

**Collective Ministerial Responsibility in British Government:
the
testing of a convention, 2010-2019**

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Abstract

The functioning of the convention of collective ministerial responsibility in British Government during the period 2010-19 is assessed by examining, in turn: the convention's historical context, its operation during the period of the 2010-15 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, and its application between 2015-19 in the extraordinary circumstances of the Brexit fissures. The key variables and causal factors which historically affected the implementation of the convention continued to have relevance in this period, during which it further evolved under the relative tensions of coalition politics and the more severe strains of fundamental policy differences on a matter of strong political salience. In spite of the stresses placed upon the convention's operation during this extraordinary period, it remains viable as a core feature of the constitution.

Key Words

Collective responsibility, ministerial resignations, coalition, Brexit, constitution.

Introduction

The British system of government operates on the basis of a constitution which is only partly 'written' in codified forms, but is dependent for its functioning on a number of key doctrines and conventions, which are partly or wholly uncoded. One of the most significant of these is the convention of collective ministerial responsibility, which governs the relationships between the Prime Minister and his or her colleagues, enforces discipline on the government, and theoretically establishes unity of purpose and direction across myriad government policies, thus facilitating accountability to parliament and to the electorate. The convention has evolved over

time to align with the challenges and realities of government, but its basic principles, which we set out below, have remained intact. The purpose of this article is to examine the functioning of this convention during a particularly testing period for British government, spanning the special circumstances of coalition government between 2010 and 2015, the subsequent time of extraordinary turbulence following the decision of the Conservative government to hold a referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union in 2016, and the consequences of that vote over the subsequent three years of Theresa May's premiership. Our aim is to establish the meaning, understanding, and application of the convention of collective ministerial responsibility, before examining, in turn, the impact of the successive periods of coalition government and Brexit turmoil on the convention. The fundamental questions we seek to address are: to what extent has the experience of the period of the Cameron and May premierships, 2010-2019, affected the operation of this key element of the constitution, and is the convention still fit for purpose? An overarching issue is the degree to which a core constitutional convention of this type can retain its essential meaning and purpose if it has been subjected to significant strain and tension. We conclude that, despite the severe stresses imposed on it during this extraordinary period, the convention remains a viable and important feature of the constitution.

Rules of the game: historical interpretation, meaning, purpose and implementation of the convention

The convention of collective ministerial responsibility in British government emerged in the late 18th century, as a device designed to prevent the monarch from

conducting business through individual ministers, and to present the King with a united front: an agreed policy position from the Prime Minister and Cabinet as a group. In the 19th century, as the power of patronage waned and the House of Commons became increasingly dominated by party allegiances, the convention evolved into a mechanism, the essential meaning and purpose of which was to secure discipline and the unity of the government against the opposition. As noted above, a corollary of this, and a further element of its meaning and purpose, is enhanced accountability to parliament and the electorate, via increased clarity regarding the content and detail of government policy. The key features of the convention have been described as ‘the unanimity rule and the confidentiality rule’¹ which mean that ministers (the convention evolved to extend beyond the Cabinet and include all ministers) are obliged to publicly support the agreed policies of the government (including the management of the government’s collective resources across budgets, legislative timetables, deployment of support staff, *inter alia*) regardless of their personal reservations, and to respect the confidentiality of policy discussions within departments, the Cabinet or cabinet committees. Norton encapsulated this as a requirement that ministers ‘support government policy, both by vote and voice.’² The convention’s meaning and application in modern government are set out formally in the Ministerial Code and the Cabinet Manual³.

The convention was formally suspended on three occasions during the 20th century.⁴ In 1932, the coalition National Government reached an ‘agreement to differ’ on the issue of tariffs, in order to allow the free-trade supporting Liberal ministers to remain in the administration. In 1975, Harold Wilson’s Labour Government permitted dissenting ministers to campaign in public for a ‘No’ vote, contrary to the official

government position, during the referendum on Britain's continued membership of the European Community. Two years later, James Callaghan's Labour Government allowed ministers to diverge from the formal position of the government on the choice of a voting system for elections to the European Parliament. The Prime Minister's power to manage the operation of the convention was emphasised by Callaghan when he was asked about its application:

I certainly think that the doctrine should apply, except
in cases where I announce that it does not.⁵

In these historical cases, opinions divided on whether suspension of the convention in order to secure party unity fundamentally breached constitutional norms, or reinforced the significance of the convention because there was collective support for a PM's decision to set it aside temporarily.⁶

These exceptional historical cases aside, the convention dictates that ministers who feel unable to abide by collective responsibility should resign from the government, or risk being dismissed by the Prime Minister. However, in practice, ministers have been able to defy the restrictions of the convention while remaining in post, and the fate of dissenting members of a government at any given time can hinge upon the nature of the policy issue, the political standing of the minister, and the attitude and/or strength of the Prime Minister. For instance, Harold Wilson dismissed Eric Heffer from his post as Minister of State for Industry in 1975 because he defied the government's ruling on the suspension of collective responsibility that year by openly opposing the administration's policy in the House of Commons. However, Heffer's

senior colleague, Tony Benn, repeatedly made clear his disagreement with various aspects of the policies of the governments led by Wilson and Callaghan during the 1974-79 period, and remained in the Cabinet. The sanctions element of the convention tends to be applied with a degree of selectivity.

In the historical context, resignations on grounds of collective responsibility have outnumbered dismissals.⁷ One important reason for this is that even if they are willing to see departures, Prime Ministers may be reluctant to create damaging negative publicity for their administrations by firing dissenting ministers, preferring to deal with these individuals by removing them at the time of a general government reshuffle. The specific grounds for ministerial departures under collective responsibility have varied across categories. These include: disagreement with a specific policy, dissenting from the general drift of government policy, and disenchantment with the Prime Minister's management of government business. In the first category, we may cite Robin Cook's resignation as leader of the House of Commons in 2003 over his opposition to UK involvement in military action against Iraq. In the second category, an apposite example is Reg Prentice's departure as Minister of Overseas Development in 1976. Cases in the third category recurred during the Premiership of Margaret Thatcher, and can be best exemplified by the departure of Sir Geoffrey Howe from Cabinet in 1990. Later examples included Tom Watson's resignation from the Blair government in 2006 as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Defence.

The challenge of coalition government, 2010-15

The coalition government formed in 2010 between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, created pressure on the convention of collective ministerial responsibility, which was 'stretched, but not scrapped.'⁸ The hung parliament which resulted from the 2010 election left the Conservatives short of an overall majority. A formal coalition agreement covering most areas of domestic and foreign policy was reached with the Liberal Democrats. The agreement also identified several areas of potential and existing disagreements between the two parties.

David Cameron had sought, since his election as Conservative leader in 2005, to 'detoxify' and 'modernise' his party, 'updating' its positions on social issues and striking a more moderate and indeed 'progressive' tone on issues such as immigration, the environment, relations with the European Union and socioeconomic inequality. Nick Clegg, his Liberal Democrat opposite number had been elected as the standard-bearer of the 'Orange Book' wing of the Liberal Democrats, which was economically or 'classically' liberal, and had gained a degree of ascendancy over the 'social liberal' faction.

In both parties, the leaderships were not in each case wholly aligned with their wider parliamentary groupings or their grass roots memberships. Conversely, the two party leaderships shared some key political leanings. For instance, although both Clegg and Cameron had serious reservations about New Labour's apparent 'statism' and its response to the financial crisis, they favoured certain aspects of the continuation and deepening of the previous government's programme of public services reform. Key differences centred on the desirability and extent of changes to the UK's political

and constitutional systems, relations with the European Union, higher education funding, and elements of defence and security policy. It was in these policy areas where collective responsibility, during the five years of coalition government, was either strained or formally suspended.

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A key plank of the coalition agreement was to be a programme of constitutional and political reform. The most high profile of these was the decision to hold a referendum on replacing Britain's plurality voting system with the (marginally) more proportional Alternative Vote system. Collective responsibility on the issue was temporarily suspended, and the vote was held in 2011, with Clegg forming a campaigning partnership with the Leader of the Opposition Ed Miliband in supporting the change, while David Cameron led the No campaign. All Liberal Democrat ministers followed Clegg in supporting the change, while the vast majority of Conservative ministers supported Cameron. This provoked a considerable degree of conflict between the coalition partners.

A subsequent disagreement within the coalition related to constitutional and political reform. The formal coalition agreement provided for reform of the House of Lords, with an elected second chamber replacing the extant part-appointed, part-hereditary arrangements. A Bill proposing a largely elected second chamber was introduced in 2014, but was subsequently withdrawn when it became apparent that it lacked sufficient support amongst Conservative MPs. The backlash from the Liberal Democrats was considerable, with Clegg publicly castigating Cameron and the Conservatives, stating that 'the Conservative party is not honouring the commitment to Lords reform and, as a result, part of our contract has now been broken.'⁹ As a

result, Clegg withdrew his party's support for reform of Commons constituency boundaries. While collective responsibility was not formally suspended or withdrawn, the spectre of the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister striking such publicly different notes was something almost unprecedented in British government outside of referendums.

The coalition agreement had tentatively broached the issue of the funding of higher education in England, giving consideration to the recommendations of a review of funding issues. The agreement made clear that if the Liberal Democrats were unable to support the measures, provisions would be made to 'allow for the Liberal Democrats to abstain in any vote.'¹⁰ When the review was published, and recommended an increased student contribution equivalent to £9000 a year the Liberal Democrats initially chose to take up their option to abstain from the vote. However, given the tight Parliamentary arithmetic, and the presence of Vince Cable (the Cabinet portfolio holder for higher education) as a key architect of the proposals, it was ultimately deemed politically infeasible for him - and consequently the Liberal Democrat coalition ministers, to act otherwise but publicly defend and vote for the enabling legislation.

Ministerial resignations and dismissals during 2010-2015 did not generally have their roots in breaches of collective responsibility or even, surprisingly, differences of opinion over policy between members of the two parties. Indeed, compared to Theresa May's premiership, which was defined by its extraordinarily high turnover of ministers, there were very few resignations. The most high profile departures were related to issues of perceived or actual personal impropriety.

Resignations undoubtedly did occur over differences of opinion over policy - most notably Sayeeda Warsi's resignation as Conservative Party Chair in protest at the Government's response to renewed conflict in Gaza, and Ian Duncan Smith's resignation over cuts to disability benefits – but these were not as a result of what would appear to be the most predictable trigger for resignation in an ideologically diverse coalition, namely principled Liberal Democrat resignation in protest at the decisions reached by a government which was numerically dominated by the Conservative Party.

Some Liberal Democrats publicly voiced misgivings about certain Coalition policies. For example, Sarah Teather, serving as Minister of State for Children and Families in 2012 publicly opposed the government's decision to introduce a cap on the total amount available to an individual to claim in benefits in 2012¹¹ and some Conservative MPs demanded her resignation as a result of this apparent breach of collective responsibility. In March 2014, the Liberal Democrat Business Secretary, Vince Cable, criticised the immigration policy of the then Home Secretary, Theresa May. In response, the Immigration Minister James Brokenshire openly criticised Cable's position.¹²

The coalition period undoubtedly demonstrated the robustness of collective responsibility as a key element of the UK's constitutional arrangements. In general, decisions were reached in a process of (largely) confidential negotiation between the

leaderships of the two coalition partners in private and supported in public by the relevant ministers. Some arguments, as shown above, spilled out into public view. But the flexibility of the convention was demonstrated when one coalition partner, or an individual, was allowed to publicly depart from the government line - or indeed not sanctioned for doing so.

This is particularly significant when Ministers may have been on record in the past expressing a diametrically opposed view in a different political context. However it might be argued that the trend towards a caveated collective responsibility with a 'safety valve' feature undermines to a certain extent a central tenet of the convention, namely the ability of the House of Commons to collectively hold the government, as a unit, to account.

The counterpoint to this is that exemptions from collective responsibility militate against two factors which are potentially damaging to democracy. The first is that these exemptions represent an acknowledgement of the unavoidable fact that differences of opinion, ideology, and perspective exist within governments. It can be argued that to pretend otherwise is to misinform, underestimate, or even disrespect voters. The second is that it may reduce instances of media interviewers exploiting differences in opinion between ministers and the 'government line' in their questioning. This often provokes a failure of ministers to give 'a straight answer to a straight question', which can negatively affect public perceptions of politicians and the political system as a whole (and therefore democracy).¹³

The challenge of Brexit, 2015-19

During this period the most significant challenge to the functioning of the convention of collective responsibility came from the fissures within government stemming from the issue of the UK's relationship with the European Union. This resulted in a formal suspension of the convention by Prime Minister Cameron in 2016, and, subsequently, in ongoing ministerial departures from the government of Theresa May between 2016 and 2019. Before examining the nature and consequences of this challenge, it should be noted that the convention was also temporarily relaxed during this period, on a separate issue. In October 2016, the May Government's support for the construction of a new runway at Heathrow Airport led to the announcement of a 'special arrangement' to allow ministers with previously expressed strong negative opinions on this infrastructure project (in many cases due to constituency interests) to resile from supporting government policy on this issue and restate their personal views. These ministers were expected to seek the permission of the Prime Minister before doing so, however, and were not allowed to actively campaign against the policy.

As the UK's negotiations on a potential new set of arrangements governing its membership of the European Union neared their conclusion, and following a Commons announcement on collective responsibility on 5 January 2016, David Cameron clarified the implications of this in a 'Personal Minute' sent to his colleagues on 11 January.¹⁴ This document made clear that ministers would be expected to support the party's manifesto commitment to negotiate 'a new settlement

for Britain in the EU' and to put this settlement to a referendum. At the conclusion of the negotiations with the EU, and throughout the referendum campaign, there would be 'a special arrangement' to permit individual ministers to take a different position from the official position of the government' although this would apply only to the issue of 'remain' or 'leave' and all other EU policy matters would continue to be covered by collective responsibility. The civil service would support the government's policy position (further guidance on this was issued by the Head of the civil service¹⁵) although the work of officials and special advisers would be subject to the rules on political campaigns during the final 28 days of the referendum process. The existence of these rules marked one significant difference between the referenda of 1975 and 2016.¹⁶

In the wake of the referendum outcome, a vote to leave the EU, the subsequent departure of Cameron from Downing Street in July 2016, and his replacement as PM by Theresa May, full collective responsibility on EU matters was to be reimposed. However, the fraught and divisive nature of the issues surrounding the UK's negotiation of its departure from the EU was to place significant strains on the practical application of the convention throughout the period of May's premiership.

In an attempt to secure a larger Conservative majority in the House of Commons, and, thereby, reduce the impact of opposition to the departure deal she was about to negotiate with the European Union, May called a General Election for June 2017. This gamble backfired for the Prime Minister when the election produced a hung parliament and left the government dependent upon a confidence and supply

agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party. Thereafter, May faced significant challenges in attempting to hold her government together, as the details of the Brexit negotiating strategy caused fissures between the Conservative Party's pro- and anti-Brexit factions. Attempts to secure a clear and consistent collective policy position on the details of Brexit were plagued by these divisions. One observer noted:

She appointed ministers ... who have publicly opposed her without sanction and many of them thanked her by resigning. The government cannot unite behind the Prime Minister's deal because there never was a collective position.¹⁷

During the May premiership between 2017 and 2019, if we exclude ministers who left government during reshuffles, and include only resignations on grounds of collective responsibility, there was 'a record number of ministerial resignations under a British prime minister since at least 1900' with 38 departures (36 of them over Brexit), including 11 from Cabinet level positions.¹⁸ This extraordinary period witnessed at least two episodes of particular note. On 8th and 9th July 2018, three ministers resigned due to their opposition to the details of the 'Chequers Agreement' which set out the government's proposals for the scope of the UK's future relations with the EU. Boris Johnson (Foreign Secretary) and David Davis (Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union) resigned from the Cabinet, along with the junior minister Steve Baker (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union). During November 2018 (on the 9th, 15th and 30th), six ministers resigned over the content of the draft withdrawal agreement setting out the proposed terms of the UK's departure from the EU. These ministers were: Jo Johnson, Minister of State for Transport and Minister for London; Shailesh Vara, Minister of State for Northern Ireland; Dominic Raab, Secretary of State for Exiting the

European Union; Esther McVey, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions; Suella Braverman, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union; and Sam Gyimah, Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation.

By this stage, it appeared that government unity and discipline were breaking down. On 13th March 2019 thirteen ministers, including four at Cabinet level, (David Gauke, Greg Clark, Amber Rudd and David Mundell) defied a three-line Whip and abstained in a vote on a Commons motion to prevent the UK leaving the European Union without an agreed deal. No resignations or dismissals followed.

Arguably, it is this instance which inflicted most damage on the convention. Formal suspension of the convention, ministerial departures (sackings or resignations), and even the occasional tolerated rebellion from a single (albeit high-profile) figure in the mould of Tony Benn, demonstrate the continuing efficacy of collective responsibility. However, the open flouting of the convention in the face of Prime Ministerial instruction to the contrary, with impunity, by a significant number of ministers, signalled a fundamental weakening of constitutional doctrine. One observed argued that, serious though it was, this episode did not represent the 'demise' of collective responsibility, but showed that 'government has simply failed to maintain the standard of solidarity set by it.'¹⁹ However, it is difficult to see how a government so obviously unable to maintain internal discipline on such a key issue could exist for long without inflicting fundamental and lasting damage on the concept of collective responsibility, or, how a government unable to maintain respect for and adherence to

the convention, could itself survive. In that sense at least, it was fortunate that the May administration came to an end only a few weeks later. There were many reasons for the collapse of the government, but the obvious breakdown in discipline and undermining of collective responsibility undoubtedly played a part in the process, and, in this respect, the convention can be said to have demonstrated its utility as a constitutional device which serves to secure the continuing viability of a government.

Conclusion: an evolving convention?

Our examination of the functioning of the convention of collective responsibility over the period 2010-19 reveals the continued importance and relevance of a set of key variables and causal factors which have governed its practical application historically. The convention's outcomes in terms of: a) formal suspension; b) ministerial departures (resignations or dismissals); and c) tolerated rebellions, were dependent upon the salience of the issue(s) plus the relative power of the Prime Minister at the time. In relation to ministerial departures, the driving factors were: a) disagreements on specific policy issues; b) opposition to the general drift of government policy; or c) disenchantment with PM's conduct of government business. Combinations of these factors might be in play in specific cases.

What have we learned about the overall operation of the convention during the period 2010-2019, under Prime Ministers Cameron and May, when it came under extraordinary strain? Collective responsibility was certainly affected by the reality of coalition government, the tensions within which, in this period were arguably exacerbated by the absence of unifying force presented by an existential external

threat (as was the case during the Second World War coalition). There was an elite level agreement over the 'big ticket' items of domestic policy, which subsequently caused little discord. More specifically, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat leaderships (through the novel constitutional mechanism of the 'Quad' of the respective party leaders and Treasury spokesmen) were in agreement over fiscal policy, and public services reform. Disagreements were, however, more evident in constitutional policy, where the respective party leaderships did not align. The first occurred in the context of a referendum in which the Coalition agreement expressly permitted the taking of different lines over the question of whether to adopt a new voting system. It is the second that may prove more enduring for the doctrine of collective responsibility, with a more *ad hoc* response to wrangling over House of Lords reform, and Cameron's either half-hearted or ineffective attempts to marshal his backbenches leading to open disagreement between the Prime Minister and his Deputy. The elements of the convention which facilitate governmental accountability, proximately to the House of Commons, and ultimately to the electorate, could be discerned during this period, although it might be argued that it was the minor party in the coalition which was punished electorally due to its (substantial) compliance with the convention and consequential failure to deliver on the programme for government on which it fought the 2010 election.

Should further fragmentation of the party system take place, and coalitions become more frequent as the basis for future governments, the Agreement which underpinned the 2010-15 administration would represent a useful blueprint for addressing divergent ideological and programmatic preferences, anticipating and

engaging with mitigation planning, and minimising the strain on collective responsibility.

The 2016-19 Brexit period, meanwhile, shows that majority one-party governments may suffer from greater unplanned breaches of collective responsibility when contingent, unforeseen, and uncontrollable externalities combine with underlying political dynamics. The May premiership, in particular, demonstrates the potential that a 'wicked problem' can have in creating a context in which rebellion, and ultimately breaches of the convention, become normalised and go unpunished. In this case, dissatisfaction with the broad thrust of government policy in a particular area, and the performance of the Prime Minister more generally created a situation in which the convention became a weaker guarantor of stability. The toleration of those rebellions further deepens this dynamic, creating fewer disincentives for wavering ministers.

Potentially, the types of factionalism and rebellion discussed here could recur, with consequences for collective responsibility. The post-2019 Conservative government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic has triggered a 'renewed factionalism' with many of those MPs associated with the 2017-2019 rebellions discussed above playing a central role.²⁰ Similarly, the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership became a hotbed of parliamentary discontent, with a Shadow Cabinet in seemingly continual open revolt, and a membership at times at odds with many of its parliamentary representatives.

These underlying divides in both parties persist (albeit, in Labour's case, under new leadership), and provide scope for future ruptures within governments. Of course, it is possible that, as has been the case in the past, periods of party instability and factionalism are followed by spells of unity and discipline, during which collective responsibility is less strained due to the threat of electoral penalties. However, it is also possible that these divides not only persist, but deepen, with resulting strain on collective responsibility, and increased pressure to temporarily suspend the convention. Notwithstanding this, the lesson of the period 2010-2019 is that the convention can withstand significant stresses and strains, and has an inherent flexibility which facilitates effective operation of government, while functioning within accepted boundaries and limits, which, if exceeded (as in the case of the May government), will contribute to the ultimate failure and collapse of a government. Under the May government, on the specific issue of Brexit, the convention of collective responsibility was, *de facto* (if not formally acknowledged as such), dispensed with. The consequences for the government were catastrophic in terms of the breakdown in discipline and the clear undermining of the authority of the Prime Minister. This was an obvious demonstration of the convention's value and importance, and the results of its negation.

Overall, this article demonstrates the counterintuitive finding that a two party coalition which encompassed a wide array of ideological perspectives over issues of high intra-party salience was able to maintain a higher degree of internal discipline owing to anticipating inevitable disagreements during the process of a shared programme

of government. Subsequently, a single party government, initially with a slim majority, and then with none at all, fell into rancour and ultimate dissolution owing to the intra-party debates related to the irreconcilable differences on the issue of Britain's terms of exit from the EU. A number of factors affect the operation of the convention, including whether it has been formally suspended and why, the threat or reality of ministerial resignations, and the toleration of those rebellions.

At the outset, we asked how the experience of the Cameron and May premierships affected the doctrine of collective responsibility. We have demonstrated that the period between 2010 and 2019 saw the convention subjected to significant strains and tensions, firstly through the operation of a coalition government, and secondly through extraordinary internal divisions within the party in power over a fundamental constitutional issue. We also posed the question of whether the convention could still be considered meaningful and fit for purpose in view of its exposure to extreme strains and tensions. Our conclusion is that although its bounds were, unsurprisingly, stretched and tested during the period of coalition government, collective responsibility emerged from that experience as a convention with demonstrable continuing functionality and purpose. The open wound of the Brexit issue during the May premiership had the potential to damage the convention more seriously. This was particularly because, in the absence of a formal suspension of collective responsibility, the pretence that the normal constitutional rules still applied, even in the face of growing evidence of disintegrating internal discipline within the government, became decreasingly sustainable. However, although the breakdown in collective responsibility was not the formal trigger for the collapse of the May premiership, it undoubtedly played a part in weakening that government in the House

of Commons, to the point where the departure of the PM became inevitable. In this respect, it can be argued that the convention's constitutional function, as a guarantor of governmental discipline and unity, at least to the point of continuing viability in parliament, was demonstrated to be meaningful and significant in the case of Brexit and the May government. Therefore, the convention remained viable, important, and fit for purpose.

Table: Suspensions of collective responsibility (2010-2019)

Issue	Description and outcome
Tuition fees vote (2010)	The convention was not formally suspended however the Coalition agreement made provision for Liberal Democrat ministers to abstain on any legislation which was contrary to commitments made in their 2010 election manifesto
Trident renewal (2010)	The Coalition Agreement made provision for the Liberal Democrats to 'continue to propose alternatives' to renewing Britain's nuclear weapons capability. The government eventually delayed a decision beyond the end date of the coalition's existence.
Nuclear power (2010)	The Coalition Agreement made provision for the relevant Liberal Democrat spokesperson was permitted to speak against the relevant National Planning Statement and for Liberal Democrat MPs to be able to abstain on relevant votes pertaining to the expansion of nuclear power in the UK.
AV Referendum (2011)	Conservative and Liberal Democrat ministers permitted to support opposite sides in the AV referendum, however the legislation to enable the referendum was subject to the usual requirements of collective responsibility.
House of Lords reform and Parliamentary boundaries (2014)	An open coalition split over House of Lords reform led to Liberal Democrat and Conservative ministers led to the Prime Minister (David Cameron) and Deputy Prime Minister (Nick Clegg) taking opposite positions on a crucial vote to reform parliamentary boundaries. Collective responsibility was not suspended at this time, however Liberal Democrat ministers were allowed to continue in post despite voting against the Government line.
EU Referendum (2016)	Collective responsibility remained in place during the passage of the legislation to enable the referendum on European Union membership and during David Cameron's intended 'renegotiation' of the UK's terms of membership. It was suspended for the issue of 'leave' or 'remain' until the referendum campaign had been completed.
Heathrow expansion (2016)	The Coalition Agreement made provision for opponents of a new runway at London Heathrow Airport to oppose, but not publicly campaign against, the government's proposed expansion – provided permission was sought and gained from the Prime Minister. This applied mainly to Ministers who had a particular constituency interest in opposing expansion.
Commons vote to prevent 'No Deal' (2019)	The increasingly fraught post-referendum period saw Theresa May, who had replaced Cameron as Prime Minister, forced to issue a <i>de facto</i> suspension of the doctrine of collective responsibility owing to the rebellion of a number of government ministers who were allowed to remain in post following their decision to oppose the flagship EU withdrawal agreement.

Notes

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