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The statecraft of the UK coalition government

by Jonathan Chaplin

Forty days is too soon to identify reliably the trajectory of Britain's Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, but its 35-page policy agreement contains clear pointers to its intended direction of travel. The official line is that the agreement heralds the discovery of common "liberal" (in the European, not the American, sense) principles between the two parties. And indeed, David Cameron has sought to move the Conservatives toward a "liberal conservatism," while Nick Clegg represents the more pro-free market and individualist wing of the Liberal Democrats.

The Conservatives campaigned on the need for a move "from Big State to Big Society," attacking Labour's squeezing out of the independent responsibilities of individuals and intermediate institutions. In the agreement, such "Big Society" talk is blended with Liberal Democrat aspirations to "disperse power" and liberate individuals and local communities to exercise greater decision-making responsibility. Thus the document promises "to distribute power and opportunity to people rather than hoarding authority within government," and to effect "a radical redistribution of power away from Westminster and Whitehall to councils, communities and homes."

But when we examine the policy detail what we find is a more complex view of the role of government. There is no straightforward transfer of authority away from central government to somewhere else. True, a raft of laws and several non-departmental public bodies are set for the chop. And many of the planned new measures are not imperative or indicative but permissive or facilitative. But whether the net effect of the overall program will be "smaller" or "bigger" government is not easy to predict, (though the drastic austerity budget of June 22nd will undoubtedly reduce the proportion of national income spent by the state).

This should come as no surprise. The laudable goal of restoring proper responsibility to individuals and to a range of public and nonpublic institutions is not the same as simply "shrinking the state." It re-

quires the establishment of a multi-faceted framework of just public relationships across society as a whole. Sometimes this requires government to step back, at other times to step forward.

Thus, for example, while the agreement contains several measures to lift the regulatory burden on businesses and reduce corporate taxation, it also envisages a welter of new economic interventions: to restore responsible decision-making in the banking sector, to require companies to report on their social and environmental duties, to reform energy markets, and to increase consumer protection.

Further, while there are significant transfers of authority from central to local government, there are also measures which restrict local authorities in new ways: a freeze on local taxation, limits on their use of investigatory powers, and tighter rules on local authority newspapers.

Equally, major decentralizations of power are envisaged for public services, yet alongside new mechanisms of regulation. In the national Health Service, for example, a bonfire of ministerial controls stands alongside newly-imposed national regulations: a uniform expansion of "best practice," a beefed-up quality inspectorate, and new contracts for doctors and dentists. In education, parents and teachers are ceded new rights to set up their own (publicly-funded) schools, while central government is also set to establish new national performance tables and expanded disciplinary powers for teachers.

The new UK government may prove an interesting case study of the central proposition of a "public justice" perspective: that statecraft is not simply about the reduction of government but about the proper attribution of plural social and personal responsibilities among many sources of social and political governance in a complexly interconnected society.

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