

Gene Healy: Real 'hope and change' in the United Kingdom

By: **GENE HEALY**
Examiner Columnist
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Three months ago today, David Cameron moved into 10 Downing Street, after 13 years of centralizing, free-spending rule by Labor. An outgoing Treasury minister left a helpful note for his successor: "There's no money left."

The British Right has never trusted Cameron, a self-described "compassionate conservative," given to gimmicky conceits like "the Big Society." (Why not "the Awesome Society"?). In 2005, when Cameron became Tory leader, former Conservative Party Chairman Norman Tebbit decried the ascendancy of "a New Modern Compassionate Green Globally Aware Party" bent on "purging even the memory of Thatcherism."

So when Cameron's Tories formed a coalition government with Nick Clegg's left-leaning Liberal Democrats, conservatives on both sides of the pond naturally viewed it as the "Triumph of the 'Wets.'" "

And yet, as we've seen with alleged RINO Chris Christie, in times of crisis, sometimes "squishes" can surprise.

Take that "Big Society" — silly name aside, it stands for devolving power from Whitehall to local authorities and the people in a British version of federalism. And it's joined to a budget-slashing agenda "rivaling in some respects even Margaret Thatcher," the New York Times reports. Since the coalition has pledged to protect health care funding, those cuts will have to be greater than 25 percent in most areas.

The new austerity threatens to "sever the financial lifeline for hundreds of cultural institutions," the Washington Post laments: London may no longer be "a beacon for controversial pieces" such as last year's Sadler's Wells production in which "the pope sexually abuses an altar boy through interpretive dance."

More promising still, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg turns out to be my kind of liberal — the classical variety, given to quoting John Stuart Mill: "a state which dwarfs its men ... will find that with small men no great things can be accomplished."

In a bracing speech on May 19, Clegg warned that Britain had become "on some measures, the most centralized country in Europe, bar Malta."

"It is outrageous," Clegg declared, "that decent, law-abiding people are regularly treated as if they have something to hide. It has to stop."

Toward that end, the new government would end national ID cards and biometric passports, place new restrictions on Britain's four million security cameras, and shut down Labor's ContactPoint database, a repository of personal data on some 11 million Britons under 18.

Clegg vowed to "tear through the statute book" repealing unnecessary laws, and asked Britons to help by leaving suggestions at the government's "YourFreedom" Web site.

The Cameron-Clegg union was never the "shotgun wedding" some supposed. As a member of Parliament, Cameron voted to restrict some of Labor's draconian anti-terrorism powers, and led an inquiry recommending de-escalation of the war on drugs. And well before joining the government, Clegg called for "savage" budget cuts and praised Thatcher for "her victory over a vested interest, the trade unions."

Besides, as Scottish libertarian Alex Massie asked in the Spectator, is "localism" or opposing national ID "a left-wing or right-wing position? ... These labels don't carry much meaning" anymore. Upon the new government's formation, Massie confessed to "an unusual, mildly discombobulating sensation: optimism."

Hope has been hard to come by for small-government types in the age of Obama. But the Tea Party movement could learn a lot from the urbane duo of Cameron and Clegg, who've brought together the best traditions of British liberalism, marrying economic and social laissez-faire.

Americans tend to prefer an earthier conservatism, one that clips the 'g's off of its present participle and rails against cultural elites. How odd — and refreshing then, if a pair of Oxford- and Cambridge-educated toffs managed to point the way forward for the American Right.

Examiner columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."