The squeezed middle?
The Liberal Democrats in Wales and Scotland: A post-coalition reassessment
A.B. Evans
Wales Governance Centre, Cardiff University
EvansAB1@cardiff.ac.uk

Do not cite without permission.
Abstract

In the wake of the repeated electoral losses suffered by the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats in 2011 and 2012 devolved and local government elections, it is perhaps unsurprising that recent analysis has focused on the ‘toxic impact of the federal party’s coalition with the Conservative party’ on the devolved state parties electoral fortunes. Certainly this significant electoral collapse, alongside the hostility to both parties recorded in the 2011 Scottish and Welsh electoral surveys, could be said to lend credence to such a research focus.

However, this paper will argue that the real potency of the Westminster coalition has resulted from it exacerbating and exposing weaknesses that have long blighted the Liberal Democrats in Scotland and Wales. Indeed, by adopting an approach that places the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats’ current woes within a historical context, this paper will contend that such frailties highlight structural weaknesses at the very heart of the Liberal Democrats federally.
Introduction: Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats and the Coalition Government

For the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats, their recent displays at the ballot box, the 2011 Scottish and Welsh devolved elections and 2012 local government elections, have been experiences defined by the despondency of lost deposits, grim faced candidates, humiliation and an emphatic reversal of years of progress.¹

At first glance the Scottish Liberal Democrats’ fall appears the starkest, coming from a higher base at both Holyrood and local government (Black 7th May 2011 [online], Lindsay 5th May 2012 [online]). 2011’s Scottish parliamentary elections saw the party reduced to a rump presence at Holyrood, suffering huge swings and defeats in areas that they had spent years cultivating (Denver 2011: 34, Black 6th May 2011 [online]). The 2012 local elections saw the party further humbled, embarrassingly so in Edinburgh, and left without a single councillor on half of Scotland’s councils (Lindsay 5th May 2012 [online], Curtice 6th May 2012 [online]).

Whilst the Welsh Liberal Democrats narrowly avoided a Scottish style meltdown in 2011, popularising a perception within the party that they had outperformed their Scottish colleagues, perceptions do not always do justice to reality.² Despite only losing one AM to the Scottish Liberal Democrats’ loss of eleven MSPs, the Welsh Liberal Democrats’ proportion of lost deposits was higher than that suffered by the party in Scotland. The Welsh Liberal Democrats lost deposits in seventeen, or 42.5%, of the forty Welsh Assembly constituencies, as opposed to the twenty five constituency deposits lost by the Scottish Liberal Democrats (around 34% of the seventy three Scottish Parliament constituencies). Furthermore, whilst the 2012 local elections saw the Welsh Liberal Democrats incur fewer losses than their Scottish counterparts (sixty six councillors to ninety five), as a proportion of their councillor base, the Welsh party again fared worse, losing 48.2% of their councillors, compared to the Scottish Liberal Democrats’ 43% decline.

To make the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats plight worse, there appears to be little sign of light on the horizon. A July 2012 Sunday Times poll, for example, indicated that the Scottish Liberal Democrats now trail the Greens at four percent on the regional list (National Left 24th July 2012 [online]). For the Welsh Liberal Democrats’ an ITV Wales–YouGov poll, also that month, showed the party behind UKIP on regional list voting intentions (Shipton 5th July 2012 [online]).

Certainly, then, both the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats have suffered a stark decline in political fortunes. An electoral malaise that appears inextricably tied to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition at Westminster. Indeed, only a glance at the polling data below reveals that the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats (like the

---

¹ Electoral data used in this paper sourced from the Electoral Commission: [http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/results](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/results)

² Interviews: Federal Party Employee 2nd May 2012 and FEC Member 2nd April 2012
party federally) saw their electoral backing fall almost instantly after the coalition was formed.

**Wales: UK General Election Polls**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLL</th>
<th>LAB</th>
<th>CON</th>
<th>LIB-DEM</th>
<th>PLAID</th>
<th>OTHERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ITV-Wales/YouGov, April 2010</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Mail/R&amp;MP, late April 2010</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITV-Wales/YouGov, 1-3 May 2010</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITV-Wales/YouGov, Oct 2010</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITV-Wales/YouGov, end-Jan–Feb 2012</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Scotland: UK General Election Polls**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLL</th>
<th>LAB</th>
<th>CON</th>
<th>LIB-DEM</th>
<th>SNP</th>
<th>OTHERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sun-YouGov, 28th April 2010</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland on Sunday-YouGov, 30th April 2010</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotsman-YouGov, 5th May 2010</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ipsos Mori, 20th August 2010</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouGov, late February 2012</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It can hardly be surprising, therefore, that a significant strain of Scottish and Welsh political discourse has been the claim that the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats have been punished for the unpopularity of the UK coalition government (Bort 2012: 37, 50). This is a claim that certainly draws strength from the Scottish and Welsh 2011 Electoral Surveys, which saw the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats record the biggest decline in popularity of any party in their respective nations and disaffection with the UK Government’s performance and Nick Clegg walk hand in

---

1 Welsh polling data courtesy of Prof Richard Wyn Jones
hand with perceptions that the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats are incompetent and out of touch (Johns et al. 2011: 15-19, Wyn Jones and Scully 2011: 11-26).

With such compelling data and such a sharp decline in electoral fortunes, it is almost tempting to blame the coalition Government as the root cause of the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats woes. However, by locating the coalition’s impact on the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats identities, their respective relationships with their political cultures and their organisational capacity within a broader historical analysis of both parties, this paper will argue that both parties have serious problems that are deeper rooted than the Downing Street Rose Garden. Problems that the coalition government has exposed and/or exacerbated.
The organisational capacity of the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats

Perhaps the most convincing evidence for this paper’s central argument is found in both parties organisational capacity. Absent from vast swathes of Scotland and Wales, the Liberal Democrats in both nations have suffered from a small membership base and acute organisational weakness, to the extent that despite formal constitutional autonomy, both the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats have historically been organisationally dependent on the federal party (Bratberg 2009: 73-74, Holmes 2007: 536). It is precisely this longstanding frailty that has made the coalition Government’s impact so damaging.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats’ marginal electoral position for much of the post-war period, alongside a weak membership base and highly limited resources, unsurprisingly meant that a defining feature of the party was organisational weakness (Lynch and McAngus 2012: 3, Lynch 1998: 23-24). This organisational underdevelopment undermined the party’s formal autonomy, with a reliance on the federal Liberal Democrats for assistance with policy development, funding and the general administration of the party in Scotland (Holmes 2007: 536-538, Bratberg 2009: 73). Electoral advances since the 1980s, however, led to an increase in their finances and organizational capabilities and by the end of the 2005-2010 UK Parliament the Scottish Liberal Democrats’ organisation was increasingly healthy, with an increased membership and a surplus in the party’s accounts (Lynch 1998: 19, 28, Scottish Liberal Democrats 2012: 4, 5).

Yet, with only 4,158 members, the Scottish Liberal Democrats were still, as Lynch and McAngus stress, a small organisation with low membership in even core Parliamentary seats e.g. the 80 members recorded in Argyll and Bute’s 2010 Statement of Accounts or the 138 in Charles Kennedy’s Ross, Skye and Lochaber constituency (Lynch and McAngus 2012: 4). Devolution has, therefore, been critical to the Scottish Liberal Democrats’ organisational health, with small membership leaving the party reliant on the revenue streams created post-devolution e.g. the staffing allowances afforded to Members of the Scottish Parliament (Bratberg 2009: 73, Lynch and McAngus 2012: 4).

The Welsh Liberal Democrats historically weak organisation similarly bred a dependency on the centre for resources and volunteers for the party’s daily operation (Bratberg 2009, p.73, Holmes 2007: 536, Thomas 2001: 124, Deacon 2007: 156-157). It was only in 1992, for example, that the party could boast full time headquarters in Wales and it took until after 1997 for a full time chief executive to be appointed (Thomas 2003: 180, Deacon 2007: 159).

Despite such stunted development, the Welsh Liberal Democrats’ organisational capacity also appeared to have made some steps forward by the end of the 2005-2010 UK Parliament. A move to new Headquarters, a rationalisation of the party’s functions and the development of financial contingency plans and a Finance and Management Committee to keep a tight hold on expenditure and budgets have been
particularly significant, leaving the Welsh party in a position where resources were “tight but could be coped with.”

However, the party in Wales was still a highly limited organisation. Official membership figures are unavailable, but the party’s support base was so thin in parts of Wales that it took the merger of a number of constituency areas just to create a viable local party (e.g. the Rhondda Cynon Taff ‘local party’ that includes the constituencies of Cynon valley, Rhondda and Pontypridd) and that despite the boost of ‘Cleggmania’ in 2010, there were only 299 members in the whole of North Wales (Liberal Democrats 2012 [online], Flintshire Liberal Democrats 26th October 2010 [online]).

This pre-coalition weakness has meant that both parties are in particularly vulnerable position, organisationally, post-coalition (Torrance 27th February 2012 [online], Lynch and McAngus 2012: 4, 28). The Scottish party’s already small activist base, for example, has been particularly damaged, with a 26% decline in membership from 4158 members in 2010 to just 3080 in 2011 (Scottish Liberal Democrats 2012: 4). Such a decline makes the already strained Scottish party’s organisational capacity even more precarious, not just financially as a result of lost membership subscriptions, but also in terms of the party’s all important activist base (Torrance 27th February 2012 [online]).

Despite their small membership, the Scottish Liberal Democrats have (as we shall discuss later) long found themselves dependent on local activism and campaigning (Russell and Fieldhouse 2004: 163). This organisational dependency on the party’s activist base makes the coalition’s impact particularly threatening, not only because party’s post-2011 reduction in Scottish Parliamentary expenses will increase their reliance on activists (Lynch and McAngus 2012, p.3, 4 and 28), but because of the demoralising impact of their 2011 and 2012 drubbings (Harrow 3rd June 2012 [online]). Indeed, concerns about morale appear particularly potent given that the Scottish Liberal Democrats fielded 84 fewer candidates for the 2012 local elections than they had in 2007, a decline of 25% (Gardham 2nd May 2012 [online], Newsnet 1st May 2012 [online]).

For the Welsh Liberal Democrats, longstanding organisational problems have also intensified the consequences of the coalition Government. Whilst 2011 only saw a net loss of one AM for the Welsh party, the reduction of staffing and office expenses associated with this, sheer quantity of lost deposits incurred in 2011 and the further electoral reversals suffered in 2012 have torn a “sizeable hole in Welsh Lib Dem finances,” that they too could ill-afford given their pre-coalition organisational frailty.5

As with the party in Scotland, local and highly localised campaigning and activism is

---

4 Interview with former Welsh Executive Committee Member: 29th May 2012

5 Interview: 29th May 2012
integral to the Welsh party’s electoral campaigning (Thomas 2001: 188), with the electoral despondency of 2011 and 2012 makes morale an equally serious concern. Indeed, party figures have not only claimed that the Welsh party’s membership has declined, but that morale is a particular worry. After all, while the Welsh Liberal Democrats have avoided the sort of public defections that the Scottish Liberal Democrats have suffered, e.g. the resignation of the MSP Hugh O’Donnell in 2011 (Pack 26th March 2011 [online]), they also saw a reduction in the candidates they fielded in 2012, down 100, or 25%, from 2007 (Davies 16th April 2012 [online], BBC 13th April 2012).

---

* Interview: 2nd May 2012 and 29th May 2012
Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats or Liberal Democrats in Scotland and Wales? The existential dilemmas of the Liberal Democrats

The Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats’ post-coalition electoral collapse has also raised the question of whether Scottish and Welsh voters can distinguish between the Liberal Democrats in those nations and the party federally, with both the Scottish and Welsh parties accused of failing to build distinctive identities (Osmond 6\textsuperscript{th} May 2011 [online], Robertson 2011: 4).

In addressing what is meant by distinctive Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrat identities this section will use a yardstick built around macro (questions of political and ideological positioning) and micro level (e.g. specific policies) issues, to argue that neither the Scottish or Welsh parties have effectively differentiated themselves from the federal party. A deficiency that not only predates the coalition, but also applies to their relations with domestic electoral rivals.

Whilst it is possible to identify some attempts at differentiation by the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats, for example Tavish Scott’s “clear yellow water” strategy that included criticism of the coalition and Kirsty Williams' ideological positioning of the Welsh party towards Labour, whom they cooperated with over the 2011 Welsh budget (Carrell 4\textsuperscript{th} March 2011 [online], Balsom 2011: 64, BBC 25\textsuperscript{th} November 2011 [online]), the 2011 and 2012 election results suggest such differentiation appears to have failed in the minds of Scottish and Welsh voters (Osmond 6\textsuperscript{th} May 2011 [online], Robertson 2011: 4). A failure that appears to be rooted in the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats own errors and external forces.

As forces beyond the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats’ control go, the coalition is arguably the biggest. Its unpopularity has triggered a serious decline in Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrat popular support, with the dominance of the UK air war in both nations further enabling Westminster politics to cast a shadow over Scottish and Welsh elections (Taylor 2011: 59, Balsom 2011: 43-45 and Black 4\textsuperscript{th} May 2011 [online]). As the figures earlier in the paper suggest, it is difficult to contest Curtice and Balsom’s contention that the Scottish and Welsh parties recent electoral woes are rooted further afield (Curtice 27\textsuperscript{th} February 2012 [online], Balsom 2011: 55).

However, the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats also face responsibility for their inability to delineate the distinctiveness from the federal party that would be particularly beneficial post-coalition. Tavish Scott’s attempt at differentiation, for example, received widespread criticism for its ineffectiveness (Thomson 1\textsuperscript{st} July 2011 [online], Taylor 27\textsuperscript{th} June 2011 [online]), including one senior party figure’s critique that it left the Scottish party unable to exploit any potential benefits from the coalition, whilst still burdening them with its’ unavoidable negative aspects.\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{7} Interview: 2\textsuperscript{nd} May 2012
This is a particularly acute problem given the presence of senior Scottish Liberal Democrats in the coalition Government. Not only are two Scottish Liberal Democrat MPs cabinet members, but one, Danny Alexander, is both a Treasury minister overseeing the Government’s austerity programme and a member of the “quad” that acts as an inner cabinet running the coalition. The Scottish party therefore appears “hardwired” into the UK coalition Government, blurring the boundaries between the Scottish and federal parties and undermining Scott’s insulation strategy.\textsuperscript{8}

Whilst, the Welsh Liberal Democrats exploited their freedom, until the 2012 reshuffle, from ministerial collective responsibility to rebel on tuition fees at Westminster and collaborate with Labour on the 2011 Welsh budget, Williams’ strategy appears to be largely focused away from public eyes.\textsuperscript{9} Even on regional pay, which Welsh Liberal Democrats vocally opposed (Mason 16\textsuperscript{th} August 2012 [online]), this was arguably a case of differentiation from their Westminster Conservative coalition partners, given Clegg and Cable’s opposition to these plans (with Williams invoking their opposition in media interviews) (BBC 8\textsuperscript{th} June 2012 [online]). Her behind the scenes approach, while praised for its effectiveness by a number of party figures,\textsuperscript{10} appears to be poor electoral politics leaving voters unsurprisingly oblivious to her efforts, as the continued slide in the polls suggests (Shipton 5\textsuperscript{th} July 2012 [online]).

However, existential questions have long provided a source of difficulty for Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats. For example, while the presence of Michael Moore and Danny Alexander in the coalition Government has been problematic, the number of Scottish Liberal Democrat MPs prominent in the federal hierarchy and policy convergence between the federal and Scottish parties (Lynch 1998: 27, McEwen 2005: 119, Holmes 2007: 538, Bratberg 2009: 74), meant that question marks over the Scottish Liberal Democrat’s identity existed pre-coalition.

Furthermore, the lack of a core electoral base for the Scottish Liberal Democrats (in common with the party across the UK) has bred a reliance on local individuals and campaigning mentioned earlier (Curtice et al. 2010: 400-401, Lynch and McAngus 2012: 3, 28). Something that has not only made it harder to build a cohesive and distinctive Scottish Liberal Democrat identity, but also explains just how potentially damaging the coalition’s impact on the party’s activist base could be.

However, questions about the Scottish Liberal Democrat’s identity are just as important with regards to their electoral rivals (Jones 2007, p.22, McGarvey and Cairney 2008: 56-58, the Scotsman 26\textsuperscript{th} August 2008 [online]). External forces have again proven significant, with Scotland’s declining media a substantial hurdle to a higher Scottish Liberal Democrat profile (allmediascotland 27\textsuperscript{th} February 2012 [online], The Scotsman 26\textsuperscript{th} August 2008 [online]) and with what remains focusing on unhelpful narratives e.g. independence vs. unionism, the result has been a party

\textsuperscript{8} Interview: 2\textsuperscript{nd} April 2012
\textsuperscript{9} Interviews: 2\textsuperscript{nd} April, 2\textsuperscript{nd} May and 29\textsuperscript{th} May 2012
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid
squeezed out by the increasingly dominant UK air war and the SNP and Labour battle for power at Holyrood (The Scotsman 26th August 2008 [online], Jones 2008: 39).

However, the Scottish Liberal Democrats have largely themselves to blame. At the macro level they have aligned themselves within the social democratic, centre-left consensus that, as we shall detail later, dominates Scottish political life (McGarvey and Cairney 2008: 58). By fighting on highly crowded and competitive electoral space that includes both the SNP and Labour (McGarvey and Cairney 2008: 56-58), it is simply essential that the party has a distinctive platform.

Yet it is precisely on this question of a ‘USP’ that the Scottish Liberal Democrats appear to have been found wanting. Not only are a number of Liberal Democrat policies shared by the party’s rivals e.g. the SNP had similar policies on Trident, Nuclear power and on the Iraq War (Lynch and McAngus 2012: 16-17), but their embrace of a “unionist chorus” with Labour and the Conservatives over Calman and the subsequent Scotland Act (Curtice 27th February 2012 [online], Torrance 27th February 2012 [online]) and refusal to govern with any other party than Labour at Holyrood, has severely curtailed the Scottish Liberal Democrats’ ability to offer a distinct alternative (Jones 2007: 22, Lynch and McAngus 2012: 16-17).

Petition to referendum 

Poor strategic decisions by the Scottish Liberal Democrats at a micro and macro level have, therefore, not only left pundits questioning, “what makes the Scottish Liberal Democrats different?” (Thomson 1st July 2011 [online], but has importantly left the party electorally vulnerable to their centre-left rivals since the UK coalition was formed (Bort 2012: 37, 59, Robertson 2011: 4-5).

Concerns about the Welsh Liberal Democrats’ identity are similarly longstanding, stretching back to the first National Assembly election in 1999 (Thomas 2003: 181). Poor communication and strategic decisions have again been crucial contributions to these difficulties, e.g. their 2003 Assembly election campaign which, via a blend of literature attacking the UK Conservative party leader, Iain Duncan Smith and a “100 Lib Dem policies delivered in coalition” slogan failed to enthuse voters, as even a senior party figure admits (Thomas 2001: 124, Thomas 2003: 181, Deacon 2007: 160). Furthermore, the party’s embrace of the dominant political and policy consensus, has as in Scotland, resulted in the party being squeezed out on the highly crowded and competitive centre-left in Wales (Wyn Jones and Scully 2008: 80 and Osmond 2007: .43).

The party’s dependency on local campaigning and a small base of activists and notables has further hindered their ability to develop a unique identity (Thomas 2001:188, Deacon 2007:158, 163). The 2007 coalition negotiations offer a prime example of how detrimental this strategic dependency can be. The proposed “Rainbow coalition” with Plaid and the Tories, not only saw the Welsh Liberal

---

11 Interview: 2nd May 2012
Democrats descend into public infighting e.g. Alex Carlile and Peter Black’s virulent attacks on Mike German’s leadership (Osmond 2007: 29), but left their credibility in tatters, resembling a collection of “individuals and a loose organisation of local parties” rather than a potential party of government (Wyn Jones and Scully 2008: 79).

However, it would again be wrong to blame the Welsh Liberal Democrats entirely for their existential problems. Welsh media is in a parlous state, with party figures interviewed united in their belief that the dearth of the Welsh media has had a hugely detrimental effect on the party’s ability to make a more distinct and effective appeal. Opinions that chime with broader analysis of the damage wrought on Welsh democracy as a whole by Wales’ ailing media (Pugh 17th November 2011 {online}).

\[\text{Interviews: 2nd April and 2nd May 2012}\]
Political culture and the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats

An important element in understanding these contemporary and historic existential and electoral problems is Scottish and Welsh political culture. Scottish political culture, for example, is dominated by the claim that Scotland is a social democratic and progressive nation (Bryant 2006: 94), with Scots alleged to be strong supporters of centre-left political parties and values such as a comprehensive welfare state and a strong public sector (Bryant 2006: 95).

While surveys suggest only a slim tendency for those with stronger Scottish identities to claim social democratic values, with redistributionist values similarly strong in the North East of England and Scots appearing no more progressive than the English on law and order, the narrative of Scotland as a nation of the left still forms a key element of political identity (Rosie and Bond 2007: 39-48, Keating 2009: 54, Bryant 2006: 95). Particularly because the political positioning of the two main competitors for power, the SNP and Scottish Labour, on the centre-left alongside the Greens and Scottish Liberal Democrats, leaves Scottish political life apparently firmly rooted on the centre-left (Rosie and Bond 2007: 41, McGarvey and Cairney 2008: 8, 56).

As noted earlier, this centre-left electoral sphere of gravity has been problematic for the Scottish Liberal Democrats in building a distinct identity, with their positioning on this ground, in an attempt to enhance their electoral support, resulting in the party being electorally squeezed and having its distinctiveness undermined (Lynch 1998: 29, The Scotsman 26th August 2008 [online]).

Welsh political culture has also been strongly influenced by notions of a radical tradition and the claim that Welsh voters, like their Scottish cousins, are more left wing than the English (Harris 1st February 2012 [online]). These narratives are again largely reliant on electoral behaviour, notably the electoral success of centre-left parties, particularly the successive Liberal and Labour hegemonies and historic underperformance of the Conservative Party in Wales (in relation to the party’s performances in England) (Wyn Jones et al. 2002: 237).

Again, the electoral sphere of gravity in Wales appears rooted on the centre-left, with the Welsh party system dominated by political parties fighting around this terrain. These dynamics explain the obvious attractions of fighting on the centre-left, yet also the danger of doing so without a unique electoral offering. As the party in Scotland has also discovered, this positioning, with little to distinguish Welsh Liberal Democrats from their electoral rivals at both macro and micro (policy) levels (apart from Powys, where they have traditionally been the dominant centre-left challenger to the Conservatives), has again resulted in an electoral squeezing out (Wyn Jones and Scully 2008: 80, Osmond 2007: 43).

The dynamics of Scottish and Welsh political culture have, therefore, been
historically problematic for the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats, but can also be seen at the heart of their electoral difficulties post-coalition, with the Westminster coalition with the Conservatives undermining the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats previous centre-left positioning, with significant electoral and organisational consequences.

This is particularly because of the toxic manner with which their Westminster coalition partners, the Conservative Party, are regarded in much of Scotland and Wales (Bort 2012: 37, Bryant 2006: 94, 95, Wyn Jones et al. 2002: 235-2010). Once Scotland’s largest political party, the Conservatives have suffered from what Bryant calls a “spectacular decline,” rooted initially in the collapse of the key pillars of Scottish Conservatism: Empire, Army and Protestantism, and accelerated by Thatcherism in the late eighties and nineties (Bryant 2006: 94, 95).

With deindustrialisation and the infamous “community charge,” Thatcher’s premiership assured Thatcher and her party, in Macwhirter’s opinion, “a prominent place in Scottish political demonology” (Macwhirter 26th February 2009 [online]). This legacy is so poisonous that not only were the Scottish Conservatives wiped out in the 1997 General Election, but one of the frontrunners during the last Scottish Conservatives leadership election, Murdo Fraser, actually pledged to replace what he described a “toxic brand,” by dissolving the Scottish Conservatives in favour of a new party (BBC 4th September 2011 [online]).

Little wonder, then, that the UK coalition has proved so damaging for the Scottish Liberal Democrats. It appears to not only contradict the traditional positioning of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, but key narratives in Scottish political culture, explaining their plunge in membership and vocal discomfort expressed by their current leader, Willie Rennie (Rosie and Bond 2007: 39, Bryant 2006: 95, McGarvey and Cairney 2008: 58, Rennie 31st December 2011 [online]). Furthermore, these dynamics alongside the almost symbiotic relationship between the Scottish Liberal Democrats and Scottish Labour at Holyrood for much of the post-devolution period, have left the Scottish Liberal Democrats particularly vulnerable to their rivals on the Scottish centre-left, who took little time to accuse the party of betrayal (Robertson 2011: 4, Bateman 30th March 2011 [online], Black 7th May 2011 [online]).

Unlike the Scottish Conservatives’ continual decline from once great heights, the unpopularity of the Conservative Party in Wales is “longstanding and apparently deep rooted,” fuelled by a belief that Conservatives care more about English, rather than Welsh, voters (Wyn Jones et al. 2002: 235-240). Attitudes that were again became hardened by Thatcher’s premiership, with the Miners’ strike and pit closures providing a fountain of enduring public hostility to the Conservatives (Wyn Jones et al. 2002: 235, 243), leading a Conservative AM, David Melding to argue that only more autonomy and rebranding could rid the Welsh Conservative Party of this toxicity (BBC 13th September 2011 [online]).
The coalition can, therefore, again be seen to contradict the dominant radical and left of centre traditions of Welsh political culture, the engrained anti-Conservatism in Welsh political identity and the Welsh Liberal Democrats traditional positioning on the centre-left (Wyn Jones et al. 2002: 229 and 237). Amidst fears, voiced by a senior Welsh party figure, that the Welsh Liberal Democrats could become a party “forever tarnished,” with increasing electoral hostility, declining party membership figures (according to the Federal and Welsh figures interviewed), the Welsh Liberal Democrats, like their Scottish brethren, appear to be a party under siege.

\[13\] Interview: 2\textsuperscript{nd} May 2012 and 29\textsuperscript{th} May 2012
Federalism-lite? Identity and the Party’s constitution

If the coalition has exposed and exacerbated deep rooted problems for the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats, such weaknesses also raise questions about the effectiveness of the party’s federal organisation, particularly with regard to the existential and organisational struggles detailed earlier. For example, whilst policy convergence can be partly explained by shared political beliefs amongst Liberal Democrats, both Bratberg and Holmes have argued that it has been particularly driven by resource poor state parties relying heavily on the centre for policy development and finances (Holmes 2007: 536, Bratberg 2009: 74).

However, a look at the Liberal Democrats federal organisation raises further and arguably more pressing signs of weakness. The transfer of the English party’s policy making functions to the centre in 1993, led to claims that the two are, in reality, interchangeable, not least because the English party, with no staff of its own, relies instead on federal employees for its administration (Holmes 2007: 535, Strange 22nd May 2012 [online]). According to Holmes such interchangeability has resulted in an English dominance over the party’s federal processes at the expense of Scotland and Wales (Holmes 2007: 535), as evidenced by the internal influence enjoyed by the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats, both pre and post-coalition.

In Wales, the Westminster coalition, at least initially, could be seen as continuing a longstanding trend of the centre neglecting the Welsh party (Deacon 2007:156). There are claims that there was minimal consultation between the Welsh Liberal Democrats and the federal leadership on either the Coalition Agreement, or on the 2010 Queen Speech commitment to establish the Silk Commission (Powys 27th May 2010 [online]). This marginalisation allegedly bred such a deep sense of bitterness amongst Welsh members, that it led some to discuss disaffiliation of the Welsh party, albeit “in anger, without full seriousness.”\footnote{14}

Even the Scottish Liberal Democrats have allegedly been a victim of neglect by the centre. Scotland’s influence within the federal party appears to flow more directly from the Scottish party’s MPs (for example the prominence of figures such as Danny Alexander, Charles Kennedy and Ming Campbell in recent years), than from figures in Edinburgh, who are allegedly often kept out of the loop (Torrance 27th February 2012 [online]). This picture of federal disregard for the Scottish and Welsh parties is vividly captured by one Federal Executive Committee member’s claim that meetings often see Scottish and Welsh members “jumping up and down together saying that it isn’t just about England.”\footnote{15}

These experiences lead us onto broader questions of how power and influence is concentrated within the federal party. The Social Liberal Forum, admittedly a faction

\footnote{14 Interview: 29th May 2012 
15 Interview: 2nd April 2012}
on the centre-left of the party, has, for example, claimed that federal policy making has become increasingly centralised at the elite level of the party (Hall-Matthews and Buch, 2012: 8-10), a criticism supported by recent academic analysis (Evans and Sanderson-Nash 2011). Evans and Sanderson-Nash have argued that the Liberal Democrats have undergone a ‘professionalization’ process (largely under Clegg’s leadership), resulting in an increasingly hierarchical organisation (Evans and Sanderson-Nash 2011: 459-468). A key reform being the establishment of a ‘Chief Officers Group,’ consisting of the Leader, the chairs of the Federal Finance and Administration, Federal Conference, Campaigns and Communications Committees, representatives from the Parliamentary Office of the Liberal Democrats (POLD), the English, Scottish and Welsh parties, the Federal President, Treasurer, and Chief Executive, empowered by the Federal Executive to manage and direct the party (Evans and Sanderson-Nash 2011: 464). This compliments the trend which has seen the constitutionally sovereign Federal Conference increasingly become a rubber stamp for policy drafted by working groups and party’s policy spokespeople (Ibid 2011: 469).

There, therefore, appear to be a number of reasons to query the structural strength of the Liberal Democrats’ federal organisation. The Scottish and Welsh parties’ respective organisational weakness compromised their formal autonomy and the development of distinctive identities. Furthermore, the alleged marginalisation of the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats appears to be almost an inevitable consequence of structural weaknesses that have seen an ostensibly federal party become increasingly Leadership-focused and more broadly Anglo-centric (Holmes 2007: 535; Evans and Sanderson-Nash 2011: 459).
Conclusion: The squeezed middle?

Whilst the damage wrought by the coalition Government on the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats is all too clear to see, to truly appreciate the difficulties both parties face we need to delve beyond the aftershocks of the coalition’s formation in May 2010. By locating the current troubles of the Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrats within a broader historical analysis of both parties, we can see that existential problems, their relationships with their respective political cultures and their organisational capacity are not just long standing sources of concern for the Scottish and Welsh parties, but have, in the case of organisational capacity and party identity, exposed structural weaknesses at the heart of the Liberal Democrats’ federally. Rather than being the "root of all evil", the coalition has, therefore, tightened the vice further on parties that were already the squeezed middle in Scotland and Wales.
Bibliography


BBC. (8th June 2012). Regional pay would be a ‘disaster,’ says Welsh Lib Dem leader, BBC News [online], http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-18367562 (accessed: 8th June 2012)


Black, P. (7th September 2012). An extra Minister, Peter Black [online],

Black, P. (28th August 2007). This is what the Welsh Liberal Democrats are for, South West Wales Liberal Democrats [online],

Bodden, T. (17th October 2011). Welsh Liberal Democrats leader warning of slump in council elections, Daily Post [online],


Calder, J. (4th May 2012). The danger of silver linings for the Liberal Democrats, Liberal England [online],
http://www.liberalengland.blogspot.co.uk/2012/05/danger-of-silver-linings-for-liberal.html (accessed: 21st May 2012)


Chorley, M. (3rd June 2012). Lib Dems suffer plunge in party membership, The Independent on Sunday [online],

Cornock, D. (21st September 2011). Nick Clegg Interview”” deputy PM rails against pessimism, David Cornock’s BBC Blog [online],


Gardham, M. (2nd May 2012). Lib Dems set to be big losers in council elections with half councillors set for the boot, *Daily Record* [online],


Harris, J. (1st February 2012). Could Wales leave the United Kingdom?, *The Guardian* [online],

Harrow, C. (3rd June 2012). Quoted in, M. Chorley. Lib Dems suffer plunge in party membership, *The Independent on Sunday* [online],


National Left. (24th July 2012). Libdems face Scottish extinction, *National Left* [online],
http://nationalleft.blogspot.co.uk/2012/07/libdems-face-scottish-extinction.html (accessed: 25th July 2012)


Shipton, M. (5th July 2012). UKIP would draw level with Tories in Labour-led Wales if nation voted today, shock poll shows, *Western Mail* [online],

Shipton, M. (5th May 2012). Councils turn red as voters give coalition a shock, *Wales Online* [online],


Thomson, G. (1st July 2011). Can the SNP wipe out the Scottish Liberal Democrats?, *Huffington Post UK* [online],


Williams, K. (21st September 2011). Kirsty Williams speech to Lib Dem Conference, *The Daily Telegraph* [online],


Williamson, D. (9th December 2008). Kirsty Williams makes political history, *Western Mail* [online],

