

How will the coalition end? Cameron and Clegg may look to the precedent set by the 1945 caretaker government

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Alun Wyburn-Powell provides a historical account of the 1945 caretaker government and argues that it provides a useful model for thinking about when the current coalition might end. Whilst obviously very different situations, there is good logic in parting some months prior to the start of the 2015 campaign for both the LibDems and Tories. It would allow a bit more freedom for the parties to maneuver and might neutralize Labour's attempt to attack the coalition.



Nick Clegg and David Cameron's press conference in the Rose Garden at 10 Downing Street was the image which characterised the start of the current coalition in May 2010. At that time many people believed that the government was unlikely to last the full parliamentary term. Now, past the halfway mark, most think that it probably will.

History is on the side of the coalition surviving to the end. The Lloyd George coalition lasted for six years, in war and peace, from 1916 to 1922. The National Government lasted nine years from 1931 to 1940 and the most recent example, Churchill's all-party Second World War coalition, lasted five years from 1940 to 1945. Assuming that it does last, how could the current coalition be brought to a neat conclusion, so that the parties do not end up fighting each other in an election campaign, while still in government together? The example of the Caretaker Government at the end of the last coalition in 1945 offers a precedent.

Although Germany had been defeated, Labour leader Clement Attlee, was willing to continue in coalition with the Conservatives and Liberals until October 1945, when the new electoral register was due to be published. Churchill made a counter offer for the coalition to last just until victory over Japan was achieved, but the Labour Party decided instead to withdraw from the coalition in May. Churchill then formed a Caretaker Government of Conservative and allied Liberal National ministers for the two months leading up to an election in July, with the Liberal and Labour parties leaving to campaign on their own separate programmes.

Despite the rather different circumstances, the 1945 Caretaker Government could provide a useful model for 2015. If the Liberal Democrats parted company from the Conservatives before the election campaign started, the parties would be seen to be offering their own independent manifestos, without an unseemly squabble within the coalition. It could offer an advantage to the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in the campaign, as the Labour Party would find it difficult to attack a coalition that no longer existed. Voters could also more easily see that the Liberal Democrats were free to form a coalition with the Labour Party after the next election, if Labour became the largest party but without an overall majority.

There is another aspect of the Caretaker Government which David Cameron might find tempting. The departure of the 25 Liberal Democrat ministers would create openings in the cabinet and other ministerial ranks for more Conservatives to be rewarded with office, however brief. For an overlooked Conservative backbencher, two months in office might seem much better than none. It would give David Cameron some incentives which he could offer to calm some dissenting voices in his fractious party.

The Caretaker Government was slightly smaller than a normal administration, comprising 88 ministers (the 1945 Labour government had 99). For 13 of its 88 members, the Caretaker Government gave them their only ministerial office. These ministers included the appropriately named, Ronnie Tree, son of Arthur Tree and Ethel Field, who was appointed as a junior minister in the Department of Town and Country Planning. Thelma Cazalet-Kier's one term of ministerial office was as Parliamentary Secretary at the Department of Education in the Caretaker Government. She

was one of two female ministers: the other being Florence Horsbrugh, who later went on to serve as Minister of Education in 1951.

The Caretaker Government contained two future prime ministers, Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan, and the sons of three former premiers. The 6th Earl of Rosebery, a former first class cricketer and son of the former Liberal prime minister, was Secretary of State for Scotland. Richard Law, son of Andrew Bonar Law, served as Thelma Cazalet-Keir's boss at Education and Gwilym Lloyd George, son of former Liberal prime minister David Lloyd George, served as Minister for Fuel and Power. For Gwilym Lloyd George, still nominally a Liberal, the Caretaker Government provided a stepping stone in his defection to the Conservative Party, which was completed when he was elected as Conservative MP for Newcastle North in 1951. He went on to become Conservative Home Secretary in 1954.

Cabinet minutes show that the Caretaker Government dealt with issues ranging from the constitutional position of India to the illegal occupation of two houses in Brighton. Foreign affairs naturally dominated most of the agendas, as the war in Europe had only recently ended and Japan was still fighting. Clement Attlee, as Leader of the Opposition, was consulted on a list of uncontroversial legislation which would be enacted before the election and was shown papers on major issues of foreign affairs and strategy.

The most politically-sensitive issue during the Caretaker Government concerned whether the Conservative Party should make an announcement on progress towards setting up the National Health Service. A plan for the NHS had been outlined by the wartime coalition in a white paper in February 1944. The Conservative ministers were keen to show that they were working on the plans and did not want to be left open to accusations that their party would withhold or delay the introduction of the NHS. Aside from this, most of the other issues before the cabinet were short-term and managerial, rather than long term and strategic or political.

No reshuffle took place during the Caretaker Government's term of office. Attendance at the, more-or-less weekly, cabinet meetings fluctuated. Many ministers, including Churchill, missed meetings because of official commitments, Anthony Eden was ill with a duodenal ulcer and the Home Secretary, Donald Somervell, was absent for a time after the death of his wife.

Overall, the 1945 Caretaker Government proved to be a useful firewall between an effective coalition and a divisive election campaign. The Labour Party won the 1945 election by a large margin, but the main reasons for this stemmed back well before the Caretaker Government. Attlee and the Labour ministers had proved themselves competent administrators of domestic policy during the war, the public wanted a brave new world and the Conservatives still carried the label of 'Guilty Men' over their role in pre-war appeasement.

Churchill did make a major blunder in the 1945 election campaign with his claim that the Labour Party would set up a form of gestapo if they were elected, but this self-inflicted problem did not cost him the election. Opinion polls, an innovation started during the war, suggested that the Conservative Party was on course to lose the election anyway.

Historians and commentators tend to overlook the 1945 Caretaker Government, but perhaps it is time to revisit it. For some politicians it was the highlight of their career. The idea could be resurrected by David Cameron in the run up to the 2015 election. If it is, we could see another Rose Garden event to mark the end of the coalition in, say, March 2015 with a business-like handshake between Nick Clegg and David Cameron and an acknowledgement that they had managed to maintain a good working relationship, despite their political differences. The coalition would be finished. However, this time another might well be on the cards after the election.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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