

Is the party over? Have we lost any real chance of demo...

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Andrew Rawnsley seeks to present an argument on coalition government [in the Observer this morning](#). I confess I see something else in what he has written. It seems to me he is saying that choice is over and that democracy as we have known it may no longer work.

As he argues:

During the 2010 election, David Cameron travelled the country issuing what he hoped were blood-freezing warnings that a hung parliament would be the most gruesome catastrophe to engulf Britain since the Black Death. Having presided over a coalition for five years, a coalition he will want to present as an overall success, he won't be able to beat the same drum in 2015.

That's obviously true. As is this:

Ed Miliband will come under pressure to be much clearer than he is at the moment about what Labour would do in the event that the voters decline to reward anyone with a majority.

And the inevitable consequence is that:

Both will have to mind their language about the Lib Dems. The Tories and Labour can be — and, you bet, will be — as rude and personal as they like about each other because the outcome no one expects is a German-style "grand coalition" of left and right. But David Cameron and Ed Miliband will have to calibrate with care what they say about Nick Clegg as he will have to modulate the levels of abuse he issues in their direction. Mr Cameron can hardly slag off Mr Clegg as "not fit for government" when they will have spent five years sitting in the same cabinet. The Lib Dem leader cannot credibly condemn Mr Cameron as a completely useless prime minister when he has been his deputy for half a decade.

You can be sure, as Rawnsley also adds, that Clegg cannot dismiss Labour either. And nor will Labour dismiss them.

And this is worrying. It's worrying because it implies that we have a party - the Lib Dems - who have shown [themselves spineless in government](#) but who seem likely to remain in office whilst we have two other parties who know that whatever they say they may not be able to deliver on their promises. That's hardly a process of democratic choice: it's also a long way from the type of government that 'first past the post' was meant to deliver. Why keep such a system of voting when it cannot even deliver on its own terms?

The question that, I think, is being posed is whether the party is now over? Is it that choice has really been eliminated? Are we seeing convergence on the mean - or what approximates to the Westminster view of the centre ground in this case - whether we like it or not, implying choice is effectively at an end?

Clearly, as a democrat, and as someone who sees the Westminster view of the centre ground as unacceptable as a way forward for the UK, not least because it leaves in place a status quo that marginalises far too many in this country, I hope this is not the case. That is why I seek an alternative to this consensus. But there are worrying signs. I will come to the whole future of democratic debate in this country later today: it seems something the papers want to ignore. Instead note what Will Hutton [has to say in his Observer article](#) today, the tone of which I find quite chilling, whether he intended that or not.

Hutton's argument is that power is draining away from those in whom it is formally placed, but with no obvious substitute in sight. It's his contention that single issue lobby groups, blogs, twitter and other influences have led to hyper-competition trying to sway opinion and that the outcome is not always beneficial. As he puts it:

Any genuinely tough call — to put property taxation on 2013 rather than 1991 values, accept the need for immigration, cigarette packaging or even build [the HS2 train line](#) — is made incomparably harder or is simply off-limits because of the veto of a single-issue pressure group that a party is no longer strong enough to take on.

It is the decay of power. The centre fragments and power devolves to myriad new forces that often exercise their power with narrow obsessions in mind. Who now speaks for the whole? Who keeps a macro view, mediating competing interests and conflicts and has the courage to make decisions based on a strategic view of all our interests, not just sectional ones?

His answer? It's that politics has to fight back:

Parties have to fight back —arguing better, crystallising policies better, running primaries to select their candidates to widen their appeal — as does our democracy. Representative government was a great invention. It now has to be saved from the single-issue, monomaniac, simplifying, self-interested vandals — a much more interesting position for Mr Miliband to take than a belated "me too" conversion to a

referendum on the EU.

That looks like an appeal for democracy and yet within it is a demand that appears to suggest the freedom of others outside political parties be limited.

Is that really what Hutton is saying? Is he really arguing that because existing party politics is failing the right of others to suggest alternative thinking should be denied?

I believe in the state. Not many people have of late had the courage [to write a book about the fact that they do](#), but I have. So of course I think there is a need for individuals to work within the constraints of the common good - that's what states do. But does that really mean that they have to suppress their views to that of a political party? And that there should be no pressure groups seeking to suggest the ways in which those parties and democracy itself should progress?

I hope that's not what Hutton is saying because the state is only valid - and political parties are only valid - when they are open to change. And suppressing opinion, or the avenues for expression of it, is not the way to achieve that goal.

I welcome debate on democracy itself - but this trend is worrying, [and that's not the first time today I've had to say so](#).