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# **The Limits to Prime Ministerial Autonomy: Cameron and the Constraints of Coalition**

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## **Abstract**

In heading up a coalition David Cameron has had to confront two unusual constraints that prevent him from being a predominant prime minister. The first constraint, something unfamiliar to previous prime ministers, is his having to work with and through a coalition partner firmly placed to the Conservatives' left. The second constraint, equally problematic, but more familiar, is that Cameron has faced a restive Conservative parliamentary party in which a sizable minority of Tory MPs remained unreconciled to his political agenda. These two interrelated constraints mean Cameron has lacked the freedom of manoeuvre enjoyed by most past prime ministers. Two aspects of Cameron's premiership help cast light on his predicament: First, his relations with Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats; and second, the nature of his dependency upon Conservative MPs. We look at these in turn and conclude by assessing Cameron's effectiveness as prime minister.

**Keywords:** Prime Minister; Coalition; Cameron; Clegg; Conservative party; Liberal Democrats

Prime ministerial power, for reasons we have argued elsewhere (Heffernan 2003, 2005, 2013; Bennister 2008, 2009, 2012), waxes and wanes, but prime ministers draw their authority from the fact that party leaders matter now more than ever and that modern prime ministers often matter more than previous ones. Because they operate in a political environment where political factors such as personalisation and centralisation to some extent strengthens their control, the prime minister remains a preeminent political actor. Should, however, a prime minister be powerfully personally resourced, not least by being electorally successful and politically powerful, he or she will additionally be a predominant actor, one less fettered by executive collegiality and more autonomous of their parliamentary party (ibid; for a recent discussion on the position of the prime minister see Dowding 2013; Heffernan 2013; Poguntke and Webb 2013; Foley 2013).

Cameron's premiership is impacted by two major constraints. The first, something wholly unfamiliar to previous prime ministers, is his having to work with and through a party firmly placed to the Conservatives' left (excepting the crucial issue of resolving the sovereignty debt crisis by means of public expenditure cuts). Because the veto wielding Nick Clegg- and his party- can restrain the Tories, even if the Tories simultaneously restrain them, Cameron- and his Tory ministers- have had to compromise his and their policy ambitions. The second equally problematic, if more familiar constraint is that Cameron has had to manage a restive, often unhappy Conservative parliamentary party in which a sizable minority of rightward leaning Tory MPs remained unreconciled to his political agenda and have been prepared, if not to topple him as party leader and prime minister, to use their parliamentary voice and vote to challenge the policy of his coalition with which they disagree (for discussion of Cameron's premiership see Bennister and Heffernan 2012; Hayton 2014; Heppell 2013; Theakston 2012).

These two interrelated constraints mean Cameron has lacked the freedom of manoeuvre enjoyed by most of his predecessors for at least some of their period of office. Prime ministerial power in the hitherto usual arrangement of a single party government arises from the prime minister, if having to work with and through senior ministers, being able to substantially lead their collegial executive and that executive being able to authoritatively lead the prime minister's party in parliament. Cameron, however, by leading a coalition, has found that (1) his authority within his executive and (2) his autonomy from his parliamentary party has been significantly restricted. If remaining a preeminent prime minister, he has found his chance of being predominant has been limited by his leading a coalition

### **Cameron's relations with Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats**

Cameron is widely considered 'prime ministerial': for many, irrespective of what he does with the office, he 'walks' the prime ministerial walk. Cameron's personal poll ratings, while poor, remain better than those of his two party political opponents. Although his net approval ratings remain in negative territory, he has consistently outpolled Labour's Ed Miliband as preferred prime minister, even when Labour has maintained a poll lead. Although leading a coalition, Cameron has a reliable Commons majority, his possession of the premiership has

been assured, and the appurtenances of the office fall to him in the same way as if he were heading up a single party government.

Cameron may appear as prime ministerial as any of his predecessors in public, but in private he is less prime ministerial by having to work with ministers not of his own party and through a party leader, Nick Clegg, who is largely beyond his control. This significantly qualifies his authority within both 'his' executive and the legislature. Clegg, someone not of Cameron's own choosing, is beyond the reach of the prime minister's patronage, power or personal charm. He, having formalised the position of deputy prime minister, holds not merely a title, but a cabinet position with certain formal powers. This position may specifically be a creation of this coalition (it can be reworked or revoked should a single party government take office again), but for the life of this coalition, Clegg's position is as solid as Cameron's. Now he is better resourced in Whitehall than he was previously his power has increased, not diminished over the life time of the coalition (as his standing- and that of the Lib Dems- in the country has weakened). And Cameron cannot reshuffle or remove him. This is, to say the least, an unusual experience in British politics. Nothing of its like has been seen since the Labour leader, Attlee, held the same post and sat of right in Churchill's coalition cabinet.

Coalition government involves compromise on the part of both the Tories and the Lib Dems; Cameron has to operate very differently to his predecessors. Five spots in his cabinet are not in Cameron's gift; Clegg appoints and reshuffles Lib Dem cabinet ministers (and he creates the 20 non cabinet Lib Dem ministers) even if the portfolios they hold are subject to Tory-Lib Dem negotiation and the subsequent agreement of Cameron and Clegg (Heppell 2014; Paun 2012). This restricts Cameron's prerogative powers of ministerial appointment and portfolio allocation. Additionally his power to agenda set by making use of his right to be consulted on matters of policy, if intact, is seriously qualified by his having to consult Clegg on such policy.

Cameron thus has fewer carrots and sticks to oblige his coalition partners to back him when Lib Dems exercise a veto over policy initiatives. Of course, when Conservative and Lib Dem backbenchers have been onside, the coalition has been largely able to successfully pursue its policy agenda by using its partisan Commons advantage. Cameron has been able to forge policy through *intra-party* agreement within the coalition. Commons disputations between the coalition partners have been very rare, so the quid pro quo by which the Lib Dems nixed the effort to enact boundary changes of electoral benefit to the Conservatives was (so far) a one off response to Cameron's failure to stop Tory backbenchers sabotaging Lords reform. Such fall outs, over issues cleared in the coalition agreement, clearly rocked the coalition; if they created little short term enmity they surely helped sew long term distrust. Both Cameron and Clegg, however, chose not to allow the fall out over Lords reform and boundary changes to spill out into a damaging personal and public disagreement. While Clegg (and his surrogates such as David Laws) may get into protracted rows with the likes of Michael Gove on schools or with Iain Duncan-Smith on welfare reform, Clegg and Cameron have rarely let their private disputes spill over into the public arena.

Cameron and Clegg have very real differences prompted by their holding different beliefs and opinions, but they or their teams have tended not to leak or brief their arguments; both men and their surrogates trust each other and are straight with each other. This lack of enmity has been underpinned by the informal 'no surprises' agreement between Cameron and Clegg, and the more formal procedural necessity that Clegg sees all significant government papers that go to Cameron (Rawnsley 2013). In this regard coalition has suited Cameron; his instinct leans towards pragmatism. He accepts the restrictions coalition imposes. Cameron has not pursued initiatives he knows Clegg cannot or will not support: having to perform any form of u-turn in the face of Lib Dem pressure would considerably undermine his standing. And his instinct has been to ensure that other Tories do not pick fights with them either. This, as we shall see, infuriates Cameron's backbench critics who often use the coalition as a stick with which to beat him.

Cameron's coalition cabinet remains mostly a forum for the exchange of information with key policy being prompted by cabinet committee deliberation or routine policy being left to departments. Should inter party policy divisions present themselves (not intra party differences) reference is made upwards to the key political principals led by Cameron and Clegg (more usually the key surrogates operating in their office such as Ed Llewellyn and Jonny Oates). When differences are most acute problems are resolved (or issues are shelved) by bilateral negotiations between the parties led by the Cameron and Clegg. Here both parties have tended not to face off, but forge some form of compromise agreement or allow 'controlled explosions' to take place (Economist, 5 January 2013). Signs suggest, however, that the Tory side is taking a more combative approach in cabinet as the election approaches (Forsyth, 2014b). The most important institution directing the coalition is not the formal coalition cabinet committee, which only occasionally meets, but the informal Quad comprising the four key senior ministers from the two parties; Cameron, George Osborne, Clegg and Danny Alexander (Hazell and Yong 2012).

The Quad operates by compromise and consensus, preferring to act only if there is agreement. The Lib Dems, if clearly the junior partner in the coalition (they have only 22 percent of cabinet posts; 17 percent of non cabinet posts; and provide 16 percent of the coalition's strength in the Commons), possess an equal vote and voice within the Quad. Critics, from inside and outside the Tory party, complain that this over estimates Lib Dem strength within the government. In that regard, whilst the Quad operates relatively harmoniously, its members cooperate rather than engage in conflict; this key coalition institution thus has an essential 'power sharing' element in which each coalition party wields a veto over the ambitions of the other. There has been some disquiet about this as (Conservative) backbenchers bemoan decisions handed down on high by four individuals (within a committee in which Treasury representatives comprise half the membership) (Economist, 5 January 2013). Having to work with such a 'group of four' at the centre of government requires Cameron to deploy different prime ministerial skills to those possessed by his predecessors. Can one imagine a similar arrangement in Blair's government when, say, Blair, Brown, Robin Cook and Jack Straw would have to regularly reach agreement between the Blairite, Brownite and non aligned members of Blair's cabinet? If the coalition partners

have to ‘hang together’ for economic necessity and political expediency, Cameron, knowing he cannot presume to have his way, has had to try to successfully manage formal and informal arrangements with individuals over whom he has no political control. Because the coalition, if far less harmonious than previously (see below), has not collapsed into open squabbling or bureaucratic sclerosis, it can be surmised that the mechanisms, both formal and informal, have worked for most of the government’s life.

*The trajectory of the coalition up to the election and its impact on Cameron*

The ways in which the government operates at its highest, deliberative echelons, how it manages its inter party differences, has changed little in formal terms from the early days of the government (Hazell and Yong 2012; Bennister and Heffernan 2012). In the first phase of the coalition Cameron benefited from the fact that the Lib Dems, especially when measured by poll ratings and election results, became electorally and politically weakened. This bound them further into his coalition. But in subsequent phases of the coalition less has been heard of the ‘coalitionisation’ of policy through the strengthened mechanics of the cabinet committee system. This owes much to the Lib Dems being quicker to assert themselves. For instance, knowing that Clegg was spread so thinly across government and the Lib Dems had little or no influence on certain departments, efforts were made to successfully boost Clegg's advisory resources (Mason 2013) and place more 'political' Lib Dems in strategic departments such as Laws at Education, Norman Baker at the Home Office and Simon Hughes at Justice.

If central government has been more collegiate and collective than in the past (especially compared to the Blairite-Brownite divisions of the last Labour government) there has been a marked differentiation strategy by both parties in the second half of the coalition government. Cameron introduced a political cabinet of Conservative cabinet ministers, meeting before the full cabinet (Goodman 2013). This supports the notion, over the period of coalition government, that informal mechanisms have been found to circumvent the formal, whereby both sides regularly caucus in order to influence- and try to ‘pre-cook’- coalition meetings. Ministers have been increasingly freed up to state their party’s case and to criticise their respective partner. Clegg, if not Cameron, has been eager to challenge and criticise his dominant coalition partner party in public much more often than previously (Rawnsley 2013). While Cameron has forbore such criticisms of his junior coalition partner, he has been more open about his desire for the return of a single party government and admitted to keeping a ‘little black book’ of Conservative policies that have been thwarted by being in coalition which will be introduced by a Conservative majority (Nelson 2013).

Viewing the various phases of the coalition, we can see that presently the Conservatives and the Lib Dems more often now agree to disagree, in sharp contrast to the first phase of coalition government of ‘civilised partnership’ (Hayton 2014; Heywood 2013; Bennister and Heffernan 2012). Here both parties sought to function as a largely harmonious entity (something which prompted the odd out of touch Tory to suggest the parties should fight a subsequent election on a joint ticket (Boles 2010) and both parties maintained a good

working relationship (Hazell and Yong 2012). In this period Cameron, subject to the Lib Dem veto on matters not contained within the coalition agreement, was thus no more constrained by Clegg than he would have been by an intra-party rival (Bennister and Heffernan 2012).

From early 2012, however, the second phase of the coalition can be described as 'uneasy cohabitation' (Hayton 2014; Heywood 2013). Fuelled by Lib Dem anxiety at being subsumed within a dominant Conservative-led coalition, the relationship became less cordial. The loss of the AV referendum in May 2011 was a significant blow to the Lib Dems, while their retaliation to the stalling of House of Lords reform by sabotaging the boundary changes in January 2013 damaged the Conservatives long term political aspirations. Cameron's inability to prevent Tory backbenchers from derailing Lords reform (with Labour assistance) was compounded by his unwillingness to intervene. By his 'increasing willingness to let the sentiments of his own party take precedence over those of his coalition partners' (Hayton 2014: 15), Cameron was seen to prioritise managing his own party over managing the coalition. Having hardened his line on Europe in terms of his commitment to renegotiating the terms of membership and the promise of a referendum on continuing membership in 2017, Cameron calculated that responding to his backbenchers (and countering the perceived threat of UKIP) was more important than appeasing the Lib Dems.

Subsequently, from late 2013 onward, a third stage of the coalition can be characterised as 'living together in disharmony', when 'the illusions and expectations that had sustained the honeymoon period have finally and firmly been abandoned' and disagreement was 'expected, not feared' (Heywood 2013). If the coalition's deficit reduction programme and its need to hold itself together until the May 2015 election bind it together, then the looming election means both parties begin separately to prepare for it. Neither side can find simple reforms they can agree on so, at the time of writing, legislation has slowed and is expected to slow further to a trickle. The coalition can be expected to *formally* remain in place, but both parties will certainly *informally* disengage in order to electioneer for the 2015 poll. Each will showcase their programme for the next parliament and lay claim to the parts of the coalition's record that best suits them electorally. Rather than govern in the present, both parties can be expected to use the 'past' and 'present' to separately campaign for the 'future'. Such a differentiation strategy has been likened by one Lib Dem source to 'a sexless couple. We live in the same house but sleep in separate bedrooms' (Forsyth 2014a). Both parties- operating in the same government- will have to take the other on. The Lib Dems, falling back on their old electoral strategy of opposing the government, but this time from within the government (Nelson 2013), will be eager to differentiate themselves from the Conservatives on welfare reform, immigration, education and energy policy. Clegg (2013) has trumpeted his claim to have moderated Tory policy and thwarted the Tory right. The Tories in turn will fret about being in coalition and being prevented from pursuing policies such as further reducing the deficit, cutting taxes, promoting economic growth, cutting welfare and improving education, reforming human rights laws and dealing with the EU.

Cameron will have to head up the Tory campaign against his own government; no prime minister has found themselves in such a perverse position previously. Obviously he was happier managing his coalition from the position of strength when the Tories were the dominant party in the first phase of coalition. Because relations with the Lib Dems has become much more unpredictable, Cameron's authority, the leadership of 'his' government, has fallen further into question. With both coalition partners seeking advantage over the other- and over Labour- Cameron has to differentiate himself from the Lib Dems by setting out bold, radical initiatives (as the Lib Dems do likewise). His coalition can be expected to remain in office, but operate only on a care and maintenance basis. This will significantly impact upon Cameron's premiership because, in terms of his ability to 'get things done' and build any significant political capital, he risks looking like a 'lame duck' prime minister for the last ten months or so of this parliament. From here on his ability as prime minister to shape the policy agenda is to be further constrained. Cameron will remain the external face of the government on national issues, but turning smooth words into actual policy is and will remain challenging. Like an opposition leader, but unlike any past prime minister, he will have increasingly to talk only about what he and his party will do with a majority after the coming election, not what he and it can do within the present day coalition.

### **Cameron's relations with the Conservative party and Conservative MPs**

If hampered by his coalition partner, Cameron, like all prime ministers, knows prime ministerial effectiveness is contingent upon the intra party context within which he or she operates. Prime ministers have to work with and through their own party and for the predominant prime minister that party is more of a resource than it is an obstacle. In coalition a recalcitrant party has many more reasons to be unhappy, but this being a coalition in government, not one in parliament means that both parties have remained very separate entities (Hazell and Yong 2012). The closeness of the party elites masks the underlying tensions between two parties. To put it crudely if the frontbench top brass found it easy to forge agreements, the backbench footsoldiers (and some NCOs) have often to swallow their misgivings. And a large minority of these footsoldiers made clear their misgivings by their voice and their parliamentary vote; others, granted anonymity by journalists, turn their private complaints into public grumbling. Cameron was initially concerned with smoothing over coalition differences and neglected his parliamentary party, but since 2012 he has had to try to manage it better (although much of the damage to his standing amongst certain backbenchers had already been done).

Within the Conservative side of the cabinet, and among ministers beyond the cabinet, Cameron remains exceptionally authoritative. Cameron's closest associate chancellor George Osborne, is the loyalist partner of the prime minister, not a party rival to him; no Gordon Brown he. In return Osborne possesses singular authority and unrivalled influence across the government both in terms of policy and personnel. He is still the Tories principal strategist and is clearly treated by Cameron as his political equal; theirs is an unsurpassed political partnership. One key feature of Cameron's premiership is that he has only conducted a single



major reshuffle; he has used his cabinet patronage powers sparingly. One result of this is that senior ministers such as Osborne, Theresa May, Michael Gove, Iain Duncan-Smith and William Hague look set to hold their cabinet positions for the full five year term of the government. This is unprecedented. None pose any form of threat to Cameron, but being entrenched in their posts means each has significant political capital and can make their mark without Cameron dictating direction or claiming too much credit. If not Cameron's rivals, such experienced ministers become his more autonomous colleagues; less his subordinates. This limits Cameron's scope for policy influence, because he has had to work with and through established, experienced ministers in a more collegial way than other past prime ministers may have done. But there have been very few intra party policy differences within the coalition (even if it is remarked that Osborne and Iain Duncan Smith have little time for each others policy or personality (D'Ancona 2013)). Such differences that have arisen within the coalition tend to be inter-party, not intra-party. And Cameron has been advantaged by former leadership hopefuls David Davis and Liam Fox having crashed and burned and by no member of the cabinet being on manoeuvres to replace him in this parliament. Such politicking that has taken place seemingly involves could-be successors like May and Osborne positioning themselves to be best placed to succeed Cameron when he vacates the party leadership (as opposed to replace him when he is removed).

Beyond the unity of the Conservative part of the frontbench, however, Tory MPs have been restless and many have been prepared to break the whip in protest at coalition policy. This has presented considerable problems for Cameron. The backbench 'tail' never wags the frontbench 'dog', but Cameron has had to fight the perception he faces a threat from the Tory right and that this threat is growing. Being unprepared and often unwilling to woo backbenchers, he has managed during his leadership tenure, to upset a wide cross-section of his own party. So Cameron has certainly suffered more than his share of Commons reversals losing Commons votes on Europe, on Lords reform and on military intervention in Syria, also witnessing several sizable Tory rebellions on Europe and immigration (see Cowley and Stuart 2013). Cameron found himself in the Tory minority on his government's flagship unwhipped vote on gay marriage, with safe legislative passage only ensured thanks to Labour and the Lib Dems. And Cameron was put in a bind by the backbench Raab amendment on the Immigration Bill in January 2014. He privately claimed to sympathise with preventing foreign criminals abusing their right to a family life in order to evade deportation, but opposed its passage because it clashed with the duties set out in the Human Rights Act. Having instructed Tory MPs to abstain in the vote, Cameron found that some 85 'rebels' agreed with the 'private' Cameron, but opposed the 'public' one.

Cameron is a cautious and pragmatic politician; he is no zealot. But his strongly held social liberalism aside, he is not as far removed from the average Conservative backbenchers as many maintain on issues such as the economic, public spending, immigration and even Europe. He has, however, struggled to manage more radical backbench MPs who, emboldened to rebel on issues such as Europe and immigration, have often obliged the government to beat a retreat. And Cameron has had to offer policy concessions, not least the promise of the renegotiation of EU membership and a subsequent in/out referendum on

continuing membership, in response to the reality of Tory rebellion. Rebellious votes clearly embarrass him and backbench discontentment undermines his prime ministerial authority, even if not challenging his party leadership. Few Tories rebel regularly - the government majority is very secure in over 90 percent of divisions - and government defeats remain rare, but partisanship is so entrenched within the workings of Westminster that backbenchers choosing to check and balance their government rather than support it, is said to be a 'revolt' or an act of 'rebellion'. Such votes nevertheless illustrate the unease on the Tory benches.

Tory disunity largely springs from deeply held conviction, but it owes much to the fact that a number of Tory MPs have long concluded Cameron has little interest in them and is not prepared to listen to them.. Many did not want him as leader in first place and object to his politics; others blame him personally for not securing a majority in 2010, others still, who owed their seats to the Cameron modernisation agenda, express disillusionment at his willingness to make concessions to the right. Much disunity also springs from some of Cameron's ministerial appointments. His power of appointment to the Conservative side of the coalition has certainly been restricted by the need to make use of talent and ensure some form of balance in terms of geography, parliamentary intake and (far less so) ideological balance (Heppell 2014). Cameron has had to take care to appoint sufficient women, but also to ensure friends and associates of his (and those of Osborne's) enter the ranks. This has proven to be a source of considerable resentment on the part of back benchers and junior ministers passed over in favour of promotable women and 'friends of Dave and George' such as Nick Boles and Matt Hancock.

Cameron's personal style has also brought him problems. If his self-assurance and comfortable leadership skills have assisted him in appearing 'prime ministerial' in office (Theakston 2012) then his assurance has been taken by some as arrogance and his background as proof of him being out of touch. Such style is held against Cameron in parts of the Tory backbench as much as is his accommodation of Clegg. For instance, referring to Cameron's inner circle, one Tory MP bemoaned the fact that there are 'six people writing the manifesto and five of them went to Eton [Cameron; the ministers Jo Johnson and Oliver Letwin; and advisers Rupert Harrison and Ed Llewellyn]; the other went to St Pauls [Osborne] (Financial Times, 24 February 2014). Another, Pauline Latham, complained that Cameron never listens to 'the likes of her' (ibid). Being an O[ld] E[tonian] has clearly been more of an obstacle than a resource for Cameron as party leader. Nadine's Dorries jibe that Cameron and Osborne were 'two arrogant posh boys who didn't know the price of milk' (BBC 2012, 23 April) not only stuck, but was widely repeated among his party critics.

Of course Cameron's party leadership style is not simply the product of his personal strengths and weakness. Such style is closely modelled on that of Blair who sought always to lead his party firmly from the front brooking, whenever possible, no opposition (Bale 2010; Heffernan 2014). In opposition Cameron could invoke the need for unity and electoral advantage to face down or silence intra party opposition; in government this has not been so easy to achieve when Tory MPs want ministers- and the prime minister- to deliver. Keeping the party 'sweet' is not something Cameron likes to do, but such is the level of backbench

unease he has had to recognise the need to compromise with the Tory party just as he has had to compromise with the Lib Dems. His Commons defeat on Syria in August 2013 proved, eventually, a case in point when Cameron strengthened his position by his acceptance of 'the will of Parliament'. The Syria vote should have been better managed, but by conceding defeat Cameron was able to move on without obvious short term damage. In similar vein, having not consulted a single Tory MP beyond his inner circle on the formation of the coalition (and only informing the shadow cabinet of his intention), he has indicated there will be a vote of the parliamentary party if the Tories are to go in to coalition again (Graham 2013). And Cameron has also sought to placate his backbenches by making it clear he 'intends' to head up a single party government after the election even if leading a minority government (ibid).

This means, post the pretence of close blissful harmony between the coalition partners, Cameron has moved to harden up his right flank and keep stronger tabs on recalcitrant backbenchers. He appointed MP John Hayes, a well connected member of the socially conservative Cornerstone group, minister without portfolio in March 2013 and made an effort to be more approachable to Tory MPs. The creation of a Policy Board in April 2013 to help plan the next Tory manifesto, headed by MP Jo Johnson, was intended to signal the beefing up of party influence within No 10. Such changes sought to 'address growing concerns that Downing Street is not *overtly political enough* and has neglected to draw up policies which are popular with many traditional Conservatives' (Winnett 2013). Many Tories saw this board, containing both old stagers and members of the 2010 intake, as being both a sop to backbench (and frontbench) critics and a means of fostering closer dialogue between Cameron and the party. Though it is hard to discern any obvious board influence, such moves clearly indicated that Cameron - in this phase of the coalition - felt he had to be less concerned with Lib Dem sensitivities and more with reaching out to his parliamentary party.

*If Cameron's incumbency as party leader has been strengthened, his authority as prime minister has been weakened*

In policy terms Cameron's more Eurosceptic line and his much tougher rhetoric on immigration and welfare have been intended to firm up his shaky base on the backbench; these are bread and butter Tory right issues. But a party Cameron claimed would no longer 'bang on' about Europe or immigration (Bale 2010; D'Ancona 2013) has thus inched back on to traditional Tory territory. From 2006 Cameron's pragmatism prompted him to modernise the party in order to appeal to soft Labour voters, but his pragmatism requires him now to embrace more conventional Conservative themes. Key modernisers privately complain that Cameron's efforts to transform the party have stalled as he fends off accusations of privilege, elitism and aloofness from voters. Backbenchers have warned Cameron that his ditching of green policies risked splitting the party, so the discontent of the liberal, modernising wing of the Tory party, whilst not as great as that of the right, still poses problems for Cameron. Naturally Cameron is not the first nor is he likely to be the last Conservative prime minister to be blown around by various combinations of party malcontents. Once backbenchers, be they left or right leaning, find that they can rebel without the sky falling in they are prepared to do it again, and again (Cowley and Stuart 2013).

Elements of the party- but still only a minority of MPs- may thus be willing to rebel, but Cameron remains well entrenched in office: backbench angst cannot- and will not- prompt any form of leadership challenge. Cameron, his tenure entrenched by the obstacles placed on any intra-party challengers by the 1998 party rule change (Heppell 2013), is strengthened by having no serious intra party rival. He has no equivalent of Gordon Brown endlessly manoeuvring to oust him. Likely contenders from within the cabinet such as Osborne, May perhaps Michael Gove remain content to succeed Cameron, not replace him. Two others said to be eager to become party leader, the backbencher Adam Afriye and the London mayor Boris Johnson, offer no contemporary threat. No one but Afriye takes seriously his chances of becoming leader and the self styled 'Boris', being outside the Commons- - is not presently in a position to seek to replace Cameron.

If the fact of Cameron's leadership has been wholly assured in the present parliament, his having to manage a partially querulous parliamentary party has had significant consequences for the type of leader, and prime minister, he has been. Hayton claims by forming the coalition Cameron managed to 'transform the failure to win an outright majority into a position which enhanced his leadership autonomy within his own party and secured a stable government' (2014: 8). Certainly a stable government was secured, but Cameron's autonomy from his party has not been enhanced; quite the opposite. Party leaders, as the ease with which Cameron built the coalition, consulting no one beyond his closest circle, proves (Kavanagh and Cowley 2010), have radically increased their autonomy from their party (Heffernan 2009; 2013), but Cameron's being prime minister of a coalition has actually qualified his autonomy from his party. Cameron clearly retains some leadership autonomy, but that autonomy has been weakened, not enhanced by his being prime minister of a coalition government. If leading the coalition 'helped Cameron strengthen his claim to be an essentially pragmatic politician' (Hayton 2014: 8), this has been at the expense of keeping the entirety of his parliamentary party onside. Backbench Tories, even if a minority of the parliamentary party, cannot be as easily ignored as they were in opposition. Thus Cameron, facing intra party critics opposed to the politics of the coalition, has had to placate such critics on issues such as Europe, taxation and immigration. By having to keep his eye on his backbench, Cameron has not been able to lead his party in ways in which Blair or Thatcher, say, led theirs when both were in their pomp.

### **Cameron's premiership**

Cameron may well prove a one term prime minister without ever having had a party majority. Following the failure to secure the expected boundary changes, winning the 2015 election outright presents a considerable challenge for the Conservatives. The rise of UKIP, which certainly complicates electoral matters, has added another layer of uncertainty. But, if electoral evidence suggests the Tories face considerable - maybe even insurmountable - difficulties in securing a party majority at the next election, it remains a possibility, should the Tories be the largest party in another hung parliament that Cameron could return as prime minister in a renewed Conservative-Lib Dem coalition. Cameron has indicated his

willingness to lead a minority should the Tories become the largest party in the Commons, but fall short of a majority. Presently polls indicate, however, that it is more likely for the Lib Dems to propel Labour into office should Labour fail to secure its majority and the parliamentary arithmetic permits a new coalition allowing the Lib Dems to exclude the Tories. Any electoral outcome, it seems, is possible, but few presently predict a Cameron-led Conservative majority. Should the Tories lose office Cameron, then approaching his tenth year as party leader, will surely stand aside or find himself cast aside.

Cameron has brought about no lasting change in the office of prime minister. The post remains to be filled by a would-be autocrat such as Thatcher or Blair or a more emollient Major. The one change he has instituted, to have relinquished the prime minister's power over the timing of elections by bringing in fixed term parliaments, will have some impact on those who succeed him. This reform, rather than being a democratic innovation, was more a ploy by both coalition partners to bind themselves to each other in office for a full term (for five years, not four). By abolishing the traditional speculation about the timing of the next general election, fixed term parliaments have ensured that this coalition government will run until May 2015. Of course, lacking the power to call an election at a favourable time of one's choosing is seen by some to weaken the prime minister. This is not necessarily so. Blair, had he to work within fixed terms of five years, would probably have had two extra years in Downing Street. And the 'power' to call an election at a time of their own choosing (or to think about so doing) weakened rather than strengthened an uncertain, dithering Gordon Brown (and brought about the early demise of Heath in 1974 and Wilson in 1970). Thus Cameron (and Clegg), by legally binding themselves together, have strengthened their incumbency (if, by the likelihood of their both being lame ducks for the last year of their holding office, not necessarily improved their ability to govern). Fixed terms can thus extend the incumbency of the prime minister, not weaken him or her. Other structural changes, such as the status and role of the deputy prime minister remain expedients which, should a single party government be returned, can easily be reversed by any future prime minister. The prime minister is still free to exercise his patronage powers and Cameron has continued to appoint to the House of Lords with gusto.

In terms of his party face, Cameron has tried to pursue his long held Blair-like inner circle tendencies (Heffernan 2014), but he has, however, struggled to find the structure and personnel to support him at the centre. This has not been helped by the loss of close advisors such as Andy Coulson and Steve Hilton so early on and his having to make some effort to broaden out the range of advisers he listens to. The effectiveness of Cameron's Downing Street operation has come in for much criticism (Institute for Government 2013) and he has consistently lacked a reliable political antenna to alert him to impending trouble. This has weakened him but, as Downing Street is put on a clear election footing, political advisers such as Lynton Crosby have become more influential at the centre. Cameron's messages will thus be increasingly focussed on what the Conservatives will do as a single party government, not what the coalition is presently doing. Entering the election, then, Cameron's incumbency is strengthened by the fact that his Tory critics can criticise him, but they cannot

challenge him; none wish to bring the coalition crashing down. But such critics have certainly eroded Cameron's autonomy as party leader and prime minister.

Cameron's premiership, heading up a coalition, has naturally been one of compromise, so it is hard to see the writ of the prime minister running through government as was so clearly the case with the likes of Blair or Thatcher. Cameron cannot lead, let alone instruct Lib Dem ministers and other than pursue deficit reduction he has struggled to set out a distinctive vision or cast his own political strategy. The Lib Dems prevent him from moulding the programme and politics of the coalition as he would wish. And critics in his party can sometimes act as a break over policies (such as Syria) with which they are unhappy with. George Jones' famous observation, that the prime minister is only as strong as his party, and particularly his chief colleagues, lets him be' (1965: 181), clearly applies in Cameron's case more to his parliamentary party than his Conservative 'chief colleagues'; it most certainly applies, however, to the five Lib Dem 'chief colleagues' with whom he is obliged to work.

## **Conclusion**

Cameron's premiership has clearly been stamped by him having to lead a coalition. His having to compromise with the Lib Dems makes a critical mass of Conservative MPs restive and unhappy; both constraints therefore mutually reinforce the other as Lib Dems restrict Cameron from easily appeasing his backbenchers. Cameron has personally proven the perfect type of party leader to lead a coalition; rather than chafe at the ties that bind him, he works within them, sometimes seeking to loosen them, but never trying to break them. This, however, infuriates his Tory critics. This is not, contra such critics, that Cameron believes in nothing, but that- bar deficit reduction- he perhaps does not believe in anything strongly enough to fight for it. On deficit reduction the Conservatives and the Lib Dems have been of like mind but beyond that, when the Lib Dems veto a policy reform, Cameron accepts the veto. This was not the style of Blair or of Thatcher. Of course neither of them led a coalition and Thatcher proved unable to keep out of the ERM and Blair's ambition to pursue Euro entry foundered partly on the objections of Brown. But it means that Cameron, unlike past predominant prime ministers such as Thatcher and Blair, has been often unable to fully assert himself on either his party or government.

Thus hamstrung by a coalition partner which has more veto power than a party of its size and standing really should have, sometimes beset by Tory critics, Cameron has not proved to be the predominant prime minister he may have appeared earlier in his premiership. He has too often been restrained by his having to make compromises with Clegg and by antagonising many backbenchers. Thus Cameron has not been able to lead either the government or the Commons in ways in which Thatcher, Blair and Brown managed. It is thus fair to say that he has held- and this side of the election will most likely continue to firmly hold- prime ministerial 'office', but that he has much less 'power' in doing so. Cameron's paradox is that coalition government has bound the policy ambitions of the party he leads, but it has strengthened his hold on the premiership this side of the 2015 election. This, one feels, is a trade off this prime minister has been quite prepared to make. It is hard to avoid the

conclusion that a cautious and compromising Cameron has been focussed more on retaining his position in the present parliament than with renewing it in the next.

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