

The Governance Foundation



**The Black Widow Coalition: Liberal Democrat
Vulnerability to their Conservative Partners**

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Vince Cable's decision to raise university tuition fees and the Liberal Democrat decision to turn its back on its election promise to the National Union of Students to oppose any such rise, may cost MPs such as Colchester's Bob Russell and Leeds North West's Greg Mulholland their seats in the next General Election. For the Party as a whole, however, the student vote may turn out to be a minor issue. If Nick Clegg does not win the argument in favour of voting reform in the forthcoming referendum, the LibDems are in danger of being swallowed up by their Conservative coalition partners at the next election.

In anticipation of the cuts from the spending review, the Liberal Democrats are nervous about how their voters will respond to their alliance with the Tories, and the Labour Party expects to benefit from the disillusionment of those who voted LibDem in 2010. However, it is their Conservative coalition partners who stand to gain most from any collapse in Liberal Democrat support.

According to an Ipsos MORI poll in September, only 15% of voters would vote for the Liberal Democrats now, which is 9 points lower than at the general election and a loss of 37.5% of their vote. Of their remaining supporters, 40% are dissatisfied with the way the Government is running the country and 43% are fearful of what the Government is about to do in the spending review and beyond.

University students aside, in these circumstances the LibDems are vulnerable to two types of defectors: natural Labour voters who voted tactically for them in seats where the Labour Party had no realistic chance of winning and traditional LibDem supporters who are deeply disappointed by their party's support for the Tories.

In constituencies where ***Conservatives won and the LibDems came a close second***, where they might have harboured hopes of future victories, the LibDems now have no possibility of winning in 2015. In most of these seats, the Labour Party picked up less than 10% of the vote and if Labour's traditional supporters conclude that there is no logical reason for tactical voting, on the grounds that voting LibDem gets you a Tory Government anyway, this alone will make these seat unwinnable for the LibDems. If we consider what is likely to happen with disillusioned long-standing LibDem voters and hard-pressed middle-class Tory voters who have no alternative place to go, the outcome is likely to be a decline in turnout, a reduction in the vote for both Conservative and Liberal Democratic Parties, and increased majorities for the Conservative Party in these constituencies.

In seats that the ***LibDems won in 2010 where the Conservatives came second***, the future is even darker for the LibDems. We do not know how many of their lost voters are traditional LibDem voters or Labour tactical voters, but the desertion of either type will benefit the Conservatives most. If the LibDems lose 4,000 votes in these seats, they will lose 17 constituencies to the Tories (Table 1). In only three of these seats did the Labour Party gain more than 10% of the vote, so there is reason to believe the LibDems could not hold them

without tactical voting. If MPs with majorities of up to 6,000 are vulnerable, which is indeed possible in the light of recent opinion polls, 23 seats could be lost.

We can make a number of assumptions about the likely level of LibDem support at the next election but, for the sake of argument, let's assume that the LibDems claw back one third of the support they have lost according to recent polls. This means that by the time of the next election they will have lost 25% of their support since 2010. In these circumstances, if the Conservatives pick up only 5% of LibDem votes in constituencies where the Tories were second in 2010, the Conservative Party will gain 27 of 38 seats. If Conservatives pick up 10% of LibDem votes, the Tories will gain 30 seats (Table 2).

In constituencies **where the Labour Party came second to the LibDems**, there are eight seats that are vulnerable to Labour if a 4,000 majority is needed to survive at the next election and 11 seats that could fall if majorities of 6,000 are needed. If we assume a loss of 25% in their vote and if Labour draws 5% of the LibDem 2010 vote, the Labour Party could gain 10 of 17 seats. If Labour take 10% of the LibDem vote, they would gain one additional seat.

In Summary, if LibDem MPs with less than 4,000 majorities are vulnerable, the LibDems would lose 25 seats at the next election, reducing their parliamentary representation to 32 MPs. Two thirds of their seats would go to their coalition partners.

Alternatively, with a 25% decline in support, a 5% swing from LibDems to Conservatives in seats where the Conservatives are second and a 5% swing to Labour in seats where Labour are second, the Liberal Democrats would lose 37 of their 57 seats. The Conservatives would gain in 73% of these parliamentary constituencies. This is well within the possibility suggested by recent polls.

Some will argue that this is an overly pessimistic perspective. At his Party's annual conference, Nick Clegg asked party members to hold their nerve, on the grounds that things will be getting better by the time the next election comes round. However, even if improvement happens, there is no guarantee that the LibDems will get credit for it. It is one thing for the Party to hold its nerve, but it may be unrealistic to expect that the voters will increase their support for it, particularly since the Conservatives will be claiming any credit that may be due.

During what should be a honeymoon period for the new Government, the LibDems find themselves on the wrong side of public sentiment. Three-quarters (75%) of those interviewed by Ipsos Mori in September felt that it was 'better to cut spending back more slowly, to reduce the impact on public services and the economy'. Less than a quarter (23%) felt it was 'important to cut spending quickly even if this means immediate job losses, because it will be better for the economy in the long term'¹. Even a majority of

¹ Ipsos Mori, poll of 1000 people, 10-12 September 2010

Conservatives feel it is better to cut spending more slowly, with only 46% of Tories supporting the Government's position.²

The LibDems have been on a 15% share of the vote before and in normal circumstances we might expect them to claw this back. However, even if there are positive economic indicators emerging by 2015, there is no certainty that the LibDems will benefit from this. The Conservatives will claim that it was the harshness of their medicine that led to the brighter future on the horizon. There may be some merit in the LibDems claiming that they softened the blow for the most disadvantaged, but this may be difficult to sustain in the face of unemployment and other statistics.

There is no getting away from the fact that the party is still most vulnerable in seats where the Tories are lying a close second behind them. Without a change to the voting system, whereby the second choices of Labour and other voters will be crucial in LibDem-Tory marginals, the future of the Liberal Democrats looks bleak.

In the above circumstances, however, most of the leadership of the Party in Parliament would survive, principally those who have been sitting round the Cabinet table. Whatever happens, it is almost certain that Clegg will survive, along with Alexander, Laws, Cable, Kennedy and Foster, but Huhne will be gone. Mulholland could survive if the students forgive his Party or consider it important that he has taken a stand against the rise in fees, but such a stand is unlikely to help Russell and others.

Where does this leave the leadership who are currently sitting in Cabinet? Will they fight on as LibDems, or will they join the Conservatives? Simon Hughes and Charles Kennedy should also survive, but for what purpose? Younger MPs who in opposition could have raised their profiles as good constituency MPs and who are unhappy with the current situation, have to remain silent out of loyalty to the Party. Or do they?

When the coalition was formed there appeared to be a consensus that it would last between a year and 18 months. It then became obvious that the leadership of each party was comfortable with the other and there were reports of the coalition parties genuinely working well together. It is now reported that the bonds between Cameron, Clegg, Osborne and Alexander have been strengthened by their common experience over the first few months in power and the consensus at the moment is that the Government will run the full term to 2015.

Some LibDem MPs will feel trapped between the need for short-term loyalty to the Party leadership, medium term considerations such as the potential loss of their employment as MPs, and the long-term attachment to liberal values that brought most of them into politics

² IPSOS Mori, Briefing to Conservative Conference, September 2010.

in the first place. Their short-term loyalty will be severely bruised by the time of the referendum in May, but most will stand firm until then.

If the referendum is lost, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that most of what would inevitably become the LibDem rump will join their coalition partners in the Conservative Party and that British Politics will return to a two-party system. The winners in the coalition experiment will undoubtedly be the Conservatives, who may have eaten their partners alive.

TABLE 1

LibDem seats held and gained in 2010

	Total Vote	Conservative	Labour	Lib Dem	SNP/PC	Other	Majority	Gain	Survivors?
Seats where the Conservatives are second									
(23 Seats vulnerable to Conservatives if a 6000 majority is needed to survive in 2015)									
(17 Seats vulnerable to Conservatives if a 4000 majority is needed to survive in 2015)									
Solihull	55129	23460	4891	23635		3143	175	y	
Dorset Mid & PN	46788	20831	2748	21100		2109	269	n	
Wells	55864	23760	4198	24560		3346	800	y	
St Austell & Newquay	47238	18877	3386	20189		4786	1312	n	
Sutton & Cheam	48508	20548	3376	22156		2428	1608	n	
St Ives	45921	17900	3751	19619		4651	1719	n	
Somerton & Frome	60616	26976	2675	28793		2172	1817	n	
Chippenham	52385	21500	3620	23970		3295	2470	n	
Berwick-upon-Tweed	38439	14116	5061	16806		2456	2690	n	
Cornwall North	46844	19531	1971	22512		2830	2981	n	
Cheadle	52512	21445	4920	24717		1430	3272	n	
Argyll & Bute	45207	10861	10274	14292	8563	1217	3431	n	
Eastbourne	52124	21223	2497	24658		3746	3435	y	
Aberdeenshire W&K	45195	13678	6159	17362	7086	910	3684	n	
Brecon & R	38845	14182	4096	17929	989	1649	3747	n	
Eastleigh	53650	21102	5153	24966		2429	3864	n	
Taunton Dean	58150	24538	2967	28531		2114	3993	n	
Torbay	49210	19048	3231	23126		3805	4078	n	Sanders
Cheltenham	52786	21739	2703	26659		1685	4920	n	Horwood
Portsmouth South	41264	13721	5640	18921		2982	5200	n	Hancock
Carshalton & W	45918	16920	4015	22180		2803	5260	n	Brake
Berwickshire R&S	49014	16555	5003	22230	4497	729	5675	n	Moore
Devon North	51321	18484	2671	24305		5861	5821	n	Harvey
Southport	43757	15683	4116	21707		2251	6024	n	Pugh
Hazel Grove	41981	14114	5234	20485		2148	6371	n	Stumell
Cambridge	50130	12829	12174	19621		5506	6729	n	Huppert
Colchester	46139	5680	15169	22151		3139	6982	n	Russell
Thornbury & Yate	48226	17916	3385	25032		1893	7116	n	Webb
Kingston & Surbiton	57111	20868	5337	28428		2478	7560	n	Davey
Lewes	50088	18401	2508	26048		3131	7647	n	Baker
Fife NE	40064	8715	6869	17763	5685	1032	9048	n	Campbell
Leeds NW	43483	11550	9132	20653		2148	9103	n	Mulholland
Norfolk North	49661	15928	2896	27554		3283	11626	n	Lamb
Bath	47086	14768	3251	26651		2416	11883	n	Foster
Twickenham	59721	20343	4583	32483		2312	12140	n	Cable
Westmorland & Lonsdale	51487	18632	1158	30896		801	12264	n	Farron
Yeovil	57160	18807	2991	31843		3519	13036	n	Laws
Sheffield Hallam	51135	12040	8228	27342		3525	15284	n	Clegg
Seats where Labour are second									
(8 seats are vulnerable to Labour if a 4000 majority is needed to survive in 2015)									
(11 seats are vulnerable to Labour if a 6000 majority is needed to survive in 2015)									
Norwich South	47551	10902	13650	13960		9039	310	y	
Bradford East	40457	10860	13272	13637		2688	365	y	
Brent Central	45324	5068	18681	20026		1549	1345	y	
Burnley	41845	6950	13114	14932		6849	1818	y	
Manchester Withington	45031	5005	18216	20110		1700	1894	n	
Dunbartonshire East	47948	7431	16367	18551	5054	545	2184	n	
Birmingham Yardley	40850	7836	13160	16162		3692	3002	n	
Edinburgh West	46447	10767	12881	16684	6115	0	3803	n	
Cardiff Central	36151	7799	10400	14976	1246	1730	4576	n	Willott
Caithness S & ER	28768	3744	7081	11907	5516	520	4826	n	Thurso
Redcar	41963	5790	13741	18955		3477	5214	y	Swales
Hornsey & Wood Green	55042	9174	18720	25595		1553	6875	n	Featherstone
Bermondsey & OS	44651	7638	13060	21590		2363	8530	n	Hughes
Inverness NB&S	47086	6278	10407	19172	8803	2426	8765	n	Alexander
Orkney & Shetland	19346	2032	2061	11989	2042	1222	9928	n	Carmichael
Bristol West	55347	10169	15227	26593		3358	11366	n	Williams
Ross, Skye & Lochaber	34838	4260	5265	18335	5263	1715	13070	n	Kennedy
Nationalists Second									
(No seats vulnerable to Nationalists)									
Gordon	48775	9111	9811	17575	10827	1451	6748	n	
Ceredigion	38258	4421	2210	19139	10815	1673	8324	n	

TABLE 2

LibDem seats vulnerable to Conservative and Labour swings

	Total Vote	Conservative	Labour	Lib Dem	SNP/PC	Other	Majority	LD lose 25% of vote	Tory + 5% swing	Tory Majority	Tory + 10% swing	Tory Majority	Tory Survivors?
LibDem Seats where the Conservatives are Second													
(23 Seats vulnerable to Conservatives if 6000 majority is needed to survive in 2015)													
(17 Seats vulnerable to Conservatives if 4000 majority is needed to survive in 2015)													
Solihull	55129	23460	4891	23635		3143	175	17726	24642	6916	25824	8097	
Dorset Mid & PN	46788	20831	2748	21100		2109	269	15825	21886	6061	22941	7116	
Wells	55864	23760	4198	24560		3346	800	18420	24988	6568	26216	7796	
St Austell & Newquay	47238	18877	3386	20189		4786	1312	15142	19886	4745	20896	5754	
Sutton & Chea m	48508	20548	3376	22156		2428	1608	16617	21656	5039	22764	6147	
St Ives	45921	17900	3751	19619		4651	1719	14714	18881	4167	19862	5148	
Somerton & Frome	60616	26976	2675	28793		2172	1817	21595	28416	6821	29855	8261	
Chippenham	52385	21500	3620	23970		3295	2470	17978	22699	4721	23897	5920	
Berwick-upon-Tweed	38439	14116	5061	16806		2456	2690	12605	14956	2352	15797	3192	
Cornwall North	46844	19531	1971	22512		2830	2981	16884	20657	3773	21782	4898	
Cheadle	52512	21445	4920	24717		1430	3272	18538	22681	4143	23917	5379	
Argyll & Bute	45207	10861	10274	14292	8563	1217	3431	10719	11576	857	12290	1571	
Eastbourne	52124	21223	2497	24658		3746	3435	18494	22456	3962	23689	5195	
Aberdeenshire W&K	45195	13678	6159	17362	7086	910	3684	13022	14546	1525	15414	2393	
Brecon & R	38845	14182	4096	17929	989	1649	3747	13447	15078	1632	15975	2528	
Eastleigh	53650	21102	5153	24966		2429	3864	18725	22350	3626	23599	4874	
Taunton Dean	58150	24538	2967	28531		2114	3993	21398	25965	4566	27391	5993	
Torbay	49210	19048	3231	23126		3805	4078	17345	20204	2860	21361	4016	
Cheltenham	52786	21739	2703	26659		1685	4920	19994	23072	3078	24405	4411	
Portsmouth South	41264	13721	5640	18921		2982	5200	14191	14667	476	15613	1422	
Carshalton & W	45918	16920	4015	22180		2803	5260	16635	18029	1394	19138	2503	
Berwickshire R&S	49014	16555	5003	22230	4497	729	5675	16673	17667	994	18778	2106	
Devon North	51321	18484	2671	24305		5861	5821	18229	19699	1471	20915	2686	
Southport	43757	15683	4116	21707		2251	6024	16280	16768	488	17854	1573	
Hazel Grove	41981	14114	5234	20485		2148	6371	15364	15138	-226	16163	799	Stumell
Cambridge	50130	12829	12174	19621		5506	6729	14716	13810	-906	14791	75	Huppert
Colchester	46139	15169	5680	22151		3139	6982	16613	16277	-337	17384	771	Russell
Thornbury & Yate	48226	17916	3385	25032		1893	7116	18774	19168	394	20419	1645	
Kingston & Surbiton	57111	20868	5337	28428		2478	7560	21321	22289	968	23711	2390	
Lewes	50088	18401	2508	26048		3131	7647	19536	19703	167	21006	1470	
Fife NE	40064	8715	6869	17763	5685	1032	9048	13322	9603	-3719	10491	-2831	Campbell
Leeds NW	43483	11550	9132	20653		2148	9103	15490	12583	-2907	13615	-1874	Mulholland
Norfolk North	49661	15928	2896	27554		3283	11626	20666	17306	-3360	18683	-1982	Lamb
Bath	47086	14768	3251	26651		2416	11883	19988	16101	-3888	17433	-2555	Foster
Twickenham	59721	20343	4583	32483		2312	12140	24362	21967	-2395	23591	-771	Cable
Westmorland & Lonsdale	51487	18632	1158	30896		801	12264	23172	20177	-2995	21722	-1450	Farron
Yeovil	57160	18807	2991	31843		3519	13036	23882	20399	-3483	21991	-1891	Laws
Sheffield Hallam	51135	12040	8228	27342		3525	15284	20507	13407	-7099	14774	-5732	Clegg
LibDem Seats where Labour are Second													
(8 seats vulnerable to labour if 4000 majority needed in 2010 to survive)													
Norwich South	47551	10902	13650	13960		9039	310	10470	14348	3878	15046	4576	
Bradford East	40457	10860	13272	13637		2688	365	10228	13954	3726	14636	4408	
Brent Central	45324	5068	18681	20026		1549	1345	15020	19682	4663	20684	5664	
Burnley	41845	6950	13114	14932		6849	1818	11199	13861	2662	14607	3408	
Manchester Withingto	45031	5005	18216	20110		1700	1894	15083	19222	4139	20227	5145	
Dunbartonshire East	47948	7431	16367	18551	5054	545	2184	13913	17295	3381	18222	4309	
Birmingham Yardley	40850	7836	13160	16162		3692	3002	12122	13968	1847	14776	2655	
Edinburgh West	46447	10767	12881	16684	6115	0	3803	12513	13715	1202	14549	2036	
Cardiff Central	36151	7799	10400	14976	1246	1730	4576	11232	11149	-83	11898	666	Willott
Caithness S & ER	28768	3744	7081	11907	5516	520	4826	8930	7676	-1254	8272	-659	Thurso
Redcar	41963	5790	13741	18955		3477	5214	14216	14689	473	15637	1420	Swales
Hornsey & Wood Gr	55042	9174	18720	25595		1553	6875	19196	20000	804	21280	2083	Featherstone
Bermondsey & OS	44651	7638	13060	21590		2363	8530	16193	14140	-2053	15219	-974	Hughes
Inverness NB&S	47086	6278	10407	19172	8803	2426	8765	14379	11366	-3013	12324	-2055	Alexander
Orkney & Shetland	19346	2032	2061	11989	2042	1222	9928	8992	2660	-6331	3260	-5732	Carmichael
Bristol West	55347	10169	15227	26593		3358	11366	19945	16557	-3388	17886	-2058	Williams
Ross, Skye & Lochaber	34838	4260	5265	18335	5263	1715	13070	13751	6182	-7570	7099	-6653	Kennedy
Nationalists Second													
(No seats vulnerable to Nationalists)													
									Nats +5% swing	Nats Majority	Nats + 10% swing	Nats Majority	
Gordon	48775	9111	9811	17575	10827	1451	6748	13181	11706	-1476	12585	-597	
Ceredigion	38258	4421	2210	19139	10815	1673	8324	14354	11772	-2582	12729	-1625	