

LSE Government Department

The HotSeat Videocast

Professor Paul Kelly discussing the affinity of Liberalism and Conservatism in light of the UK Coalition Government.
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Alex Page : Liberalism and Conservatism are two of Britain's most important political ideologies. Hi, I'm Alex Page and welcome to the HotSeat. Today with us to discuss the relationship between liberalism and conservatism in light of the recent government coalition is Professor Paul Kelly. Hi Paul.

Professor Paul Kelly : Nice to see you.

Alex Page : Since the election in May, the coalition government has run much smoother than many commentators would have imagined. Does this suggest a stronger affinity between liberalism and conservatism than was previously imagined.

Professor Paul Kelly : There's clearly something very interesting going on between the two parties. If one thinks back to 2007 when Cameron was starting to make his pitch, in the long run up to the election, he announced that he saw himself as a liberal conservative. That may mean that he was just positioning himself to attract conservative support but given the later coalition it looks like there was some interesting convergence between the conservative party and the liberal party. The level of ideologies; what does that indicate? Well, I think you can see some affinities between Cameron's brand of conservatism, at least that which he's trying to impose on his party to bring it nearer to the centre ground, and what's being done by Clegg and what we'll call the orange book and the orange book liberals, after the famous 2004 orange book which saw a slight shift in the liberal party from being a social liberal, quasi social democratic centre-left party to one that was much more centrist. So, in a way, you had an indication of what might happen in the coalition long before the election and some of that seems to have come together in the ease with which the two parties seem, at least until quite recently, to have slotted together in government.

Alex Page : So do you see this as an ideological shift in the conservative or liberal parties or is this just political positioning by David Cameron and Nick Clegg?

Professor Paul Kelly : Well, when one's looking at political parties and political leaders, positioning is always something. But you're looking at the terrain on which they do the positioning. Now, one way of seeing that is to say that liberalism is both the ideology of a party but also, in some sense, the general ideological terrain on which all parties position themselves. So if you think of what Blair did and what new Labour did toward the end, they wanted to distance themselves from being the left liberals so they were tough on civil liberties issues and so on. Cameron seems to have gone a little bit the other way. I'd say he's shifting toward the centrist position from a more traditionalist, conservative, strong state but tough on crime, tough on immigration, law and order, do as you're told and also a kind of moral conservatism which is traditionalist values and so on; that seems to have gone. Now, what I would say is what you see with those two parties is they are moving about on this liberal terrain so liberalism is a backdrop and conservatism is a positioning on that liberal terrain and what Cameron is trying to do is say we're more to the centre bit, so we're more liberal conservative than right conservative. And that fits well with the ideology of conservatism which is much more pragmatic so it accepts what's around, decides it has to conserve that and builds its agenda around the policies that fit with the

terrain that it's given. The last fifty years has seen significant liberalisation in British public life; I suspect that's what lots of conservatives think they ought to conserve.

Alex Page : Recently, opposition leader, Ed Miliband, has called David Cameron a child of Thatcher and, once again, the streets of Westminster echo with the calls of Tory scum. Has the conservative party really changed?

Professor Paul Kelly : Well, it's very easy to think of this as just a re-run of what happened in the 80's. Obviously, that provides us with a kind of discourse. Thatcher, in a way, didn't actually roll back the state that much. She did fairly iconic things like privatise national industries and so on. What the current government is doing, the coalition government, is a lot more radical in the sense that, although it is doing it as a response to a financial crisis and so on, it is threatening to shrink the state significantly, that seems to be the policy goal. Now is that just Thatcherism coming through under this nice liberal face of David Cameron? Possibly, but also remember that's what the orange book liberals were concerned with. Their view was that the state had grown to the size it could be and remember, this is 2004. So when we have the full effect of the cuts, we're going to have a shrinking of the state to what it was in 2008 which is somewhat bigger than it was in 2004 so arguably this is what they wanted. Much more targeting in terms of what the welfare state should do and withdrawing from things that it shouldn't do. So it's easy to think of this is the poll tax again, this is the red in tooth and claw conservatism but actually it's the sort of orange book conservatism, if you like, that comes from the coalition's policies and how it will turn out, of course, who knows? We see a lot of uproar over the student tuition fees and so on which is an interesting attack on the middle class; which is what the orange book liberals were concerned with, you know shifting benefits away from the ever benefit hungry middle classes. It's not obvious that this is Thatcherism. Thatcher was very cautious about protecting her middle class base; she was quite happy to hit the poor and the areas that were dependent on old nationalised industries like coal and steel. She was very protective of things like universal benefits for the middle class which is precisely what the current government are going for. So radical certainly and maybe tough in its radicalism; not quite sure that this is a sort of re-run of the early to mid-eighties.

Alex Page : Alright, thank you Paul. You are off the HotSeat. And thank you and see you next month for the next edition of the HotSeat.