

Talking It Through

Judi Atkins, *Conflict, Co-operation and the Rhetoric of Coalition Government*. Palgrave. 2018. xi + 184 pages. ISBN 9780230359673.

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When there is a voting system in place that has continuously resulted in a situation in which one of two traditional major parties has been able to secure enough seats to form a government, change to this puts all participants in a new situation. In the United Kingdom, the term “hung parliament” refers to a situation in which the first-past-the-post voting method fails to provide any single party with the needed majority. As the country needs a stable government in order to have votes of confidence to handle everyday business and lead the country, the party with the most seats can either form a coalition government together with junior partner, as happened in the UK in 2010, or form a government with the support of another party without a formal coalition agreement, as happened in 2015. The former option in particular requires negotiations to reach an agreement and work in order to have the government survive the length of the entire parliament, and it is on this that Judi Atkins’ *Conflict, Co-operation and the Rhetoric of Coalition Government* focuses.

The period of the book, namely 2010–2015 is promising and also affords a brief view of the subsequent general elections of 2015, when the Conservative Party formed a government supported by the small Northern Ireland DUP without a formal coalition agreement. The coalition between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats, formed in 2010, offered the latter party its best chance to rise to power and to implement its much-desired electoral reform, but at the same time establishing the coalition subjected the junior partner to strain from a numerically larger and ideologically different governing partner.

Dividing her book into eight chapters, Atkins aims to afford her readers a view of the rhetorical aspects of coalition life, a task she accomplishes by restricting her analysis to the rhetorical identification strategies of key politicians such as Prime Minister David Cameron and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, and to some contributions from both backbenchers and other frontbenchers. As her starting point, Atkins utilizes Kenneth Burke’s theory of rhetoric as identification in order to illustrate how attention is directed in a particular situation to some aspects rather than others. Her book approaches the coalition politics by means of a thematic division that seems to benefit the analysis. Simultaneously, author does not systematically engage at great length with the exhausting corpora of coalition, but focuses on some particular fo-

rums to express political identification strategies: election manifestos and selected parliamentary debates, party conferences, TV debates and other forums for political rhetoric. These sources, supplemented by secondary literature do indeed provide enough support for the findings Atkins proposes. Atkins analyses rhetoric and presents her interpretation of how the perspective of ideological identification explains the arguments utilized the rhetoric.

As Atkins shows, there was a lasting tension between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats, although concerted rhetorical efforts were made to defuse difficult situations. In her analysis, Atkins focuses on coalition bargaining, the formation of the coalition, higher education policy, constitutional reform, the European Union, foreign policy and the 2015 General Election campaigning. These themes are logical selections for the book structure, and among them higher education policy as well as constitutional reform had the most significant results for the Liberal Democrats, whereas the Conservative rhetoric towards the European Union had to cope with the increasing popular support enjoyed by UKIP.

The books aptly illustrates how the question of continuity and discontinuity in rhetoric became an essential way for coalition partners to identify with a direction thought to be politically more useful in different circumstances. Here emerges the key challenge of coalition politics, which Atkins describes as the unity-distinctiveness dilemma, how and when co-operation ought to be advocated and how and when a party should seek to differentiate itself. Both strategies carry risks and offer potential benefits, and in fact, in the case of a coalition between two parties, there is a partisan interest to preserve ideological distinctiveness, a feature apparent in various phases of the coalition government analysed.

As is well known, the Liberal Democrats seemed to be on the losing side of the coalition, when the number of their seats fell from 57 to a mere eight seats between 2010 and the General Elections of 2015, especially due to the party's inability to keep their election promises in regard to higher education fees. Furthermore, the party was able to reach a compromise with the Conservatives and get a referendum on a new voting system but failed to gather enough popular support to implement the change. This failure resulted specifically from the senior partner's work in the coalition against the proposition to change the voting system from the first-past-the-post system to an alternative voting system. Nevertheless, the rhetorical perspective is shown to explain the extent to which different parties sought to differentiate themselves. It is also able to illuminate how the parties shared a similar ideology, especially in foreign policy, and how the debt crisis was utilized to not only attack the Labour Party in opposition but to provide the needed link between the coalition partners to implement economically stringent policies. Here different rhetorical identification strategies are indirectly suggested to be rather selected strategies

in various situations, limiting the chance for *ex tempore* stances and responses and thus establishing patterns of rhetoric and dialogue closely connected to party ideology. Some concepts, such as “fairness”, “the national interest” as well as “sovereignty”, are raised in connection to themes. These concepts provide instruments for ideological identification and the contestability of meanings attached to these concepts are shown to both enable and disable agreements on various issues. The success and outcomes of the rhetorical strategies utilized in different situations are often briefly touched upon by describing how events and debates proceed, forming key part of the author’s analysis. More attention to a more systematic analysis of concepts could have improved the argument and illuminated exactly how the dynamics of the debate between two parties in government and one major party in opposition worked out, as Westminster is well known for its cut-and-thrust debating style between opposing sides.

To sum up, as a nicely focused study on coalition politics, book has most to offer for situations resembling the coalition government of David Cameron and Nick Clegg and of course to scholars of British politics, especially if future elections lead to further efforts to create coalition governments. Atkins calls for more research on coalition politics, but from the point of view a reader, one might have expected to read some historical contextualization on how rhetoric had a connection to ideological identification in the effort to establish a coalition government in 1974, the last incidence of a hung parliament. At the same time the book also provides ideas for the study of more traditional multi-party governments in which more disparate parties are interested in preserving their ideological distinctiveness.