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Rhetoric and the Advancement of Progressive Neoliberalism

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Rhetoric and the Advancement of “Progressive Neoliberalism”

Introduction.

As fundamentals, the combined art of rhetoric and oratory enables effective political communication. This communication can be used to advance policies, ideas, philosophies, and ideologies. Combined, they can have the potential to shift the political dynamic from one end of the spectrum to another whilst retaining the same support base. Such is this impact, that the study of both is vital. The focus of this paper is the first prerequisite of effective communication, that of rhetoric. Without rhetoric, there can be no oratory; without oratory, rhetoric remains uncommunicated. The importance of both is key, but for this paper, a focus on oratory is out of scope. This paper focuses of the rhetoric and ideologies of the coalition government. It will evaluate the impact of chosen rhetoric and the ideological heritage of both parties towards constructing a definition of *progressive neoliberalism*.

From a dispassionate perspective, the coalition appears ideologically nebulous at best. Although it consists of two distinct parties, the ideological construction is far more diverse, comprised of one nation Conservatives, Thatcherite Conservatives, Post-Thatcherites, Orange Book Liberals and a few social democrats such as Simon Hughes thrown in for good measure. This leads to the perception of a melting pot of conflicting ideologies, united together in government.

It can hardly claim to be a government with a single ideological location or objective, either progressive or neoliberal, so what holds the coalition together? How is it able to govern effectively, and what is the glue which binds this current administration?

To answer such questions we need to relate how carefully crafted rhetoric relates to

ideological constructions. This is coupled with the central ballast of coalition rhetoric, that of 'the national interest'. Such crafted rhetoric is vital in order to prevent an acceleration of governing degenerative tendencies, so common in parties of government, to garner sustainability and credibility.

Importantly, a full evaluation of the definition of rhetoric itself is out of scope for this paper. The work of many leading scholars have provided analyses of how rhetoric functions both in government and in opposition, as individuals, and how it can and does relate to political science more broadly. For this paper, rhetoric shall be used to draw upon key dynamics within the coalition, how the partners inter-relate ideologically, and the potential importance of rhetoric in ensuring governing longevity.

This paper also treats the coalition parties as separate ideological entities. Despite sharing a core advocacy of ideological individualism, it is appropriate given the distinctive historical narratives of both. Each showcased differing policy positions prior to the formation of the coalition government, thus their shifting ideological construction is relevant.

This paper will argue that through carefully balanced rhetoric the coalition government is able to appease the remnants of social democracy within the Liberals whilst simultaneously adopting policy positions which only the most dogmatic neoliberal dare dream of in the 1980s. Both are tied to the rhetoric of modernisation and progress, enabling the advancement of a new oxymoron in British Politics, that of *progressive neoliberalism*.

The Unifying Rhetoric.

Ideological rhetoric enables each wing of the coalition to claim a degree of ownership for scraps of policies which appear to validate their chosen position within the leviathan. “We're all in this together” could be used as a characterisation of the coalition as well as the call to arms Cameron seeks to inject upon the country. Each Party in the coalition claims a distinctive ideological heritage rooted in economic and political theory, raising the question what could possibly unite the two parties?

Much has divided the coalition partners historically – Europe, social morality, environmental policy – yet a unifying objective over-rides such divisions. Such is the strength of this unifying objective, that it is able to cast aside deeply felt ideological positions dating back decades on each side. Such is the perceived importance of the unifying objective, that it places the potential electoral success of the junior partner in significant jeopardy, seen by the Liberal elite as a price worth paying.

This greater good, which has bound these two parties together, is the ongoing attempt to locate the sole responsibility for the global recession at the door of the Labour Party. To blame the Labour Party for excessive social spending and irresponsible governance, each aim to garner electoral traction. The Liberals see this as their chance to demonstrate governing competence, respectability, and a hope to make the same breakthrough as Labour in the 1940s. For the Tories, their return to power without the baggage of critique and a legitimising emphasis on the national interest ensures they are able to implement ideological policies advancing economic liberalism.

Both parties of government, therefore craft their rhetoric around this justification, allowing the ideological paradoxes to coexist with each other for mutual benefit. The national interest is, broadly defined, economic recovery through austerity. This unifying

objective over-rides other ideological concerns because achieving economic success was the legitimising basis upon which the coalition was born. To abdicate it for any other ideological cause would be seen to renounce its own existence, to remove its *raison d'être*, and to accept economic defeat. Therefore, this unifying objective can not be underestimated in terms of value for the quad within the coalition; it is, after all, why the coalition exists.

As party leaders, the rhetoric of both David Cameron and Nick Clegg has the potential to span the full ideological ground of both parties. A government which both Charles Kennedy and Philip Davis support implies the need for a rhetorical form that can appeal across the ideological extremes. In addition, given the media is quick to perpetuate divisions as evidence of governing degeneration, the importance of restating the coalitions unifying objective is vital. For example, the changes to tuition fees not only forced the Liberal Democrats to reverse on a clear pledge, but to in fact support the opposite policy. Equally, David Cameron's recent position on Europe conflicts sharply with social democratic progressivism, yet Cameron's position subsequently garnered supportive rhetoric from Clegg given the overarching national interest narrative. Both were legitimised as being in the national interest, to safeguard economic growth, whilst also to appealing to fairness. This demonstrates that individual ideological tendencies have given way to the economic growth as the key measure for coalition success.

The Ideological Construction of the Coalition Conservatives.

In order to successfully locate the rhetoric of the coalition government into an ideological categorisation, it is necessary to first evaluate its eclecticism. It is important to remember that both parties deploy rhetoric likely to convince their core supporters that their ideological heritage remains firm. For example, taking the lowest earners out

of tax, banking reform, and protecting the environment are seen as positions which the junior partner seeks to claim as their own, whilst economic recovery, liberalisation of education provision, Health Service liberalisation, and social morality *vis-a-vis* post-riots analysis of the 'sick' parts of society are seen as positions the Conservatives claim. The fact both are ultimately accountable to the electorate for all the policies of the government does not prevent them deploying rhetoric likely to appeal to their ideological demographic. Critics such as Owen Jones argue, however that far from being the tamers of the Conservatives, they are instead the enablers, both bound together with similar anti-collective objectives. It is important to remember that a coalition is, by its very definition, a fusion of counter-positions which are seemingly – from the outside – incompatible. The compatibility between the two parties, however, can be found in their ideological individualism.

The old concept of One Nation Conservatism has become something of a badge for Conservative elites to wear in order to demonstrate their post-Thatcher credentials, even though some reforms – such as opening up the NHS to 49% of private provision and deconstruction of the comprehensive education system – are policies which the Thatcher government would consider appealing but electorally damaging. Thus, we should ask whether both the One Nation and Thatcherite traditions have given way to a renaissance of Traditional Conservatism. This form of Traditional Conservative roots their positions in nineteenth century notions of nationhood, a belief in Britain as one state, one British identity, one concept of morality, one economic ideology. This form of Conservative individualism eschews a role for the state beyond maintaining the established legal and moral order, manifest partly in the twenty-first century through the Big Society.

Importantly, the neoliberal free market philosophy of Thatcherism casts a shadow beyond its own ideological category. Indeed, such has been the consolidation of free market liberalism that it has extended beyond the fringe faction of extremists such as Keith Joseph in the 1960s to now include many within the Conservative Party, sections of the Labour Party, and the Liberal Democrats. Although challenged by economic failures, the philosophy of economic and social individualism remains strong across the political parties. This expansion is important to understanding the decline of collectivism and social democratic values in the post-Thatcher period.

Yet, acknowledging the potential unpopularity within the Downsian centre ground of the electorate, deployed Conservative rhetoric aims to demonstrate *moderation*. The rhetoric of confrontation has been subsumed by a more conciliatory language that implies an inclusive and socially aware policy framework. This rhetorical construction advances policies likely to favour such institutions as the City of London whilst reducing benefits for those with disabilities. Such is the significance of this form of coalition rhetoric that it can deploy convincing positions which the post-Thatcher electorate considers moderate whilst pursuing policies that are ideologically to the right of that administration.

Also tied to economic individualism is personal morality. The modern Conservative libertarian looks to the liberalism of old for inspiration, rooting their rhetoric in moral individualism. Moral individualism carries with it an implicit understanding that collectivism and state-led social welfare is inversely *immoral* and that those lacking an individual drive for volunteering may lack moral fibre.

The implication of immorality for those who do not engage with individual action

carries with it a judgementalism that has roots in classical concepts of the morally deserving and undeserving. This again connects the rhetoric of the coalition to nineteenth century social attitudes.

This introduction of morality into Conservative rhetoric produces a value subjectivism that differs from each individual's personalised understanding of morality. This leaves the coalition's conception of morality open to accusations of appealing to a narrow definition of civil society.

The Big Society, a key component of coalition social reform, is legitimised as a reorientation towards philanthropy and individualism. It must be noted, however the state would adopt simply an underwriting role for providing funds to charity organisations to provide social services. The state is no longer the *provider* of socially necessary services, rather it would be an administrator. To justify such a shift, those advocating the Big Society argue the 'use the state [is] to help stimulate social action, helping social enterprises to deliver public services and training new community organisers to help achieve [the] ambition of every adult citizen being a member of an active neighbourhood group'.

Morality, therefore is highly important in understanding the rhetoric of the Conservatives in government. Indeed, aspects of such rhetoric tends towards an overtly Christian character, with figures such as Michael Gove actively adopting positions likely to promote an advancement of the established Church in schools, underpinning a growing re-emergence of established individual morality.

Also under the rhetoric of Christian morality, Cameron has argued the beliefs of

Christians hold value across the belief spectrum of all individuals, both religious and secular. This implies a belief in God is not a requirement for adopting comparable moral positions enabling the conclusion to emerge of moral universalism. This would result in a reversal of social progress, and a return to a Christian domestic concept. Such a position leads to the conclusion the dominant party in the coalition is following a harder interpretation of Thatcherite thinking, linked back to an idealised conception of a pre-progressive era. The Conservative's, therefore place moral individualism at the core of their coalition rhetoric.

The Ideological Construction of the Coalition Liberal Democrats.

As well as the clear dominance of the Conservatives in the coalition, the presence of the junior partner must also be considered. The Liberal Democrats have joined the Conservative's in government, believing the rhetoric of a moderating influence justifies participation in an ideologically right wing government. The Liberals seek to downplay the Thatcherite elements of government policy by emphasising this moderating element, paradoxically enabling more neoliberal policies to garner credence by diverting attention. Further countering the position of moderation is the view that the Liberal Democrats are enabling an ideologically Thatcherite government to function by providing numerical support in the Commons. By providing such support, the Conservatives are able to use the Liberals as ideological protection from progressive attacks, enabling the conclusion that the liberals are less effective at moderating and are in fact more effective as the enablers.

Clegg's rhetoric highlights areas of policy impact which he argues has garnered policy success. Such areas include changes to the NHS Bill and low paid taxation, which he uses to construct a justification of support for subsequently un-progressive positions on

tuition fees, the public sector, and the expansion of and subsequent reorientation of New Labour's academies towards becoming *de facto* independent state schools *vis-a-vis* Free Schools.

Moreover, the self-imposed belief of the Liberal Democrats that their influence of moderation upon the Conservatives is a one way road may be imprecise. Indeed, the inverse has greater validity. The impact of a coalition with the Conservatives has bound the Liberal Democrats to a policy framework that can hardly be called social democratic. For the social democrats, an egalitarian education system and a progressive relationship with the European Union are central elements of the ideology, whilst for the Traditional Conservatives such positions are contentious. Therefore, for the Liberal Democrats, the rhetoric of moderation is vital, yet the reality appears to subvert this, with the actual impact of the Liberal Democrats being limited to providing cover for an ideologically neoliberal and socially conservative government.

Little research has been conducted upon the Liberal Democrats ideological composition as much of the existing literature has centred around the Labour or Conservative parties respectively. However, the existing research does indicate an ideological splinter within the Liberal Democrats along two key evident lines. These are the social democratic liberals, to which Charles Kennedy and Menzies Campbell can arguably be described, and also the Orange Book liberals, a relatively new group within the Party who are seeking a post-Thatcher, post-socialist ideological revolution – in its most literal sense – towards classic nineteenth century liberalism. If successful, then the continuing impact of the Social Democratic old guard of 1988 is in decline, with classic liberal philosophies re-emerging. Combined with the Traditional Conservatives, a post-progressive modernity appears to be ascending which showcases the coalition's

ideological harmony around non-state social and economic orthodoxies.

With regards to the Orange Book itself, Vince Cable, Chris Huhne, and Nick Clegg each contributed chapters on Liberal Economics and Social Justice, Global Governance, and a Liberal Europe. The Orange Book, a product of the CentreForum under Paul Marshall and highly influenced by David Laws, was seen as a necessary restating of classic liberalism in the post-collectivist world. This demonstrates that the lifeboat liberalism had found on the left was no longer necessary, and that the liberal heritage of the nineteenth century was able to re-embrace the free market. This has become the foundation of Liberal Democratic rhetoric.

In addition to the Orange Book, the thinktank Policy Exchange – described by the Independent as “centre-right progressives with big ministerial punch” - were seen by Liberal elites to be producing recommendations for reform that were located in individual responsibility. Ultimately, the recommendations of both were to look beyond the state and towards greater choice in health and education, to bring in businesses, philanthropists, companies, charities, and faith groups in order to deconstruct the role of the state, leading to the deliberate creation of variance and the inequality of provision. Seen as enabling progressive reform by some, the rhetoric deployed aims to draw out potential benefits to consumers rather than the impact on delivery. For example, “failing schools would be left to fail” in order to enable other schools to succeed, entirely disregarding the impact upon the staff and pupils of such a failing school.

The end of social democratic liberalism within the Liberal Democratic party has also garnered credence by the perception of overspending by New Labour, to the end of a clear left / right ideological debate, and to the narrative of economic decline

necessitating a national, unifying approach to economic management. This narrative has put the state firmly out of favour with the centre ground of the electorate, enabling the Orange Book liberals to locate their rhetoric in progressive neoliberalism.

As a result of this ideological shift, the Liberals are able to occupy the ground vacated by the One Nation Conservative tradition, and even to straggle elements of neoliberal conservatism. Consequently, it must be concluded that the rhetoric of the coalition reaches a point of ideological convergence, located on the centre-right.

Conclusion.

To begin to conclude, the relationship between the two coalition parties and the balancing of progressive neoliberal rhetoric between these ideological positions will ensure the coalition runs to term. For the Liberal Democrat's, however, this could prove problematic should the numerical dynamic at the 2015 election result lead to Labour being largest party without a commanding majority. By engaging with the conservative agenda so closely, the rhetoric of liberal individualism has the potential to undermine a future coalition with the Labour Party.

To understand the success of the coalition, it is vital to recognise the role of chosen rhetoric. It is the glue which holds the coalition together. This glue revolves around the central unifying rhetoric of deficit reduction. This objective over-rides other key ideological commitments, such as the Liberal Democrat's promises regarding tuition fees or the Conservative's green credentials. This is because deficit reduction is the core objective of the coalition; it legitimises its existence, it legitimises its objectives. Therefore, carefully crafted rhetoric located around the national interest is key to effective coalition governance.

Ideologically, the convergence between the two is less unexpected when considered against the backdrop of ideological changes in the Liberal Democrats. The decline of social democratic dominance, the emergence of classic liberalism, and the perception of moderation within the Conservative Party since 2005 created an alignment opportunity enabling both parties to enter government with compatible policy positions. The coalition can not be simply viewed as only a mathematical necessity based on the result of the 2010 election, but also between these philosophically individualistic parties having compatible ideological positions making joint rhetoric not only a possibility but rather an inevitability.

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