

# Powerscourt

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## ***'How quickly the coalition went from the Rose Garden love-in to a bed of thorns'***



### **Powerscourt Advisory Group member Ian Birrell offers a perspective on the coalition's first year of power**

It is easy to forget the feeling that we were witnessing a new dawn during those heady days in May last year when two rival parties joined together in one government to save the country. After a bitterly-contested election, the dramatic formation of the coalition felt like British democracy was entering a new dimension.

The speed at which David Cameron exploited the political stalemate was breathtaking, and the maturity with which politicians in both his own party and the Liberal Democrats responded to his challenge made it seem like there really was a new politics taking off after the scandals over expenses.

How quickly the coalition went from the Rose Garden love-in to a bed of thorns. Now there are endless stories of the two partners fighting over policies and positioning, while their own supporters and the country at large demonstrate growing disenchantment with coalition government.

It could be argued that for the LibDems, it has been nothing short of a disaster. Some obituarists even argue we are observing the suicidal spasms of one of the country's great political parties. Such views were strengthened last month with the rejection of electoral reform and the party's terrible local election results coming, with stomach-churning symmetry, on the first anniversary of the formation of the coalition government.

Meanwhile after a brief flirtation with more permanent forms of coalition, Mr Cameron rediscovered his inner conservatism to shore up support in the party. The question now is whether the weakening of coalition ties will diminish the government and undermine its quest to be a great reforming administration, while also tarnishing Mr Cameron's modernisation project.

After the fierce pace of the first few months, increasing friction is taking its toll. The LibDems, flailing around in political panic, are wary of anything that might make their self-inflicted wounds even deeper. They are finding unexpected allies among the more cautious Conservatives, intent only on winning an outright majority at the next election rather than changing the landscape of Britain's welfare state.

What a contrast with the early days, when the LibDems provided cover not just for the immediate task of tackling the deficit but also for unleashing a wave of bold public sector reforms in education, health, justice, planning and welfare. They were not providing a fig leaf - many key LibDem ministers were, after all, the people behind the infamous Orange Book, which promoted aggressive localism and choice in public services. Some of the suggested ideas, which included replacing the 'second rate' National Health Service with a social insurance scheme, were far bolder than anything yet suggested by the Tories.

Now the brakes have been slammed on the health service reforms, the idea of elected police commissioners has been rebuffed and a radical white paper on the public sector delayed repeatedly. Inside Whitehall, the LibDems' wariness of anything that smacks of 'privatisation' is causing immense frustration. In public, the battles will further diminish the public's appetite for coalition government.

Already we are seeing that the longer the coalition lasts, the less the public seems to like it as a form of government. After last year's General Election, voters said they approved of the idea of parties working together. A spate of polling to mark the anniversary found that, by thumping majorities, people believe coalition has led government to be weaker, more muddled, more indecisive and less responsive to the public. Four out of five voters say, for example, that government is 'more confused' with a coalition.

Endless bickering in public will increase disenchantment with this continental-style of government. How could voters not be confused when both parties say they were responsible for restraining health service reform, for example, or when the Prime Minister brazenly undermines his deputy's social mobility work by saying he is relaxed about giving work experience to friends' children?

This outbreak of tribalism also threatens to undermine another key strategy for the coalition. On both sides of the government there is a desperation not to be defined by public spending cuts. This is one of the reasons for the furious early pace of public service reform. But the more the LibDems and timid wing of the Tories slow the speed of change, the more the risk grows that the government will be shaped by spending cuts alone. 'They are making long-term strategic mistakes for short-term political gains,' said one Downing Street source.

Much of the internal concern revolves around the populist issue of private firms encroaching into the public sector, despite evidence from Europe of how market-led reforms transformed state services. 'The trouble is they have no strong policy agenda and all they're doing is stopping progressive reforms,' said another key Conservative. 'It's all so negative. The only way they can demonstrate their position is to block stuff, but they are putting up nothing in its place. It does not exactly show coalition government at its finest.'

The result is a lack of strong narrative over and above the cuts, something that Downing Street aims to rectify over the summer with a stronger and more-obvious strategy. But for the Conservatives, there is another problem looming: will the coalition damage, rather than strengthen, Mr Cameron's rebranding of the Conservative Party?

As a result of growing disillusion, the Prime Minister has been forced to pacify the more unruly elements on his backbenches and in the media with uncompromising speeches on issues such as immigration and multi-culturalism. On top of this comes the impression left by the LibDems constantly claiming to have softened Tory policies, the nice guys reining in the nasty party. The net effect is that the coalition could end up hindering, rather than helping, the Tory modernisation project.

It would be a tragedy if a coalition that promised so much ends up delivering too little, especially when the public sector has proved such a failure in so many areas to the most vulnerable people in society. In his speech to mark the anniversary of the coalition, Nick Clegg said that after decades of scaremongering, they had proved coalitions are not 'un-British' but a better way of delivering in government. The voters may take a different view.

*Ian Birrell is a media commentator, a former speechwriter for David Cameron and a member of the Powerscourt Advisory Group.*