presidents with extremely opposed views, it seems America hasn't been as ideologically split since the Civil War. While the policies of the current Obama Administration might suggest a model government for left-leaning parties around the world, it faces the most incredibly hostile and personal attacks from bitter right-wingers on a daily basis, a process that will no doubt be reversed if and when the Republicans get back into office. This sort of incredibly polemical, deeply divisive politics, in which both sides are the bitter enemies of the other, can detract quite extensively from the substance of governance. Taken over the long-term, it can leave a country's policy-making at a standstill, as the two sides throw rational analysis out the window and vehemently oppose, and eventually overturn, any policy the 'enemy' suggests. In this light, a liberal and Conservative alliance should be seen as a victory for pragmatism over in-fighting, and as providing a government that can temper the worst extremes of the two constituent parties. This is a positive boon for liberals – while their vote for the Lib Dems may not have put them into power (and in a sense, enabled a Cameron government), it has stopped a Conservative government having the freedom to push through their more controversial right-wing policies, such as raising the threshold for inheritance tax to a strata of the populace that are surely not in need of any tax relief, especially in this most challenging of economic climates.

This tempering of extremes has worked the other way around as well – plans for the Liberal Democrat's "mansion tax" are being shelved, along with their opposition to a renewal of Trident, and their "amnesty" for illegal asylum seekers. This abandonment of traditional ideological policies should lead to the coalition government being able to expend all its energy on the common ground the two parties share, which is larger than many people consider.

The key idea binding the two together must be the advancement of civil liberties. The outgoing Labour government has to be viewed as one that rapidly encroached on personal freedoms. It toyed with ID cards for years, changed the British legal system's long-standing laws on suspect detention and then misused them, put millions of its citizens on a crime database whether guilty or innocent, and was in charge as the world's largest collection of CCTV cameras were installed around the country. It is difficult to analyse the ideological basis of Labour's approach without invoking the spectre of Marx, but nevertheless it could be called Socialist in the older sense of the word, when it meant something more threatening than just wealth redistribution and equalisation. The term "nanny state" is overused and now largely meaningless, thanks to a reactionary right-wing press simultaneously desiring government interference (in the contradictory form of increased spending and reduced taxes) and personal freedoms, but Labour certainly seemed to operate on a platform of increasing intrusion into the private lives of its citizens. The Conservatives and

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Liberal Democrats are without doubt opposed to this encroachment of the state upon citizen's private lives. This is a common by-product of their commitments to a smaller, less intrusive state in the case of the Tories (*'Tory' being the historical and often still used name for the Conservative party*), and human rights and the government as the servant of the people on the Liberal Democrat's end. Furthermore, both these parties embody individualism over collectivism, personal responsibility over social responsibility. All these viewpoints are neatly embodied in the work of John Locke, for example, who believed in a minimal state and inviolable human rights, especially in the face of potential government interference. These two views, far from being mutually exclusive, meet up in their commitment to the negative rights of the individual over the state, where Labour would have promoted 'collective action' led by a strong government initiative. I would imagine the first casualty of Labour policy under the new government will be the ID cards scheme, which although a worthy response to the very real terrorist threat the United Kingdom faced at the time (and still faces), was late and over-budget, and increasingly being forced on an unreceptive populace.

The other major difference between the Liberal-Conservative coalition and the defeated Labour government will be the approach to the deficit crisis facing British politics, a problem shared with most other developed nations across the world. The Liberal Democrats' plans to increase spending seemed speculative at best, and they were always likely to fund these by penalising the rich, for example with their mansion tax. So why aren't the Lib Dems and Tories ideologically opposed on dealing with the deficit? Because both of them can gain a victory out of a joint policy. The Tories can make the massive cuts they feel are necessary to ensure the ongoing viability of Britain's credit rating, and the Lib Dems can impose a tax on banks and massive bank profits, along with stricter regulations.

While it is arguable how the next few months of the United Kingdom's unique economic situation might proceed, placing penalties on wild banking speculation, risk-taking and short-selling seems to guard against the potential for another massive collapse in the banking sector, the overwhelming reason that the country is mortgaged to the hilt in the first place. A second banking collapse is unthinkable and unaffordable. The argument that regulation of banks will drive business out of this country is simply untrue; as Britain has a history of bank and business enterprise relatively unmatched around the world, and conditions would have to become far more stringent before they drive out a noticeable amount of business. The Tories will have persuaded the Lib Dems during preliminary talks that not making cuts to the current deficit is a much greater risk to the British economy than driving business away through stronger legislation. This tacit agreement can again be related back to the classic liberal commitment to a minimal state; while this incarnation of the Lib Dems might be more avowedly socialist in nature, it is still a defender of personal freedoms and liberties, and a smaller state is an integral part of such a commitment. Aside from the ideological notions, further borrowing and an increased deficit seems likely to result in the downgrading of Britain's credit rating, a problem seen in Greece, Spain and Portugal recently. This is something which could start a disastrous downward spiral for the UK, especially if it continues to keep borrowing to fund further recoveries. Many commentators have claimed that, historically, the only way to prevent a 'double-dip' recession is to spend our way out, but this is advice from a time when the government had money to spend to avert such a crisis. The problem with increased spending at this critical moment is that any further state spending would either have to be created (in the form of quantitative easing), or have to come out of further borrowing, which stands at the highest level it has ever been. It is forecast to increase over the next decade simply as a function of the current overwhelming debt's interest. The only other option is increased taxes, another route which can drive a country back into recession by penalising those that drive the economy and lessening the desire to spend. Given how important they perceive stringent cuts to be to the future of this nation, the Tories will be prepared to accept banking regulations in return for the freedom to decrease the debt, the first step of which will surely be accomplished in the emergency budget already announced by the coalition. Thus, the UK should get both a pragmatic approach to the banking crisis and a levy on the profits of banks, something that no single party would have delivered by itself.

In addition, the ideologies of the left wing can add to or temper right-wing policies, rather than directly oppose them. For example, the Conservative's original plans involved a tax break for married couples. Now with the addition of the Liberal Democrats into government, this tax break has been extended to those in civil partnerships as well, making the policy fairer and less discriminate. This notion is again embodied in both parties' historical commitments to the ideology of a 'hands-off' government, but this was largely glossed over by the Tories during the election when it came to individual morality. The Tories claim to be the party to give Britain a 'better sense' of morality once more, but this statement is over-simplistic and unhelpful when framed as it was by the Tories. Favouring one social grouping over

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another, in this case Christianity and Christian values, creates a less inclusive society, something that seems to go directly against Cameron's calls for a "Big Society" throughout his campaign. The liberal conception of social morality, that each individual must be treated the same no matter their background or choices, and that one life plan is incomparable to another in terms of inherent value, can temper the Tory commitment to there being a (however thin in nature) 'right' way to live one's life, but this in turn can also restrain the liberal ideal of complete blindness towards socially-made choices, especially when it comes to welfare state expenditure. We can find a 'third way' by combining aspects of the two moralities, and so liberalism and conservatism can meet on a broadly agreed notion that the individual must be free to be (and should not be penalised for) living their life as they choose, but also to bear greater responsibility for the outcomes of these decisions. In this statement there are again the fingerprints of classic liberalism or Libertarianism. Individual freedom and liberty in the nature of these doctrines comes with increased individual responsibility, showing that these two supposedly incommensurate doctrines are not mutually exclusive, but instead arise from a surprisingly similar and non-contradictory background.

In summary, then, the Tories and Lib Dems share a deep-rooted ideological background, the embodiment of which can be found in the work of classic liberal thinkers such as John Locke. This vision is undoubtedly founded on the promotion of civil liberties over government expansion, as both are committed to making individuals responsible for their own lives, be this by a non-judgemental conception of individual morality or a smaller, less intrusive government. Furthermore, it is likely that the more polemicist aspects of their policy will be tempered by the presence of the other coalition party, resulting in a more pragmatic and agreeable set of policies. Hopefully this will mean a less divisive, stronger government. It would seem from the early evidence that the Tories, and potentially the Liberals, are unconvinced about the strength of the alliance, however, as it is difficult to interpret a push for a fixed term of government in any other way. It will certainly be interesting to see if the Liberal Democrats can push through voting reform, and what effect, if any, the Alternative Vote system will have on the make-up of the British Parliament. Confidence in the alliance would surely mean leaving the system as it is, even if this resulted in a rapid election. It is unusual, compared to other European parliaments, how few coalition governments this country ends up with, a function of the antiquated voting system which aims to provide strong single-party government, blocking out smaller parties entirely in the process. It remains to be seen if public confidence in such a new and unexpected alliance can be perpetuated indefinitely, but there is no reason to doubt the compatibility of the two parties.

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