

The new UK coalition and the challenge of western Asia

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‘WE talk about our strategy but we are subordinate in our strategy to the United States,’ said former Liberal Democrat leader Sir Menzies Campbell in response to the new Foreign Secretary William Hague during the first full day of debate on the Queen’s speech, highlighting a weakness that the coalition Government may have to overcome. ‘We should be cautious therefore in forming strategies that do not take account of the fact that the US position may be subject to very considerable domestic pressure.’

Campbell’s comments must be seen within the context of William Hague’s meeting with Hillary Clinton in Washington DC as part of the first international trip that the new foreign secretary embarked on. Reemphasising the consensual foreign policies that have characterised the ‘special relationship’ between the two countries, at least rhetorically, Hague was quick to denounce the Iranian nuclear energy programme and reiterated Britain’s commitment to the war in Afghanistan.

It may be too early to judge, but I think it is safe to argue even at this early stage that Campbell’s comments are indicative of a wider dilemma that the coalition Government between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives will have to deal with. Whereas in some of the key domestic policies both parties seem to have found common ground, the vicissitudes of international politics may well shake and stir the young Government, especially when it embarks on navigating through the strong currents engulfing some parts of western Asia. The early exchanges seem to confirm that in terms of foreign policies, this coalition Government is by far less homogeneous than William Hague promised to his US counterpart.

Moreover, with the Liberal Democrats as a part of the Government, Britain is very likely to be reluctant, maybe even opposed, to join the US in a new military adventure against Iran or any other country in western Asia. The Liberal Democrats categorically ruled out any military action against Iran in their election manifesto and openly questioned both the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and the conduct of UK intelligence personnel during that war in their campaign. The latter issue, galvanised by the evidence



of torture of Binyam Mohamed and other victims of the extraordinary rendition regime, has been taken up by the foreign secretary, who called for an investigation into the state’s complicity in human rights abuses abroad.

That in itself and the generally non-militaristic election manifesto of the Liberal Democrats is not a guarantee for rather more ‘pacified’ British foreign policies, of course. But it sets the parameters according to which the Liberal Democrats, and by implication this Government, can operate. It seems that, for the Lib Dems, it would be manifestly disastrous to be dragged into a military conflict, and in terms of legitimacy for a Government that is obviously amalgamated, probably impossible to accommodate any requests to that end. This is an important difference to the one-party-led governments that we have had in this country for the past 70 years.

Much will depend on the strategic security and defence review that both parties demanded in their manifestos. After all, it is with such state-sponsored exercises that foreign policies are legitimated, decisions about war and

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peace are pre-coded and the enemy is identified. One should not indulge in unnecessary speculation, but I deem it highly unlikely that this coalition Government has an interest in letting some of the rather more hawkish Tories implant any overtly provocative policy

recommendations in the review. So the Liberal input may very well prove to be a restraining force in the foreign policy discourse and its practice over the next five years – ceteris paribus, of course. Given the continued human suffering in Iraq, the unresolved question of Palestinian statehood, the war in Afghanistan – which is approaching its 10th year – and the nuclear stand-off with Iran, this is to be welcomed.

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‘Special relationship’: William Hague meets Hillary Clinton on May 14 (above)