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Making it stick [1]

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Among the lessons the coalition should take to heart after a remarkable year in British politics is that reform must be radical to be durable. Too often in the past reforms have been half-hearted and tentative, enabling a subsequent government of a different ideology to reverse them. History abounds with examples.

The 1945-51 Labour government implemented wholesale nationalization of UK industries. The subsequent Conservative government did not reverse this, but contented itself with denationalizing the steel industry. A later Labour government easily reversed this reversal. The 1980s Thatcher reforms were more radical, with systematic and large-scale privatization replacing the hesitant piecemeal denationalization of the past. This was radical enough to be irreversible in practice.

Labour's abolition of the grammar schools was not reversed by subsequent Tory administrations. Instead schools were allowed, after a somewhat fractious process, to opt out of local authority control. This, too, proved easy to overturn.

The Tory health service reforms which enabled GPs to become budget holders were highly successful, but so limited in scope that once again Labour was able to reverse them.

The Conservative part of the coalition has been watching the Swedish school reforms which permitted state funds to be spent in relatively low-cost private schools. This was so popular that the Social Democratic opposition, which had pledged to reverse it, not only U-turned, but even extended the reforms when they regained power.

The lesson of past experience seems to be that if the reform is thoroughgoing, and done swiftly enough and on a large enough scale, it can attract support by its success, and embed itself so firmly that it becomes difficult to overturn.

Many observers supposed the coalition would be a weak and temporary affair, tackling only lowest common denominator things that both parties could agree upon. Instead it had turned out to be quite bold, going for big reforms in the three problem areas of education, health and welfare.

None of these has final proposals yet set in stone, so at the time of year when resolutions are made, our hope is that the coalition will look at the failure of half-hearted measures in the past,and resolve to go for the really radical solutions that could prove to be lasting.

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