

UK government shifts further to the right

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This week, UK prime minister David Cameron reshuffled his cabinet and made a distinct turn to the right.

The Conservative/Liberal Democrat government saw its first change in leadership since it came to power in May 2010.

As deeply unpopular as its programme of austerity is, Cameron made clear there would be no backing down from spending cuts and privatisations.

Instead, a number of noted right-wingers were promoted while Conservatives who are seen by their colleagues as wet, “one nation” throwbacks to an earlier era were unceremoniously dumped. Justice Secretary Kenneth Clarke, the closest thing to a personable Tory, and his close ally, Sir George Young, the leader of the House of Commons, were demoted. Clarke was moved to the position of minister without portfolio in the Cabinet Office.

Andrew Lansley, the health secretary responsible for the government’s Health and Social Care Bill, aimed at paving the way for the full privatisation of the National Health Service (NHS), is widely hated. But he was replaced by perhaps the one man more popularly despised and hostile to the NHS, the former culture secretary, Jeremy Hunt.

Hunt even wanted to remove the NHS tribute from the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, and in 2009 co-authored a book entitled *Direct Democracy*, which called for the NHS to “be dismantled” as it was “a 60 year mistake” and “no longer relevant”.

Jeremy Hunt is a central figure in the ongoing crisis at Rupert Murdoch’s UK operation, News International. He was chosen by Cameron to adjudicate on Murdoch’s News Corporation’s £8 billion bid for the TV satellite channel BSkyB, after having publicly declared himself a “cheerleader” for the bid. He will be just as enthusiastic in cheering on the private health corporations as they take over large swathes of the

NHS and shut down the less profitable sectors.

In the face of such a rightward lurch, what passes for the liberal media was obsessed with the possible implications for the future of the coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Both the *Guardian* and the *Independent* made a desperate effort to maintain the pretence that Nick Clegg’s party is a moderating influence on the Tories that should not be marginalised.

Guardian political editor Patrick Wintour wrote, “This was a reshuffle by the Conservative party for the Conservative party, designed to make the party more at ease with itself, and allow it to be seen as a distinctive right of centre ideological force at the next election.”

“It is not a reshuffle for the coalition, or more cohesive government,” he complained. “In his choices Cameron has shown little deference to Nick Clegg, and instead paid attention to the demands of his parliamentary party. The Rose Garden [the lawn at Downing Street where Cameron and Clegg made their first joint statement] is now closed until further notice.”

However, after noting that “Senior Lib Dem officials did not deny the reshuffle will be seen as a shift to the right”, he still argued that “the coalition agreement and the decision making processes, including government write rounds and meetings of the Quad, remain firmly intact.”

Andrew Grice of the *Independent* argued that “if the newly appointed Tory ministers try to push through a raft of right-wing measures before the election they will face opposition from the Lib Dems, who do have a veto on policy if not people. Policies still have to be signed off by Mr Clegg; the reshuffle does not magically create a Commons majority for the Tories, however much they might wish otherwise.”

All of this is transparent nonsense. The Liberal Democrats retained all of their five seats in cabinet as the Tories lurched still further to the right precisely because they pose no threat whatsoever to Cameron.

The fact is that Clegg is more despised even than Cameron because he is seen as a liar and a hypocrite, someone who junked every one of his campaign pledges when taking office alongside the Tories.

Wintour speaks of a “conflict between effective government” and the “party interest” when the overriding feature of contemporary politics is the degree to which party allegiance has lost any relevancy. In fact, the programmes of Cameron and Clegg are all but indistinguishable. The Liberal Democrats entered the coalition fully signed up to its right-wing agenda, with £123 billion in public spending cuts being imposed.

Clegg even rejected claims that the coalition would become more right-wing after the reshuffle, declaring, “Right from day one, this government was anchored in the centre ground. We’ve got a coalition agreement which is there, which is a tablet of stone setting out what we are going to do. That is not going to change.”

Far from the right-wing make-up of the government resulting in a “marginalisation” of the Liberal Democrats, it is they that have marginalised themselves by acting as front men for the Tories. The cabinet reshuffle has only confirmed what is self-evident to millions of people: This is a right-wing government, dedicated to the further enrichment of a handful of super-wealthy parasites at the expense of the jobs, pay, and conditions of working people and the elimination of social services on which millions depend.

For the vast majority, the notion that one Conservative is preferable to another, or that the Liberal Democrats function as some sort of moderating influence in government, is laughable. That is why the reshuffle that dominated the nation’s press was largely seen as a non-event.

Why then did it dominate the editorial offices of the *Guardian* and *Independent* and lead to so many tortured and prominent column inches of news script? Both papers reflect the political concerns of a privileged petty-bourgeois stratum, who are doing very well from the tax-cutting, anti-welfare, cheap labour agenda of the Tories, but who are, more than Mr. Cameron and his Eton- and Oxbridge-educated ilk, still aware of the seething discontent building up in the working population.

Functioning as political watchdogs, theirs is a warning to the Tories not to dispense with the fig leaf

provided by the Liberal Democrats. But their warnings only emphasise how out of touch with popular opinion they too have become.

There has been barely any reference in the media to the possibility that the Labour Party might benefit politically from the Tories’ ongoing and increasingly naked shift to the right. This is a tacit admission by its apologists in the media that Labour’s claim to represent an alternative to Cameron et al. is as tattered as that of the Liberal-Democrats.



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