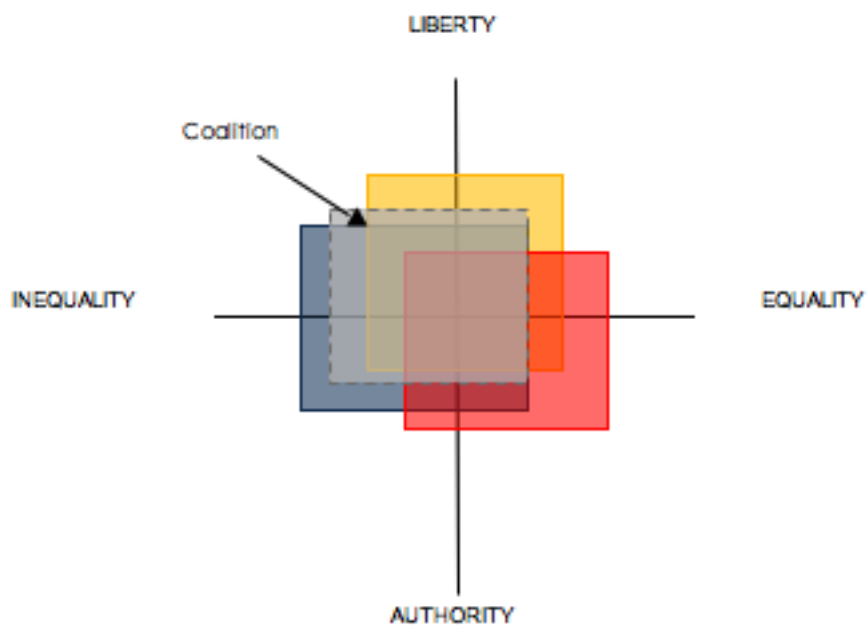


# Stuck in the middle?

Should Labour lurch to the left or stay on the centre ground?

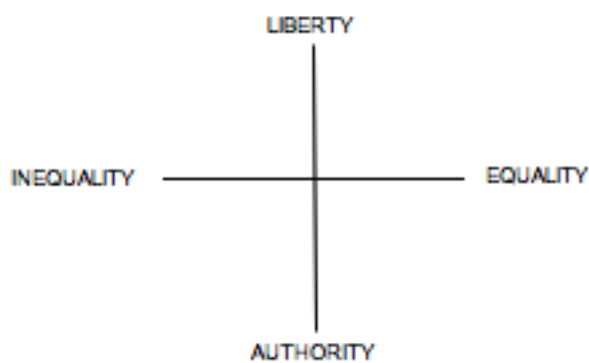
by Helen Goodman MP



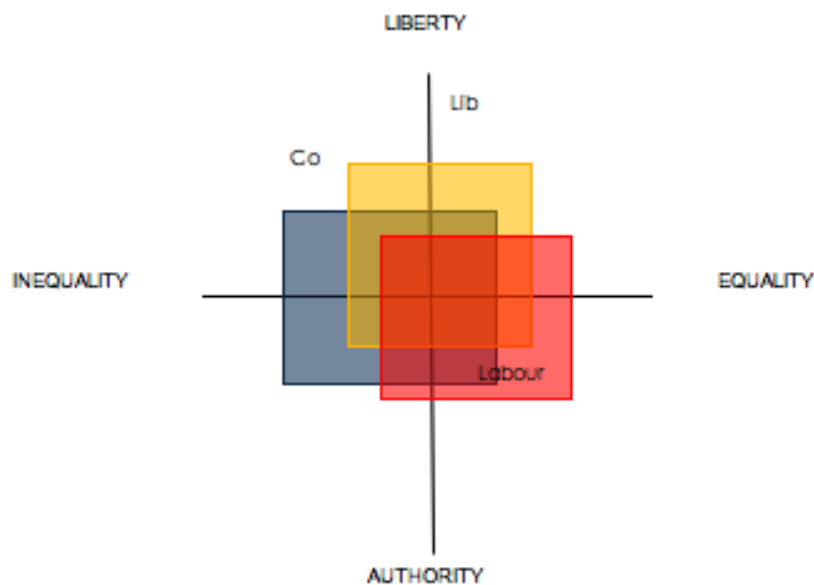
**Should Labour lurch to the left or stay on the centre ground?**

This is one of the central strategic questions now being asked. I want to show that this oversimplifies the issue and draw a map of the political landscape that can be manipulated to help us think about where we go from here, without trying to write the detail of individual policies.

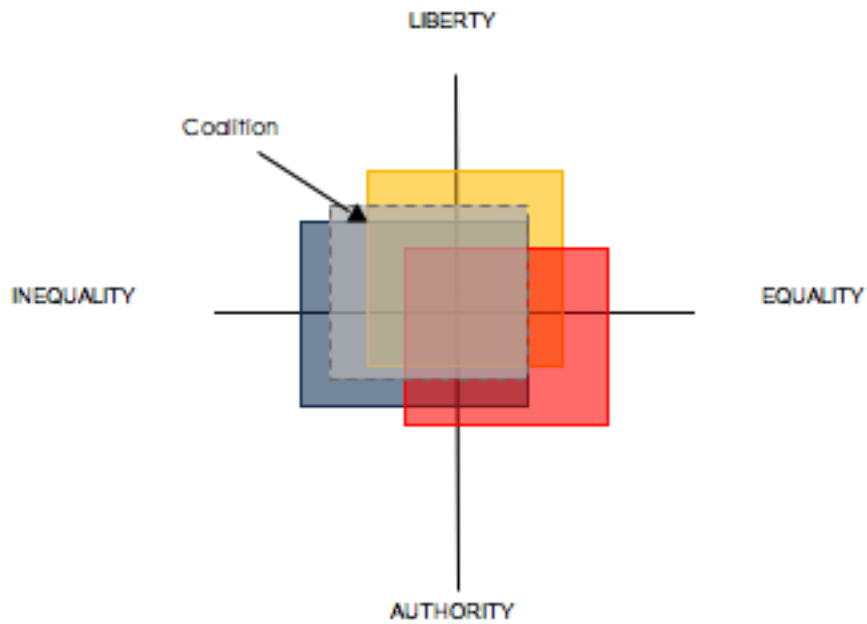
Rather than using a left/right dichotomy it might be better to look at two axes – a liberal/authoritarian axis and an equality/inequality axes like this: -



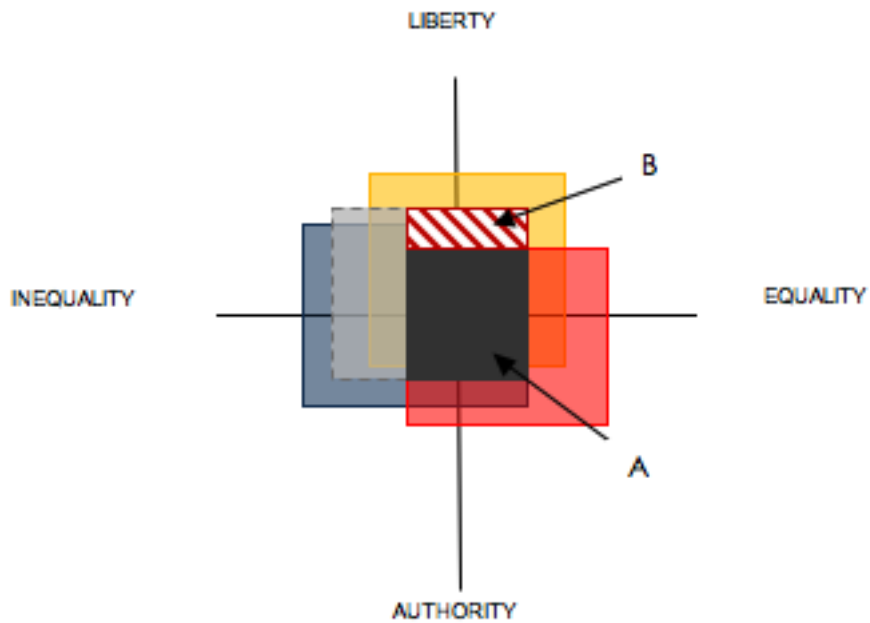
And then to consider where – before the election – each of the parties was placed. I would suggest it was something like this: -



And that the advent of the coalition has produced a map something like this: -



The shaded area at A marks the extent of shared political space between all three major parties.



There now seems to be a growing consensus (which I share) that we need to become more “liberal” – and move into the area at B. For example, we gather that in the coalition negotiations AV and the abolition of the DNA database were offered. On reading this, many of us were left wondering why we’d had them in the manifesto anyway! And Alan Johnson is to be congratulated on allowing the negotiating flexibility in his area which would have facilitated these policy shifts.

Equally within the Labour Party there is a consensus that we should not move towards the inequality pole simply because we could then occupy more of the same space as the coalition.

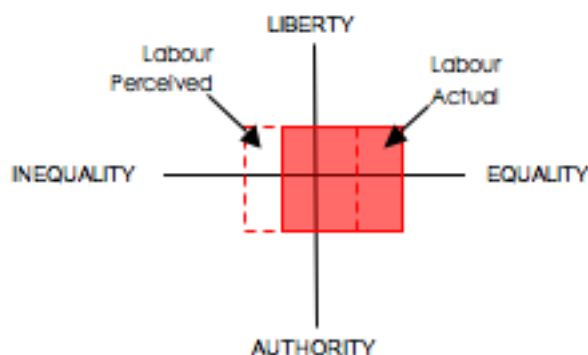
But there seems to be a real debate about whether we should shift to a more equalising agenda.

## Appearances and reality

Before we answer this though we need to address another issue. How was it that despite the fact that our policies in government and our prospectus for the future (minimum wage, tax credits) were way more distributive than those of the opposition parties (inheritance tax cuts etc.) they were able to outflank us rhetorically and criticise our record on equality?

The answer to this is important because it produces two different conclusions – maybe we just need to communicate better, “explain more”. For example the children’s voluntary sector - who have been campaigning on child poverty for 10 years - have expressed their disappointment to me that we didn’t make more of our achievements – lifting 500,000 children out of poverty (up to 600,000 based on statistics published this week). The second possibility is that we should actually have done more (e.g. on bankers’ bonuses) and we should make that shift now – if not a lurch than at least a move to the left.

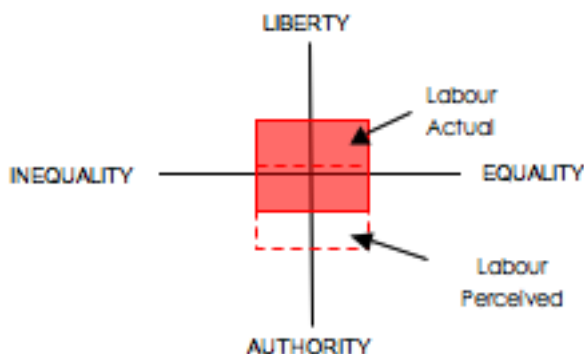
To return to the diagram then, what was going on may have been something like this:-



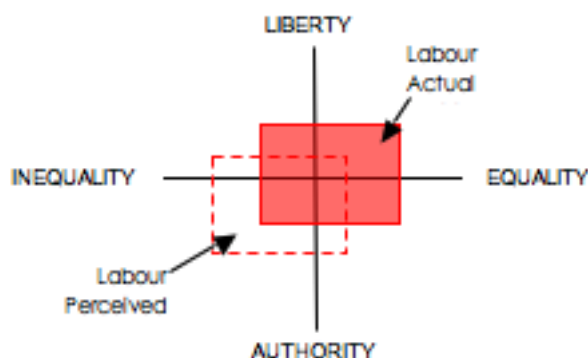
A more radical critique is that the economic policies we were pursuing, pro-globalisation and pro-markets, were entrenching greater economic inequalities and that our social policies on redistribution simply couldn’t keep up – how much harder that will be in the tight fiscal position we now face and how much more important to look at how we manage markets rather than relying on public spending.

In fact – and apologies for such a bland conclusion – perhaps what we need now is a bit of both, more energetic policies to deliver social justice and better communications.

Returning to the liberty agenda perhaps there too we had a perception problem, like this:-



The case for arguing this is that on a range of issues we were more progressive (race, gay rights, gender etc.) If this is so as well we achieved a catastrophically bad outcome being positioned well away from the public’s perception of us. Thus:-



However, there is also a good case for arguing that actually the last government did allow Labour’s bossy tendency too much free rein – and not just on the big issues like ID cards – also in allowing the development, especially at local authority level of a risk minimisation culture which is self-defeating. Thus in my own constituency I had cases of schools not taking children swimming because it was “too risky” for them to walk along the pavement to get there – even though that is how the children got to school, and OAPs being told it was “against health and safety” for anyone over 70 to carry the Union Flag on Remembrance Sunday. If we continue to defend this sort of approach we will lose touch with people who feel they are being treated in a petty way and government is not on their side.

This is important, because we believe the state can be an effective enabler of justice and opportunities and to succeed in our objectives of equality we must build a consensus assuring people that it is on their side. So as we move forward and develop policy we need to make sure that we address the issue of the role of the state and the way it interacts with people. This is not simply a question of accountability within service delivery, though that matters too, we also need to attend to the wider questions of government at every level