

Kirsty Williams – A Road Map to 2016

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Coalition negotiations

Now, five years ago in a back garden in Westminster, there was a Scot, an Irishman, and a Turk – well a woman from Llanelli.

Honestly, this isn't a joke though, it's a true story.

Me, Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy.

It was two days after the 2010 general election, and we were in Local Government House on Smith Square.

The three of us gathered outside during a break in a joint meeting of the Lib Dem parliamentary parties.

I think it's fair to say that each of us three share – or rather sadly now I should say shared – a similar place on the political spectrum in the party. Sure, we shared an excitement about the opportunities ahead for enacting Liberal Democrat policies.

But that excitement was tempered by the grim parliamentary reality that only a deal with the Conservatives had the numbers to succeed.

Out in the back garden, the three of us debated our misgivings. We'd each fought the Tories all our lives – in the Highlands, in the West Country and in Powys.

We saw our Party, and our Party's history, as being a considerable distance from conservatism on the political spectrum. Reforming politics, shaped by a passion for social justice were – and are – what drove us; comfortable in our own skin as the contemporary component of a radical Liberal tradition.

But as we know, events were moving quickly.

In fact, Paddy made the defining intervention in favour of the coalition at the following meeting

Charles spoke against the deal – speaking about a lifetime against vested interests and the forces of Conservatism.

Following our experience in Wales, I took what I believe to be a pragmatic approach. In 2007, my party wasn't rewarded by voters for avoiding coalition. This time I believe we had to take the bull by the horns. Otherwise voters would wonder what's the point in ever voting for us.

But from the off, there was a growing sense of foreboding. It never felt good, but the decision was dictated by the state of the economy and the parliamentary arithmetic. And on both of these points Labour had, unequivocally, come up short and been punished by the electorate.

So, that's how I went from back garden trepidation, with two of my colleagues to sharing claustrophobic photo calls in the Senedd with Cheryl Gillan...

All in a matter of days!

The Coalition – what went wrong

Zhou Enlai, the eminent Chinese statesman, famously remarked that it was *"too early to say"* when he was asked in 1972 to judge the impact of the French Revolution.

To be fair, he was probably referring to the Paris uprisings of 1968 rather than 1789. Yet still, the myth of the far sighted diplomat remains powerful in the retelling of the story.

We are now barely two months on from the General Election. My party experienced a devastating election result. That's an undisputed fact. I believe it is still far too soon to make a full judgement on our record in Government. However, I hope you know me well enough to know that I don't think it's too early to make some observations!

You might expect me to say that I come to bury the Coalition, not to praise it – but that wouldn't be the considered response, and in any case, the voters of Britain have beaten me to it.

Let me pick out some key themes that may help explain my thinking. Trust, Tories and Teams

In short:

- We lost a colossal amount of trust over tuition fees. Not only did we break our pledge, but it's worse than that, it never even looked like we fought to keep it. That was wrong, it was a mistake of the highest order and one for which we were never forgiven. It didn't matter that in many ways the new policy was better for poorer students. Nor that the issue was devolved. And it didn't matter that all Welsh Lib Dem MPs kept their pledge: It was a political disaster. At that moment, for the people who were already sceptical, this was all the confirmation they needed. Details no longer mattered, people simply stopped listening.
- The Tories, frankly, were better prepared back in 2010, constructed a more potent narrative, and were brilliant at assimilating Lib Dem policies and boxing us in. Critically, they owned the economic narrative and made the political weather. We got the grief when things went wrong and never the credit for the good stuff. I lost count the number of times people said they liked the Coalition, which was why they would vote Tory this time rather than us.
- And let us be in no doubt, although we were dealt a difficult hand, we could have handled it better. Obsessed with showing that coalition could work and that we could take 'tough decisions' we lost our own focus, our own identity, forgot to take ownership of our achievements until it was too late – it just came across as 'Team Coalition', rather than 'Team Lib Dem'. From the Rose Garden on, we were swallowed up.

And more than that – and maybe in the end this was the biggest self-inflicted wound – we appeared to the electorate to leap from a firm and hard fought anchorage in one part of UK politics to another without so much as a by-your-leave.

We had secured the support of growing numbers of people across the UK under successive leaderships of Grimond, Ashdown, Kennedy and others by projecting our progressive, reforming and radical politics.

To say that it was disorienting for those who had supported us when we formed the coalition with the Tories for five years is perhaps one of the great understatements of the last parliament.

Sometimes, even from within, it felt like we were struggling to locate a compass to navigate our way through with our values unscathed. On May 8th we found out that a considerable number of those who had previously supported us thought we'd lost our way.

And yes, I worried about these developments over the course of the Coalition. At times, I was frustrated, even angry. And the regular phone calls with the Deputy Prime Minister weren't always comfortable.

I fought my arguments from within and worked to ensure that the Welsh Liberal Democrats were the voice of Wales within the coalition.

Achievements

To some extent that did work. The Welsh Liberal Democrats used our influence and certainly made a difference. I'm yet to see any evidence that was the case with the Tories in the Assembly.

Regional Pay is an obvious example. Plans to pay public sector workers less in Wales were originally hidden in one of George Osborne's budgets. It would seem that our outnumbered Ministers didn't know much about it.

I'm not going to lie – I first had to kick off within my own party. I made my views clear and as the statements about regional pay from Vince, Danny and Nick grew more sceptical, we took a motion to our UK party conference to make the party's position crystal clear.

The motion passed, our Ministers listened – the policy was stopped. I honestly believe that without the Welsh Lib Dems, amongst others, campaigning and lobbying on this issue – Welsh workers would now be paid less.

And then there is the Silk Commission, which led to the Wales Bill and the St David's Day announcement.

Let be entirely clear: the Silk Commission was in the Coalition Agreement because Welsh Liberal Democrats insisted on it. That's the only reason.

We may as well now be clear that with the exception of fixed term parliaments, devolution was the only part of the constitutional reform agenda that the coalition made real progress on.

Tax powers, bowering powers and a more accountable Welsh Government – that's not bad for a party of just five Assembly Members and up against devo-sceptic Secretaries of State such as David Jones!

Lessons from coalition to take forward

So, what lessons do I take from our experience in the Coalition Government?

The fact is that the Liberal Democrats decision to form a coalition was the right thing to do for the country, but in many ways wrong for the party.

So was it the wrong thing to do? Will I rule my party out of any future coalitions in Wales? No I will not. But lessons must be learnt.

I will not rule out working with a particular party. Despite my views expressed earlier on conservatism, I have no overarching wish to pledge to the people of Wales before an election that they can only live under a Labour First Minister.

However, the coalition experience at Westminster has meant that what was an already very high bar, has just been raised further.

Mark my words: the Welsh Liberal Democrats would only ever consider entering Government if we were 100% satisfied with the agreement we secured. We would also only strike a deal if it was entirely clear what policies we had secured.

And if I may add one further point on this, as the Welsh party has shown: it is entirely possible to achieve your policies, your goals, your values without entering Government.

More money for schools, stopping work on the M4, reduced bus fares for young people, the Health Technology Fund, the list goes on. With just five AMs, and outside of Government, we have a proud record in the Assembly. There is every chance similar opportunities might come again. A vote for the Welsh Liberal Democrats is a clear vote for positive Welsh Liberal Democrat policies.

Restraining Tories not enough

During the General Election, it became clear me that people might have known what we stopped, but not what we achieved.

Yes, over those five years we did restrain some of their worst narrow-interest, anti Europe, anti green, nasty party instincts.

But I didn't come into politics to mitigate the Tories. When I was growing up in Llanelli my political awakening didn't coincide with thinking "if only someone could give Margaret Thatcher a bit more heart".

I didn't campaign for devolution and home rule because those Tory Governor Generals they kept sending over the bridge were just a little misplaced.

And I'm proud to be a foot soldier in the long battle between radicals and Tories that's been fought in Powys in particular for generations.

Those differences and debates still matter. And we need to make that clear, and to win our case.

But we will have to persuade before we can prevail. And that needs a clear, distinctive and coherent message.

And of course we've been here before: in a letter to Margaret in Criccieth during the "*difficult and baffling*" 1922 campaign (as he described it), Lloyd George was pretty blunt about his ultimate objective: "*My chief aim is to keep the Tory numbers down*".

That's a tradition that's echoed down the ages for progressives of all stripes in Wales – but one that started with **us**.

However, it cannot, and should not, define us alone – there's already too much of that lazy and complacent self-identity in the Senedd.

Believing that that Wales is exceptional, that Wales is just naturally centre-left, that Wales will always reject Tory politics

You just have to look at Scandinavia to see how those kind of truths get challenged and realities change.

Closer to home in May - just across the Loughor Bridge from where I grew up, Gower got its first ever non Liberal or Labour MP. First ever. Communities such as Gorseinon, Pontarddulais and Clydach represented by a Conservative.

In my patch, it's with considerable regret that my constituents in Ystradgynlais for example now no longer have a Welsh Lib Dem MP.

So yes, 2015 holds lessons for my party but I believe it poses challenges for our nation as a whole.

Wales is changing. We need to look at Wales not as it used to be, or as if it's already a part of a mythical Scandinavia where economic prosperity, superb public services and social justice are part and parcel of daily life

For progressives, some things need to be said, met head on.

It is not, in the end, a triumph of radical politics if a pre-requisite of that radicalism is our own country continuing to be one of the poorest parts of the UK

Nor is it self-evident that Wales will always somehow be the radical gift that keeps on giving. Look at the combined votes of the two right wing parties in May and there is surely a message there.

I still believe in Welsh solutions for Welsh problems.

But far too often it seems that Welsh solutions at best lack impact, but at worst often exacerbate, Welsh problems. And no amount of made in Wales strategies, statements or summits are seen to be providing answers.

Even when a Welsh government keeps tuition fees low – there is still a huge gap in educational attainment between our less well-off communities and our richer neighbourhoods.

Although prescriptions are free – you can't afford to fall ill on the weekend, or be in need of a speedy ambulance response.

Even as the Welsh Government just this week attacked the UK Government for redefining child poverty, nobody seriously expects them to meet their own target to abolish child poverty by 2020

There is a constant obsession with plans, but a complete lack of delivery and follow through.

Reset dial

Now, I have spent a lot of this speech looking back, but now it's time to look forward.

I am proud of the many Liberal Democrat achievements we secured in Westminster: tax changes, pension reform, same-sex marriage, better childcare, a greener Britain – the list goes on.

But I will be blunt: today I want to draw a line under the last five years

Being free from the shackles of coalition has given me, if I'm honest, a strong sense of liberation

A better chance to help mould my party into where I believe we should go next

I want to reset the dial for the Welsh Liberal Democrats.

Already we have seen a huge jump in membership as many new members rush to ensure the voice of liberalism is heard

Over the coming months, I will be outlining in a series of speeches my roadmap to rebuild our party

I remain convinced by Keynes's maxim that: "The political problem of mankind is to combine three things: economic efficiency, social justice and individual liberty."

There may be individuals in other parties that would subscribe to these three principles. But I defy you to name another party that can adequately fight for all of these ideals. The marrying of these three things is something I believe only the Welsh Liberal Democrats can offer.

My plan for the next year is as follows:

Firstly, we will strengthen our identity: which is as Welsh, as it is liberal.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats feel strong sense of national identity. We must communicate that.

We have the deepest roots of any Welsh political party, yet we embrace the Wales of today.

For as long as there has been popular politics in Wales there have been liberals – in every single part of part of Wales. Welsh Liberals have been in the frontline of progressive reform in Wales for over 150 years and we are determined we will continue to be so.

And progressive reform is so desperately needed. I am so hugely proud of this great nation of ours, but we have been held back for too long

We must make the best of our strengths: our culture, our resources, and most of all, our people

We will speak for all of Wales, no matter who you are or where you live:

Rural - urban, north - south, monolingual - bilingual, young - old, rich or poor – everyone must be play an equal part of rebuilding and revitalising our great nation, ensuring Wales reaches its potential.

This vision for Wales is relentlessly positive. A vision without the poison of narrow nationalism. A vision that doesn't think economic poverty is inevitable. A vision that doesn't blame Westminster for all its woes.

An open, tolerant Wales, where every person has the freedom and opportunity to achieve their full potential

A uniting vision of a self-confident nation, standing on its own two feet, in the United Kingdom and Europe

Of course, it is also our Liberal values that set us out from all the rest.

I joined the Liberal Party at the age of 15 in Llanelli. You have to be brave to do that! But then you have to be brave to be a liberal full stop

You have to be confident enough to say that immigration has hugely benefited our great nation

Confident enough to say you believe in rehabilitation more than you believe in imprisonment

Confident enough to say you believe people shouldn't be locked up for becoming dependent on harmful drugs

The Human Rights Act, the green agenda, mental health – we fight for the underdog, we fight for what is right, leading on the issues that no-one else will.

There are people across the whole of Wales who feel the same as us - and already they are joining our liberal family.

However, we of course must be more than just Welsh and liberal.

The Assembly election will be relentlessly focused on public service delivery, and I very much welcome that. There is nothing progressive about poor public services – which is exactly what 17 years of Labour will have left us with.

For too long in Wales, parties have either been too timid to find major solutions, or have done the opposite - offering lofty statements of intent with no follow-through or delivery.

Over the coming months, the Welsh Liberal Democrats will be unveiling people-focused policies.

Policies that show we are on the side of the pupil, the parent, the patients. We **will** win the battle of ideas on public services.

And finally, we will focus on 'opportunity'. Our Pupil Premium, that additional money for our schools, shows our commitment to fairness and equal opportunity.

Over the coming months, we'll build on this, unveiling our vision for all of Wales:

a pro-enterprise vision that strengthens our economy and creates wealth,

a vision that helps people own their home,

a vision that shows we will help people get on in life

Despite a seemingly crowded political battlefield, the opportunity is there as none of the other parties are offering solutions to Wales' problems:

Who, if not the Welsh Liberal Democrats, can offer the clear-headed solutions for small business support and national economic development;

Who, if not the Welsh Liberal Democrats, can offer tackle the educational inequality and our creaking health service; and

Who, if not the Welsh Liberal Democrats, can offer the move away from an unquestioning political culture that is all promotions, prohibition and producer-interest.

Above all:

Who, if not the Welsh Liberal Democrats, can offer **all** of the above?

We have a Welsh Labour Government out of ideas and out of steam. Come next May it will have been in power for 17 years, but still as far away from delivering the more prosperous Wales with first class public services that we were offered.

We have Plaid, who think the answer to Wales' problems is mirroring the politics of people like Jeremy Corbyn, sprinkled with what Dafydd Elis-Thomas would no doubt describe as divisive sectarianism.

And we have a Tory party that spews bile about the NHS, but offers nothing more. That can only talk money, rather than ideas. That wants to head further to the right, with savage cuts to education and floating policies like charging for healthcare.

And then we have the Welsh Liberal Democrats:

It will be clear from my observations at the start of this speech that we have a real job of work to do. There are truths that we have to speak to ourselves and I have done that today.

But others before me have faced tough times and, as I will do, they faced them with liberal values – Welsh Liberal Democrat values – front and centre of their fight.

We are a party intent on spending the next year unashamedly clear on our liberal message,

A party that knows that in Wales, as anywhere, greater wealth creation is a precondition for distributing that wealth.

A party that is showing we have the fresh ideas to improve public services

A party whose mission is to ensure everyone reaches their potential.

Conclusion

I don't think we can rely on others to tell the truths that Wales needs. To deliver clear solutions that combine Keynes' economic efficiency, social justice **and** individual liberty. We are at a crossroads as a democracy, as an economy and as a society.

Lloyd George, on accepting the offer to be Prime Minister said to that other woman in his life, Frances Stevenson, *"I'm not at all sure that I can do it. It is a very big task. I wonder if I can do it."*

I believe that Wales **can** do it. Wales **can** meet those three problems. And the Welsh Liberal Democrats will help make it happen.

Thanks for listening, and let's discuss more during questions. **END**