Liberals in Coalition

Tips and Advice
Before, During and After Government

International Office
UK Liberal Democrats
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INTRODUCTION

Rt Hon Nick Clegg MP
UK Deputy Prime Minister
Leader of the Liberal Democrats

For too long the United Kingdom – thanks in part to our out-dated electoral system - has seen pendulum politics that has swung between red-blue, blue-red single party Labour or Conservative governments.

In 2010, for the first time since the Second World War, a ‘balanced parliament’ with no clear winner led to a formal peacetime coalition. This meant that, for the first time, the Liberal Democrats entered government at a UK level, taking Ministerial positions across Government and delivering numerous flagship Liberal Democrat policies to help build a stronger economy and a fairer society.

Four years on and the coalition government has made our country fairer, more free, more green and more liberal. If we go back to the bad old days - not of coalition or balanced politics, but of one of the old parties dominating government on their own – then we risk an economic recovery which is neither fair nor sustainable. A majority Labour government simply can’t be trusted with the recovery – when they were in charge they crashed it, while a Conservative-only administration wouldn’t deliver a fair recovery that works for the whole country.

The 2010 election was not a flash in the pan, it was the culmination of decades of movement away from class based two-party politics, a trend which will only continue in coming years. All across the world liberals are forming governments – working with parties of both left and right to help advance our cause. Those liberals across the globe are in their own ways building stronger economies and fairer societies, enabling everybody to get on in life.

I hope this booklet, produced by our International Office, with its useful tips to consider before, during and after coalition will be of real help to you.

Sincerely Yours,  

Nick Clegg
Dear Liberal Friends, as Director of the Liberal Democrat International Office and Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) programmes it gives me great pleasure to introduce this publication to you. Through our WFD programmes the Liberal Democrat international office provides best practice support to political parties in transition democracies. We do this because we understand that if a political party wants to translate its ideas and values into reality it needs to be organized and self-sufficient. It’s only at that point can it be truly competitive in elections and entertain the possibility of forming a coalition.

For most of our existence the British Liberal Democrats sat on the opposition benches in parliament, we developed progressive policies, nurtured the finest champions of liberalism in the country and represented our electorate to very high standards. Unfortunately we were squeezed out of government by the dominance of either social democrats or conservatives. In 2010 that changed and for the first time in modern British history we entered coalition government.

Across the world more and more liberals are entering, or preparing to enter government. This is why it’s so important we share best practice and improve dialogue and communications between the parties to draw on those invaluable experiences. Currently we are working with our sister parties in Georgia (Republican Party, Free Democrats) and Moldova (Liberal Party, Liberal Reformist Party) to do this very thing. I also want to thank parties that took time to contribute to this publication, including: D66 and VVD from Netherlands, Radikale Venstre from Denmark, HNS from Croatia, Civic List from Slovenia, Reform Party from Estonia, FDP from Germany, SFP and Keskusta from Finland, MR and Open VLD from Belgium, Centerpartiet from Sweden, DP from Luxembourg and UC from Morocco.

We can only hope this publication will help our sister parties in transition democracies with some ‘real-time’ practical advice to consider before, during and after coalition government.

Yours,
NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Peter Lesniak
Editor, Project Manager
Liberals in Coalition

Dear reader, coalition politics is a rare occurrence in Westminster, but a common and expected outcome of elections in the rest of the democratic world. In fact, research shows that in the second half of the last century, more than half of all governments in the democratic world were coalitions of one form or another. Coalition government is a standard in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Estonia and most of the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe.

This publication originated from the programme developed by the UK Liberal Democrat International Office with our sister parties in Georgia and Moldova - a programme of political assistance that aimed at strengthening our partners’ positions in their respective coalition governments.

This document does not aim to show you everything there is to know about coalition governance, but to evidence some useful examples from other liberal parties around the world, hoping that we, as liberals, can learn from each other’s successes and mistakes. While reading this publication, remember that coalition politics is too complex to apply a single rule to succeed. Some examples mentioned in this book will be applicable to your political dynamics, others will not. Different countries have different institutional and cultural backgrounds. Thus, there is no one-size-fit-all rule to apply to issues such distinctive as political coalitions.

Document is divided into three thematic chapters that will help you guide your way through the life of a coalition government:

1. Before - this section deals with a period of time just before the government is formed. It will help you understand a distinctive dynamics between deciding to be in government and actually being part of it. It will show best-practice examples of coalitions negotiations, communication, structure of the negotiation package and coalition agreements.

2. During - being in government is not easy. This section will explore the difficulties one might face in the coalition government - keeping your identity, day-to-day dealings in government and mechanisms of resolving disputes.

3. After - Every coalition has its end. The last part will deal with how does one prepare to exit the coalition, and what are the red lines to take into account.

I hope this publication will strengthen us, as liberals, and our position not only in the national governments, but on the international stage. Thank you, and enjoy...

Yours,
BEFORE

One of the key decisions to make before we start thinking about forming a coalition is whether we publically express our willingness to partner with certain political parties, or keep our intentions quiet and wait for the votes to be counted. This section shows different ways of getting around this important decision.

1.1 FORMING COALITION BEFORE ELECTIONS?
Do we publically voice our coalition intentions, or keep our options open?

- **(Netherlands, VVD):** The VVD never explicitly excludes any political party for future cooperation. The Netherlands is a country of coalition governments, so you never know who you might need in the future to govern with. The VVD rarely choses its favourite coalition partner before the election. The campaign is based on the electoral manifesto and we always focus on the policy proposals. We avoid personal criticism of other parties. The opponent during the elections can be your partner in government. It’s important to maintain good personal relations.

- **(Finland, Keskusta):** We hold no negotiations prior to elections. Informal discussions begin immediately after the elections and the official negotiations start when a new parliament has convened a few weeks after the elections.

- **(Estonia, Reform Party):** In Estonia, the president nominates the candidate for the prime minister (normally it’s the leader of the party which won the elections). We may already have an idea in advance of this nomination with whom we might try to form a coalition, but we definitely do not open any cards (what, with whom, how) before the official invitation to start the negotiation. If we leak possible deals before polling day, it may seem that we are engaging in campaigning activities for the other partner. If the larger party is likely to win, they never share intentions or promise anything before the election. If, however, party is small, they may try to get credit for showing that they are part of the big game.

“**You never know who you might govern with in the future!**”

VVD, Netherlands
• **(FDP, Germany):** In Germany, parties mostly pre-electorally voice their intentions on who their preferred (or even only) coalition partner is. This, however, does not always work in a complex political dynamics, especially if you are a smaller coalition partner that relies on votes from voters that are not your typical supporters.

In 2002, FDP decided not to publically voice their coalition intentions, in order to gain more independence and to counter stereotypes, which defined Liberals as an adjunct of conservatives. This attempt failed. FDP gained a result far below expectations as too many supporters of a conservative-liberal government decided to vote conservative. For the federal elections 2005 and 2009 FDP clearly committed to a conservative-liberal coalition and gained outstanding results.

• **(Croatia, HNS):** In Croatia, pre-election agreement was concluded well before the election results came to light. This agreement, however, was not binding and served only as a declaration of readiness of the parties to jointly go to the elections. A joint campaign program was agreed relatively easily between party representatives in charge of the program and was endorsed by the presidents. The main content of the negotiations was the presence of party representatives on the joint electoral lists/ordinal numbers on these lists; negotiations were run by the presidents of the parties, and final agreement was confirmed by the relevant executive bodies.

• **(Morocco, UC):** Negotiations in Morocco have always been held after the elections and after the appointment of the head of government by the King. He then undertakes negotiations with the political parties that agree to form a government. The Union Constitutionnelle has opted for the opposition until the establishment of a more uniform government. In general, the Political Bureau is informed immediately about the contact of the head of government with the party invited to the negotiating table.
In certain situations, you have to consider whether being in government is the best option. If it is and if you are lucky enough to have a choice, you also have to think about who would be your best partner. Before deciding to take the big step, consider some of the below points from the Dutch D66 and the Danish Radikale Venstre.

1.2 TO GOVERN, OR NOT TO GOVERN?
Do we enter the coalition? Who would be the best partner?

(Netherlands, D66): Do not govern unless you are needed for power and can set terms. If they do not need you for a majority, you have no power and will not have leverage when this matters. Once you make a commitment, make sure the party is fully on board and remains there. Consider holding a party referendum (like D66 and Lib-Dems) to ensure a majority of the party supports the leadership’s decision to govern. Don’t do it if your party/voters don’t understand why you went in, or ultimately vote against it. You need the support of your core voters to be able to govern with confidence.

It will also be difficult for you to maintain a strong position in a coalition if its composition goes against the essence of what you stand for (ex: in bed with racists or extremists), no relationship is worth selling out your principles for. Most importantly, don’t govern if you are afraid of taking decisions that will cost you voters, because there will be bad polls and people will lose their seats.

(Denmark, Radikale Venstre): Before you take a decision on getting into coalition, it is worth considering who would be your best coalition partner. Looked at over a long period of time one can conclude that for a centrist social-liberal party coalitions to the left seem to be more successful than coalitions to the right. Generally, it seems to be easier to develop the compromises on economic policy, typically needed when cooperating to the left, than the compromises on matters regarding culture, civil liberties etc., which are typically needed within a coalition to the right. The reason is partly technical – there are typically many more parameters involved in economic policy and thereby more scope for compromise – but also political, because compromises on economic policy are more easily explained to both your own membership and the electorate in general.

“Don’t govern if you’re afraid of losing seats”

D66, Netherlands

Note: No data was available for the former Yugoslav republics and Albania.
1.3 WHO NEGOTIATES THE COALITION?
Who to involve in coalition negotiations?

(UK, Liberal Democrats): In 2010 the negotiating team consisted of 4 people and was appointed by the Leader of the party. The leader himself was not part of that team. It was felt that it was preferable for the negotiating team to be in a position to speak with authority but without necessarily being able to take the final decisions. It is important that the negotiating team are seen to be able to effectively represent the different sections of the party - with a balance of “left” and “right”, and ideally the negotiating team should have the total confidence of the leadership but should also be able to represent the views of the party membership.

(Luxembourg, DP): The DP’s main negotiation team was composed of the 4 leading candidates (Luxembourg has 4 constituencies), the secretary general, an expert in finance, an expert in social affairs and health system and two senior advisers of the parliamentary group staff.

(Netherlands, VVD): After the elections the parliament appoints a key negotiator (an experienced person, less political). Then the party leaders negotiate. When the negotiations are narrowed to the likely governing parties, the party leader selects normally one key advisor as co-negotiator.

(Croatia, HNS): Negotiations were led by the presidents of the parties and the results were subject to confirmation by the highest bodies of parties.

(Finland, Keskusta): This is defined in our party rules. Chairman of the party leads the negotiations with other leaders of the party as well as members of the parliamentary group. In addition to them, a number of MPs and other experts take part in negotiations about the government programme.

(Germany, FDP): The party board determines who is sent to negotiate. Historically this has been the party leader, the secretary general and several MPs. Normally, working groups with MPs specialized in the respective topics are formed.

(Estonia, Reform Party): It is the bureau of the party who determines the negotiation team. It’s normally the mix of high ranking and practical thinkers of the party. We had max 5 people involved in total.
It is popular in certain countries to involve the civil service in the negotiation process, sometimes even bringing in external specialists and professional negotiators. In other countries, this process is strictly political.

1.4 ARE EXTERNAL NEGOTIATORS INVOLVED? Is there a role for civil service or external specialists?

(Liberal Democrats, UK): We didn’t include civil servants in the negotiations, despite the pressures from them to be involved. We trusted that negotiations should be held between political representatives only.

(Germany, FDP): In Germany, the civil service and parties are strictly separated. Coalition negotiations are party-political work.

(Finland, SFP): The tradition in our negotiations is to have experts from outside the political sphere brought in by the different parties, and these people can play a key role in making sure the right knowledge is present when needed. In other words it’s important to maintain a good network of people and specialists at all times, and one that stretches far beyond traditional political circles, you never know when you may need the knowledge and expertise someone possesses.

(Estonia, Reform Party): No civil service is involved in our negotiations. This might be the cultural difference but we believe that policy should be drawn up by the people who have a mandate from the people not by civil service.

(Finland, Keskusta): Civil service is used only as experts in government negotiations (when a particular issue is discussed). Politicians do the actual negotiating.

(Netherlands, VVD): Civil servants as well as the statistical bureau facilitate the negotiations, but politicians play the key role.
PREPARING FOR COALITION NEGOTIATIONS

Now that you know who will be your negotiating partner(s), you have to make sure that you prepare for the process to make your best case and get as much out of the negotiations as possible. There are different ways to prepare, but below are case studies from Luxembourg and Sweden which might be helpful in preparing for your negotiations.

CASE STUDY 1
DP – LOUXEMBURG

In order to best prepare the negotiations for the government program, the three coalition partners (the DP, the Socialist party and the Green party) organised themselves into 8 different working groups. Their mission was to prepare the ground for the main negotiations by emphasising the common features and differences of the three election programs. The working groups were composed of about 10 people, i.e. the newly elected parliamentarians, among which experienced ministers and MPs, as well as experts and personnel with field experience from the civil society and close to the parties. Each group focused on one main policy area:

1. Finance and the financial centre;
2. Economy, competitiveness, employment, tourism, energy, middle class and research;
3. Social policies, family, health, equality of opportunity, special needs;
4. Education, culture, sport, child care, higher education;
5. State, institutions, justice, public service and administration, data protection, religious practice;
6. Sustainable development, infrastructures, transport, consumer protection, agriculture;
7. Housing, municipalities, Grande-Région, police, civil protection;
8. Europe, defence, development aid, immigration.

The above working groups had to link the policies of the past years of the outgoing government to the draft laws on the agenda and the objectives of the three electoral programs. The identified common views and divergences were summed up in a note which was used as a working basis during the main plenary negotiations.
In 2004 six working groups were established:

1. Growth (companies and jobs),
2. Justice and security
3. Labour market,
4. Education,
5. Welfare and
6. Foreign affairs.

All groups consisted of one parliamentarian/politician from each party and one political advisor. The groups compared policies of the different parties to see where we agreed and where there was a potential political conflict, in preparation for what the groups could suggest in their reports and what questions/issues the groups needed to deliver proper answers to. The working groups arranged seminars and presented reports.

A number of strategic agreements were also made at the start of the coalition work; on how the work should be done, plans for common activities such as common parliamentary group meetings, common seminars etc. The four party leaders also agreed that all four parties should benefit from the cooperation (the work was not to be done on the expenses on one or more parties) and all should contribute to the common success. The agreement at the beginning was also that we (the coalition) had the ambition of moving policies forward, to develop policies and that the negotiations should not lead to the lowest common denominator.

For the national election in 2010 new working groups were established. And for the election in September 2014 five working groups have been established.

“The party leaders agreed that all parties should benefit from the cooperation.”

Centerpartiet, Sweden
1.6 HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE INTERNALLY?

Who do we consult with? How is the party informed of the process?

- **(UK, Liberal Democrats):** During negotiations, there was regular contact between the negotiating team and our parliamentarians. Usually once or twice per day. In addition, reports would go to the party Leader on a regular basis from his representative at the negotiation team. At the end of negotiations, several party committees had to agree to the final deal and a special conference was called for grass-roots members to approve the coalition package before we made the final commitment to govern.

- **(Estonia, Reform Party):** Communication with the outside world is minimum. Inside, a limited amount of people are involved. Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed!

- **(Netherlands, VVD):** The negotiations are very confidential. When there is an agreement some parties ask just their MPs to accept it, some other might consult their members nationwide.

- **(Belgium, MR):** The party chairman must be able to refer at any given moment to a restricted body of advisors and MPs so as to maintain a dialogue with his “lieutenants” and know how far he can go in negotiations.

- **(Finland, Keskusta):** Party organs and the Parliamentary Group will closely monitor the conduct of negotiations. The better they are kept informed, the more strongly the party commits to government co-operation.

- **(Germany, FDP):** Party leaders decide to start coalition negotiations, working groups are formed and at the final stage, the drafts of those working groups are coordinated in a bigger group. Party board, party congress or even all party members finally decide for or against the draft.

Now, that you find yourself in the negotiating room, it is crucial to find a way of effectively communicating the progress in the negotiations to your party, leadership, and the voters. It’s not easy to get clearance on issues immediately and certain things might need approval.
1.7 HOW DO WE GET OUR PROGRAMME RIGHT?
Which issues do we choose to fight for during negotiations?

- **(Finland, Keskusta):** We prepare for the negotiations carefully even at the time of making our election programme. This is done in a way that provides us an easy access to the post-election negotiations. After that, we defend these goals as well as possible in the negotiations themselves. The leaders of the party and the parliamentary group are always strong people who can stand up for themselves and the proposals we campaigned on.

Estonia, Reform Party: The first point is to ensure that your programme gives you access to the coalition negotiation at all. If your programme is unrealistic (double the minimum salary) or too radical, you may not even be invited behind the negotiation table. This might happen even if you win the election. A realistic programme is the one that is: sellable, what is doable and what could be acceptable for the general public.

What gives you a good basis in the negotiation is the planning behind your promises. For example, if you promise the tax reduction, have the realistic data based on calculations, facts, social studies already prepared. Be ready to present the plan of action in government right away. The same rule applies if you talk about reaching out to single mothers to improve their social situation or plan to introduce free public transport. You need facts, data, numbers to back up your initial plan.

Let’s say you have got great programme and remarkable mandate, but you still need to commit to the coalition with other parties. Your position at the table will depend on whether you are invited or invitee to the negotiation table. In either case you must know your and other parties’ programmes by heart.
• **(Netherlands, VVD):** During the campaign the VVD focuses on specific issues that are especially important for us as liberals. When negotiating a coalition government, it's important to keep in mind what the main issues were that have been addressed during the campaign. Try to deliver on those issues in particular.

• **(Netherlands, D66):** Get the coalition to commit to at least some of your program, save the rest for the next coalition (or absolute power). It's important that you show commitment to the most important issues you care about.

You need to decide what will be in your negotiating package. Try to select about 10-12 key areas but note that you can realistically only expect about 5-6 to be included in the final coalition agreement.

A good negotiating package should include some high profile things that you have been campaigning for and people regard as Liberal Democrat policies and some less high-profile issues that are in your manifesto. In addition, you can select some things that you know won’t be agreed on, but may strengthen your negotiating power.

Finally, you have to decide on your flagship policies. They will be the top issues you have been campaigning for and are known for. We selected the top 4 from the front page of our manifesto and managed to secure them in the coalition agreement.

When deciding which policies to concentrate on, it is often a good idea to apply the policy triangle test: Liberal, Popular, Deliverable. Is it something that you want (liberal), is it popular, and will it work (deliverable)? Aim for ideas that have all 3 components. Make sure that your policy proposals are reasonable and base them on facts and research rather than only popularity or needs. All policies in your negotiating package have to pass that test.
1.8 HOW TO NEGOTIATE THE BEST DEAL?

How we ensure that our key policies are part of the negotiated agreement?

- **(Belgium, MR):** Before negotiating, we must identify the issues which are essential to us in order to remain faithful to the party program. We must also identify the results that we have to secure (e.g. a reduction in taxes on labour income).

- **(Finland, SFP):** Come prepared. After many turns in government we have acquired some knowledge of how governments are run. We can pretty much guess what the difficult subjects of the next government negotiations will be, and we can therefore prepare how best to tackle them. Having thought through the scenarios beforehand, and knowing the obvious default positions of the different political groups comes in very handy. Having written texts handy with the necessary compromises already made give the prepared party the upper hand.

Prepare for your no-no’s. There are obviously red lines for all parties that can never be crossed, and lines in the sand that need to be guarded. Being ready for these fights in advance is naturally very important. Every party will have these, smart players will know which these are for the others, and forming the right alliances behind the scenes to secure support when you need it is key.

Know when to fight to win, and when to fight to loose. As in most negotiations you need to know what battles to fight with the intention of winning, and what battles to fight – and loose, to secure something else.

*Prepare your no-no’s. There are obviously red lines for all parties that can never be crossed.*

*SFP, Finland*
(Denmark, Radikale Venstre): A key discipline during coalition participation is to address the expectations of the party’s membership. If you sell your policies very aggressively during the election campaign, your own electorate can build the expectation that you believe to be able to force those policies upon your coalition partners without having to compromise. Thus if that does not succeed during coalition negotiations part of your membership can become extremely dissatisfied and even turn against the party’s leadership in public thereby almost guaranteeing that the next election will result in a loss of votes.

(UK, Liberal Democrats): Your starting position is important - are you “buying or selling?” After our elections in 2010, the Conservative party needed us to govern, so we were in a better position to negotiate a good deal. Always think about whether the other side knows how keen you are to be part of the government. They need to think that you can take it or leave it – they also shouldn’t know which things are important for you to negotiate.

The length of the government formation process

*The UK coalition government was formed in five days, although the full coalition agreement was not published until 13 days after the election. 

(Estonia, Reform Party): If possible, try avoid getting the portfolio where you could not deliver the most in respect with your programme. You absolutely must deliver (even just a part of it) what you have promised by the next elections. There is perfect example of this mistake from very recent part in EU. Party “A” campaigned for the tax reduction; consequently they got the mandate, got into the government but accepted the portfolio of foreign affairs. During the following years, they were out of their main electoral target, they had no platform of talking about their programme, their promises. Next election party “A” fell out not only from the government, but even form the national parliament. They had no result to show. The rhetoric: “We would have done all we promised but others didn’t let us.” is working in the kindergarten but not in politics. You do what you promise or at least try hard and publicly.

Coalition negotiations are like any other negotiations. You must know what is your minimum and maximum programme and you must try to get as close to the maximum as possible. Just stick to your guns. All you need is an attractive, realistic, doable programme in fixed term and the person to deliver. Keep in mind that other parties want the same thing, so you must give up something. Give up parts of your programme what are the least realistic, raises least of the profile and what could be hijacked by the other parties during the process.

(Germany, FDP): In Germany, that widely works with negotiating packages: We accept a certain key policy of the other party if they accept one of ours.

(Civic List, Slovenia): Numbers help greatly. Because of our decisive say in the National Assembly and the fact that Civic List was second largest party in the coalition, all of the party’s key policies were included into the coalition agreement.

(Netherlands, VVD): The future coalition partners of course had their own agenda in negotiations. Try to give some space to each other during the negotiations so that both, or all, parties can show real results to their supporters. When both political parties feel comfortable within the coalition the risk of premature collapse is covered most properly.
1.9 WHAT ABOUT THE COALITION AGREEMENT?
Do we write ‘coalition agreement’ at the end?

(Netherlands, D66): Have a clear coalition agreement with deadlines where possible. Make sure you have points in the coalition agreement that voters recognize as being yours (if you are the party of education, get education items). Do decide to go for it wholeheartedly and commit to being a stable coalition partner.

(Belgium, MR): If there is an agreement, the ultimate goal is to draft a Government program that is extremely accurate in every detail and which will set the political agenda. It is the guarantee for future good concord within Government.

(Estonia, Reform Party): It’s a lengthy document with concrete actions and deadlines. Estonians also tend to stick to that agreement. To dishonour your agreement with others, you must have a very serious reason. Otherwise, you are not considered trustworthy, which is the worst what can happen to your image as a political player.

(Germany, FDP): Coalition agreement is approx. 50-100 pages with several dozens of policies. Many of them are rather non-binding: “The coalition will verify, if...”. How much can be passed to law strongly depends on the political composition of the parliament. Parties very rarely dishonour the coalition agreement. But of course, drastic developments sometimes may lead to u-turns of the coalition as a whole: e.g. after the nuclear disaster of Fukushima, the conservative-liberal coalition decided to accelerate nuclear power phase-out instead of delaying it.

Parties cannot make decisions that run counter to the government programme. That would result in dissolving the government.

Keskusta, Finland
(Finland, Keskusta): The current government programme is around 90 pages. The programme sets out targets for all government departments. The aim is to implement entire program before the next elections. Sometimes there are attempts to polish one’s own public image but parties cannot make decisions that run counter to the government programme. That would result in dissolving the government.

(Netherlands, VVD): Leave some space in the coalition agreement. You can never predict what will happen in the next four years in details and you might want to leave enough space for parliamentary debate. However, the basic fundamentals should be addressed (for example, the maximum budget deficit, or what will happen when new austerity measures are a necessity). Normally, our agreement is about 30-50 pages, covering guiding principles for all major policy areas. A financial appendix might be included as well.

(UK, Liberal Democrats): You can use the coalition agreement not only to agree on things that you will deliver as a government, but also to set out the things that you don’t agree on as well as issues that are of concern to both parties. It’s a good way to try to avoid disputes in Parliament. Our current coalition agreement if very

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The length of coalition agreements around the world

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*Very short coalition agreements mainly or entirely covering the rules and principles of coalition government rather than the government’s policy programme.

†Coalition agreement for proposed Liberal-NDP coalition, which was ultimately not formed.

Source: IfG analysis.

precise and specifies exactly what policies will be implemented during the course of the government. However, the ‘partnership agreement’ published by the first Labour-Liberal Democrat Coalition in Scotland in 1999 was a rather loose document, characterised by one aide as “in many cases an agreement to agree, with relatively few detailed policy commitments”. While this increased the Government’s flexibility, it also ensured that “there had to be considerable negotiation between the parties on detailed aspects of policy”, on an ongoing basis.¹

Over the years, we have learnt to redefine the scope of the coalition agreements to achieve a better position for smaller parties in a coalition. The resulting structure is a balance between:

- A need for speed in order to secure that the parties in the coalition do not lose control over media debate around some of the key topics where there usually will be disagreements between the parties in the coalition
- A need for quality which is in Denmark addressed be a substantial production of smaller analysis memos from the civil service throughout the negotiation process securing that policy items in the coalition agreement are implementable
- A level of specificity which secures that the party holding the prime minister position cannot overrule the smaller parties when the actual policy is designed during the coalition period

The balance between these priorities is probably unique for each country. In Denmark negotiations lasting longer than three weeks is probably hard to imagine given the very close relations between politicians and media where conflicts can relatively easily be discovered by the media and – if not commented on due to ongoing negotiations – spin out of control. The format of the agreement will typically be a written document with around hundred pages stating policy principle and within selected controversial areas comment on specific issues in future legislation. Since 100 pages is a lot for journalists to read the experience is that the storyline around the document is extremely important.

¹ Halifax, Stuart and Paun, Akash (June 2012). A game of two halves: how coalition governments renew in mid-term and last the full term. Institute for Government.
Keeping your identity in a coalition government is one of the most important, yet most difficult issues to deal with. Making sure that government policies are your policies is not easy either. The section below will see ways to deal with both issues.

2.1 WHAT IF THEY STEAL OUR POLICIES?

How do we keep our identity and make sure we own our policies?

“One in office, make sure that everyone in your team knows what the ultimate goal is. Do not let other subjects eat up your time, energy or attention. If you had a realistic plan, you would be able to execute it without major obstacles. Start at day one and make your way forward. You never know what the future will bring.” - Reform Party, Estonia

(UK, Liberal Democrats): Communicating success is a key part of the work in coalition, but often very difficult. If other parties take credit for your policies, you have to make sure that public (media) knows that they are taking credit for policies that are inherently against their beliefs and were not in their election manifesto. Make sure that your flagship policies that you want to be known for are things that your partners are not interested in.

The language that you use in coalition is extremely important. Sometimes, the media and the public will portray you as being the ‘larger party’s toy’ or that you are ‘going to bed with the devil’ and ‘betraying your ideals’. You have to make the point that this is a ‘business partnership’ rather than a ‘love affair’. Part of political communication is making sure you describe the situation as it is and explain why it is that way.

(Netherlands, VVD): Sometimes ‘stealing policies’ happens and other parties of course have the freedom to do that. It’s useful, therefore, to agree on policy proposals to be presented by a specific party, who can then take credit for it once it has passed.

(Estonia, Reform Party): That is why you need a concrete programme and concrete coalition agreement, and a good communication from the beginning to make sure that people know who came up with those ideas and policies initially.
(Slovenia, Civic List): When you are in government, it is sometimes problematic to present and explain the government's decisions to your voters. Particularly, when those decisions are not exactly in line with your party's programme. There is a thin line between making compromises within the government and the potential loss of one's own identity. The continuous balance is, therefore, needed throughout and space to express one's own opinions and policies. In Slovenia, ministers are those who usually present and explain accepted government's policies and therefore they must publicly back and defend government. It is expected that in the decision-making process, all coalition parties accept responsibility for the decisions that were made.

In Ireland, smaller coalition parties have been described as 'punchbags for heavyweights'. The most recent example of this phenomenon is the Irish Green Party, which entered Coalition with Fianna Fáil in 2007 after gathering vote share across three previous elections. The Greens had gained popularity as a small party with a distinct ideology and agenda. The party did secure some distinctive policy wins in coalition, but at a time of economic crisis this was seen as an esoteric priority. The Greens were also criticised for backing down over issues which had previously been seen as key policies. The party struggled under the pressure of having to agree on tough action to tackle the financial crisis and ultimately pulled out of government shortly before the election, but this was in vain. The party's vote share collapsed with the loss of all seats in 2011. This episode illustrates the difficulty of a small party maintaining its distinct identity. But the party also suffered from the bad luck of being in government at a time of crisis, and in partnership with a tired and ultimately discredited larger party.¹

(Denmark, Radikale Venstre): The key success factor for a small party is that one does not suffer at the expense of the leading party in the coalition. That one's standing in polls move with the total poll position of the government has to be accepted. It is very hard to be popular as small government party if the total government is unpopular. Denmark has since 2000 seen a number of examples of smaller parties in government loosing votes. There is, however, a difference between center parties who have bargaining power because they can in theory shift to the other side, and other small parties on the right and left who do not credibly have that option.

(Netherlands, D66): Do put the right people in the right places, strong leaders and good communicators need to be in government, they can explain your party’s agenda and the government achievements. Good ministers can “sell” the coalition (including taking responsibility for the compromises), while reaffirming your party identity throughout. Keep making it clear why you went in and always manage expectations (if you want us to do our whole electoral program, give us an absolute majority). At the beginning of the coalition, it’s crucial to give each side visible ‘quick wins’ and let each other shine – grant each his moment of glory, but keep it in balance, to avoid resentment.

(Finland, SFP): Governing with colourful political players can be very challenging to anyone, and especially for junior coalition partners. The successful grand projects a government may pass (should there be any of those), will have the big parties taking credit, and the struggles and failures that are inevitable will be difficult to tackle. The SFP tradition of a very pragmatic way of governing, and a balanced view on most political questions has helped us navigate this. This is our guide:

1. Have your list at hand at all times

More importantly though has been keeping track of a clear list of successes, both in the negotiating stage when the paper explaining what government will do is finalized. Keeping track of day-to-day events that are important to the SFP electorate is also important. When someone asks you “What good have you ever done?” you should be able to give a long answer.

2. Communicate clearly

Communicating the role the party has played, and communicating both the successes and the realities that cause the failures is also important. This is something most parties need to become better at, and especially for junior coalition partners. The successful grand projects a government may pass (should there be any of those), will have the big parties taking credit, and the struggles and failures that are inevitable will be difficult to tackle. The SFP tradition of a very pragmatic way of governing, and a balanced view on most political questions has helped us navigate this.

3. Don’t lose your cool

For parties with a more narrow ideological history many decisions become very troublesome. When your people think you are overstepping your ideology, you need to stay focused. You sometimes have to dare to give a pragmatic explanation describing the realities that lead up to certain decisions, and stand by the decisions even when it may be unpopular.

4. Stay focused on the goal

Governing is never easy. If it is, something is not right. Your political enemies are finding errors to exploit, and the media needs to fill airtime, newspapers and the Internet with exciting news of your failures. Reporting successes seem to be our own task. The goal of governing is of course more than just making sure you come out of it looking good. The goal is to do what is needed and what is right in any given situation. When being attacked and when being ridiculed, it helps if you know you are doing what is right. Stating that should make you sleep better.
2.2 HOW DO WE MANAGE DAY-TO-DAY WORK?
How do we organise and structure coalition work on the daily basis?

(Belgium, Open VLD): As the government agreement is fairly detailed, the government parties avoid fundamental policy discussions during the parliamentary sessions. However, the monitoring of the correct execution of the coalition agreement is an important part of the government work as each party only has a few ministers in a larger cabinet. The key players here are the Deputy Prime Ministers that each government party is entitled to. In Belgium, ministers have the right to appoint quite an elaborate private office of political advisors, and part of their role is to shadow the work of the ministers of the other parties. As the weekly cabinet meeting is the main decision-making body on the Belgian level, the ministerial political advisors of the various parties will often have one of more so-called ‘inter-cabinet meetings’ to prepare decisions, where all the details are discussed and the conformity with the government agreement is checked. Remaining conflict points will be discussed at the highest political levels at the ‘core cabinet’, consisting of the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Ministers.

You have to agree what rights will you have to oversee departments that you don’t have ministers in.

UK, Liberal Democrats

In addition to the inter-party talks, ministers will also keep in touch with the party by having weekly meetings with the party leader, as well as attend the party bureau that traditionally meets on Mondays. In addition, they attend the meetings of the parliamentary group to give context to decisions taken in government.
(Finland, Keskusta): The daily work in the government is organised so that all government parties have representation in different ministerial committees. However, the most pressing and difficult issues are solved in between the party leaders.

(Luxembourg, DP): As the government has a slim majority (32 seats out of 60) that is based on three parties, the compliance to the government agreement throughout the decision-making process is essential. Some measures have been introduced in order to lead a stable coalition. Therefore, coordination is required at two different levels. Firstly, it is necessary to coordinate decisions between the ministers and the parliamentary group (through regular parliamentary group meetings). In addition, separate meetings between parliamentarians and ministers on a particular subject on the agenda are very common. Those regular encounters are meant to set in practice one of the main missions of the parliamentary group: the monitoring of implementation of the coalition agreement policies. It is also important to maintain a high-quality coordination between the coalition partners. On that account, parliamentarians of the three parties meet regularly according to the subjects on the agenda (inter-parliamentary group meetings that are dealing with different issues). To maintain the coalition position, ministers often agree on common line.
(UK, Liberal Democrats): Make sure you have the institutional machinery in place for the coalition to function effectively. We didn’t get the machinery of government right when we first went into the Coalition – the political establishment was not institutionally ready for coalition government (for example – we had to create the office of the Deputy Prime Minister from scratch). We needed to hire political advisors and restructure the office during the course of government. As the smaller party in the Coalition we didn’t get enough political advisors and it took a lot of time to get this right. You have to make sure that agreement is in place with your coalition partners on how are you going to keep a grip on policy making across all departments. You have to agree on what rights will you have to oversee departments that you don’t have ministers in, or what will be the consultation process with your party in those departments.

(Croatia, HNS): Harmonization of the points of view between coalition partners takes place through joint meetings between the presidents of the parties and through the joint sessions of the Executive Cabinet of the Government. However, ministries have great autonomy in the conduct of their policies and, thus, coalition partners usually take care of “their” departments. Coalition members in parliament usually vote for proposals of the coalition partners without any major disagreements. Any public display of different points of view among coalition partners causes unwanted difficulties in the media and speculations about the crisis or collapse of the Coalition.

(Netherlands, D66): If your coalition partner fails to keep their word, don’t retaliate immediately (tit-for-tat hardly works in politics), but do react in-house. It’s important for your coalition partners to know that you are not pleased with their decision, but you can show maturity in how you handle this. Ultimately, try not to hang out your dirty linen, don’t gloat when the others stumble. Public perception of coalition is important, don’t underestimate it. There are coalitions that grant each other victories (one for you, one for us) and those that begrudge each other everything (if I don’t get my way here, you won’t get yours there). Presentation is part of the equation, but mutual trust and atmosphere is the determining factor. In fact, trust is your coalition’s biggest asset, don’t squander it. Once mutual trust is gone, everything becomes much harder. Remember that oppositions don’t bring down governments, coalition

"Public perception of coalition is important, don’t underestimate it.

D66, Netherlands"
partners do. The opposition will find weakest link and keep prodding at it until it snaps. The opposition will hurt you when they can. They will vote against everything they stand for if they think it will lead to a government collapse: do not count on them for anything.

(Denmark, Radikale Venstre): The ultimate challenge for any coalition government, especially minority coalition governments dependent on support from other parties, is to manage the interaction within the coalition. One can look at it as a multidimensional matrix of personal interactions which have to work successfully: (1) Within the core government management committee consisting of senior ministers, (2) between each minister and the relevant spokespersons from the other coalition parties inside and outside the government, (3) between the group of ministers and the group of members of parliament within each party, (4) within the group of ministerial communication advisors, (5) between a party’s ministers and parliamentarians and the governing bodies in the party’s constituent organization etc. As one approached the next election after building a coalition one must address the issue of securing that each coalition partner has sufficient political room to address its constituency so that the coalition in total maximize the chance of being re-elected. This in practice requires that most of the controversial parts of the agreed legislation in front-loaded and dealt with around two years before the next election. To make hard compromises while at the same time focusing on your own long-term values when addressing you own constituency in preparation for election is in practice next to impossible.

To ensure that the agreed policy is implemented, a Policy Coordination Secretariat has been set up at the Prime Minister’s Office. The Secretariat consists of a State Secretary from each of the parties in government, assisted by a number of coordinators from that party, divided up by ministerial areas. Essentially, the Secretariat consists of four smaller policy coordination secretariats, one for each party in government. All policy coordination secretaries have the same numbers of coordinators (regardless of the size of the party and regardless of number of ministers).

All matters have to be approved by the Secretariat before they can proceed for a decision. Only when the responsible person at the Policy Coordination Secretariat has given the go-ahead to the ministry responsible for the matter, it can be placed on the agenda for a Government meeting. There are also common meetings between the four parliamentary groups couple of times every year. Representatives of the coalition partners (party leaders, secretary generals, MPs) make statements together, arrange seminars, do different study visits etc.

When one party leader makes a major statement (article, interview etc.) this is communicated to the others in advance, so that everyone is aware of the process and announcements.
Regardless of how well do you know your coalition partner and how detailed is the coalition agreement, there will be many disputes between governing partners. It’s crucial to find a good mechanisms to resolve those dispute - for the sake of coalition stability.

### 2.3 What about disagreements between us?
Is there a way of resolving disputes and disagreements in coalition?

**(Netherlands, VVD):** Always inform each other about major policy proposals you want to go public with. You might disagree on something, but in order to maintain a good personal relationship, it’s better not to surprise each other. Decide on a procedure what to do if there are disagreements. It’s important that you have a clear understanding of the position of other parties and know a way of communicating your differences with your coalition partner(s). It mainly depends on trusting each other and remaining disciplined within the coalition.

**(Germany, FDP):** This is mostly handled by the chairs of the parliamentary groups or the party leaders. There is no real mechanism, but the real negotiations always take place after the coalition agreement is signed. The coalition partner can be a much bigger challenge than the opposing parties.

**(Belgium, Open VLD):** In Parliament itself, quite a high degree of party discipline exists. As private member’s bills are possible, a similar coalition logic

> We solve our problems behind the closed doors.

*Reform Party, Estonia*
applies: government parties will try to agree on proposals and give priority to issues included in the government agreement. They will try to avoid public discussions about issues on which coalition parties disagree in order to prevent the possibility for the opposition to exploit the disagreement between government parties. However, on certain topics, it might be that the government itself will ‘leave the matter to Parliament’, thus recognizing that bills receive a parliamentary majority different from the government coalition.

(Slovenia, Civic List): Different opinions within the government are usually resolved internally. Prior to making any decision, matters are usually carefully examined to form a clear view and to find the optimal solution. The most significant issues of national importance (for example constitutional changes) are being discussed and approved among all parliamentary parties. Nonetheless, coalition partners were allowed to freely express their views on issues not included in the coalition agreement.

(UK, Liberal Democrats): Dispute resolution process was built in the process of negotiations and agreed on. If there are major disagreements between the coalition partners, we try to sort them at departmental level. If that fails, the issue is raised at the ‘Quad’ – the two leaders of the coalition parties (Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister) and their senior parliamentary representatives. Remember - trust is a key issue in coalition.
Every coalition has its end. Whether it’s because of breach of trust, fundamental disagreement, or simply the flow of electoral cycle, it’s important to be prepared. This section will show you what to consider.

3.1 WHEN DO WE EXIT THE COALITION?
What are the red-lines?

- **(Netherlands, VVD):** Voters eventually want a stable government that delivers on core issues, such as security, infrastructure, investment and climate. Political instability can threaten these core tasks of the government. Letting a government collapse is therefore a major political decision that can have major consequences. The VVD is reluctant to call for new elections while being in government. **Voters expect us to govern, not to gamble.** If a government loses confidence, or political differences become irreconcilable, politicians should never be afraid of elections. Calling for elections is only a good option if it’s obvious that the common good would be harmed by avoiding elections.

- **(Belgium, Open VLD):** Despite the complicated nature of Belgian politics, an exit of a government party is a rare occasion. If it does happen, it mostly relates to fundamental disagreements between the coalition partners. If decisions are not taken during the coalition negotiations and are left to the government to decide, lengthy discussions might dominate the government’s work, until a point is reached in which a decision would be forced without the approval of one of the parties. In that case, that party has to make a trade-off between staying in government and having to defend an unpopular decision for its party base, and a government exit.

> Case in point is the government exit of Open Vld in 2010. After the coalition agreement in 2007 had left the institutional reforms to the government in order to temporarily defuse the situation, parties were faced with the necessity to conclude these reforms to a point where the opposition would use them to bash the ineffectiveness of the federal government coalition. As these institutional talks within the government also deteriorated the relations between the parties, other important social and economic reforms did not take off as Open Vld anticipated. Therefore, after another round of institutional talks had failed, the leadership of Open Vld
decided to pull the plug of the federal coalition due to its inability to govern. The Open Vld Deputy Prime Minister announced the government exit through Twitter with the Latin phrase “alea iacta est” (“The die is cast”). Early elections would follow two months later. Despite a hard fought campaign, Open Vld lost a quarter of its vote share in the 2010 elections. The main victor in Flanders were the Flemish Nationalists of N-VA who had made institutional reform a priority. The analysis here was that the voter had agreed with Open Vld that a radical change was necessary. However, they did not reward the party that had the courage to end the previous government. Although economic reforms were the core of the liberal platform, the government fell on an institutional issue. The lesson here seems to be that a government exit should clearly be linked to a point that is a priority for the party itself. If not, voters will punish the party that caused the premature elections.

• (Estonia, Reform Party): Getting out of the government is never an easy decision. It is like a marriage - together for better and for worse. But it does not mean that you can lose your face. Sometimes you win and sometimes you lose. Try to avoid going between the conflicts of your coalition partner and opposition. Public criticism of your coalition partner does not help. If there are more than two parties in the government, the situation may become more complex, but if you see that being in the game is more damaging than being out of the game, you should consider getting out. Don’t forget - in politics it’s almost always “not what you say, but what others hear”. You also shouldn’t rely on emotions. Leaving government is a decision to be taken with pragmatism and careful consideration. Opposition has its benefits, but you should always consider other factors: timing, when are the next elections, if you leave, how many other possible partners there are to take over your seat, what will other coalition partners do?

“Voters expect us to govern, not to gable.”

VVD, Netherlands

• (Finland, Keskusta): Despite the long history of coalition continuity in Finland, the possibility of dissolving a government still exists and can happen if another side breaks the government deal or one party decides to resign due to an individual case. This has happened
in Finland in the past, when one of the smaller parties has left the coalition government. However, trust is the basis of our coalition. Remember, parties are not committed to continuing co-operation after elections. In 2007, for example, our government partner changed from Social Democratic Party to National Coalition Party, from left to right.

• **(Croatia, HNS):** The only issues that could constitute red lines for us are fundamental issues that we, as a liberal party, have been advocating for years. In the case that the largest coalition partner insisted on putting together or forcing through the legislation that would be against our core values and ideas, it could mean the termination of the coalition.

• **(Slovenia, Civic List):** Red lines are always relative, but there are certain situations where we, as liberals, have to leave the coalition. Matters of morality, equality and fairness that we all represent have to take priority. We found that we could not be in the government led by the Prime Minister accused of corruption - this was our red line and we decided to ‘leave the room’ and distance ourselves from the corrupt officials.

After one year of governing, the Civic List was faced with the decision to stay or leave the ruling coalition. The national anti-corruption commission issued a report that made serious corruption allegations against the heads of the two leading parties, including Prime Minister Mr. Janez Janša, who did not want to resign. To the Civic List the anti-corruption commission’s report meant crossing the red line and so the party left the coalition immediately afterwards. Party’s leadership gained full support for that decision from the Council of the Civic List, the party’s highest executive body beside the congress (also responsible to make this kind of decisions). As the leaders of most parliamentary political parties at that time preferred forming a new government instead of early election, the Civic List afterwards signed another coalition agreement with a centre-left coalition and gained the position of the minister for interior, minister for justice and minister for infrastructure and spatial planning. These three positions in the government were crucial for the Civic List to implement programme priorities.
(Netherlands, D66): Leaving coalition is not easy. You have to plan and strategize each step in the end game like a military operation, there is no room for surprises. Try to keep party unity, divisions cost votes and credibility. It’s crucial to define your breaking points internally beforehand and don’t let other parties do that for you, make sure they are communis opinio (life or death issues). If you eventually decide on leaving, keep control of your message and repeat it until long after the coalition has fallen. Lastly, don’t be rude or indecent, even if others are - you may be in the same coalition boat next month. Few things to remember in this crucial junction are:

- Elections are not won on past results, but on promises for the future.
- Everything you did wrong in government can and will be held against you, everything you achieved will be claimed by the other party. Don’t get upset, that’s life in power.
- The opposition will start to sense when your electoral mandate has run thin, before you do and will use all in its power to accelerate the process.
- You can only bring down your government once.

Which policy areas lead to coalition splits?

Note: In compiling the above analysis, we tallied the number of times coalition cabinets terminated as a result of policy conflicts. Where conflicts within two or more policy areas contributed to the demise of a single coalition cabinet, these were counted as separate cases. Data covers 1945–1999 period for 13 Western European countries. Data total 101% due to rounding.

Source: IFG analysis of data from Müller and Strom, *Coalition Governments in Western Europe*.

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