

# Ending Equidistance

*Alan Leaman traces the story of the adoption and abandonment of the Liberal Democrat strategy of 'equidistance'.*

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On 25 May 1995, the Federal Executive of the Liberal Democrats received and endorsed a statement from their leader, Paddy Ashdown, which formally ended the 'equidistance' from the Conservative and Labour parties that the party had maintained during the 1992 general election campaign. The statement was subsequently accepted with little dissent by the Federal Conference in Glasgow on 17 September 1995 as part of the Executive's Annual Report. An historic change had been made, with minimum collateral damage in internal division or disaffection. This article describes the background to this decision, analyses some of the surrounding debates, and considers its implications for the future strategy of the Liberal Democrats in the light of the 1997 general election result.

## A short history of equidistance

Equidistance became a term of political art at the time of the 1992 general election, adopted by journalists and others to describe the refusal of Liberal Democrats to express any preference between the Labour and Conservative parties. But its relatively short and recent appearance in the political lexicon does not mean that equidistance represented a new issue for the third party of British politics.

Very few people have ever believed that the Liberal Democrats (or, for many decades, their predecessors) were likely to be able to form a government on their own – in the short term at least. So the party has often been plagued by questions about how it would handle any power short of an outright victory, particularly in the event of an indecisive election result leading to a hung parliament. Indeed, a large proportion of the difficulties experienced by the Liberal/SDP Alliance in its 1987 general election campaign came about because of the

failure of David Owen and David Steel to agree a common position on their attitude to the other two parties. At times David Owen campaigned explicitly for a hung parliament which, he believed, would open the door to maximum influence for the Alliance. His argument inevitably raised questions about how any influence would be deployed. Butler and Kavanagh record: 'As the election progressed it became plain . . . that Dr Owen would be much more ready to do business with Mrs Thatcher than would Mr Steel.'

The problem of two leaders was resolved by the merger of the Liberals and the SDP to form the Liberal Democrats in 1988, and by Paddy Ashdown's election as the unified party's first leader later that year. It took longer to resolve the uncertainties of the third party's role.

Paddy Ashdown had argued during his leadership campaign that the task of the Liberal Democrats was to replace the Labour Party as the leading non-Conservative party of conscience and reform. It was a bravura campaign which helped to revive morale within a battered and divided party. Ashdown successfully exploited the membership's disillusionment with their experience of the 1987 election, when it had seemed that the limit of their leaders' ambition was to come third. And his message was consistent, albeit uncomfortably, with the tradition of Liberal leaders since Jo Grimond who had spoken of their desire to realign the left.

But replacement as a strategic objective was already out of date by the time that it was launched. Under Neil Kinnock, the Labour Party had begun to recover from its nadir of the mid-1980s, and was also starting to change its character. The Liberal/SDP Alliance had failed to eat into Labour's core vote in those years of maximum vulnerability – why should the Liberal Democrats be able to do so as La-

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bour clawed its way back?

Replacement was old-fashioned in another sense, too. It assumed that there was only room in British politics for two major parties, conceding that the Liberal Democrats could only advance by pushing another party aside, thereby creating an alternative, but still bi-polar, party alignment. Yet the Liberal Democrats, like their predecessors, believed that this two-party system itself needed to be broken. They spoke of the multi-party world which would flow from the introduction of a proportional voting system. As the Labour Party exhibited its first signs of real interest in constitutional reform (marked also by the establishment of Charter 88), the logic of this analysis pointed Ashdown in a different direction from the rhetoric of his leadership campaign. In practice, replacement was still-born, and quickly forgotten.

At first, Ashdown's instinct was to adopt a clearly anti-Thatcherite position. For the first years of the Lib Dems' life, few people were interested in any position he took, as the new party struggled for attention and against extinction. But, as Mrs Thatcher passed her tenth anniversary as Prime Minister, Ashdown told a Liberal Democrat conference in 1989 that, whatever happened after the following election, 'she will have to go.' In the event, the Conservative Parliamentary Party got there before him. Mrs Thatcher was replaced by John Major as leader of the Conservative Party in November 1990.

The Liberal Democrat position for the 1992 election was first formally set out in a key passage of Paddy Ashdown's speech to his party's spring conference in March 1991. He had been careful to welcome Major's rise to the premiership, remarking that it might herald a 'more rational' style of politics. Ashdown had eschewed Labour's tactics of branding John Major a 'Thatcher Mark 2', and he was critical of Neil Kinnock's inflexibility in the face of a changing Tory party. Kinnock himself was giving no pub-

lic signal that the Liberal Democrats could have a role to play after the general election. There was a widespread assumption that, in the event of a hung parliament, Kinnock's Labour Party would be able to take a weakened Liberal Democrat parliamentary party for granted, and that Ashdown would have little negotiating leverage.

Ashdown, then, used his March 1991 speech in Nottingham to spell out his general election position, and to toughen his stance in advance of the coming campaign. 'Is Labour better than the Tories? Or are the Tories better than Labour? The answer is simple. They're just as bad as each other!' It was at about this time that Ashdown started comparing the other two parties in television interviews to being 'run over by a train

campaign unfolded, opinion polls pointed to a hung parliament as the most likely result, since Labour and the Conservatives appeared to be so evenly matched. Inevitably, coverage of the Liberal Democrats concentrated on this possibility. Press stories speculated about the price that Ashdown would demand for supporting a minority government or entering a coalition. He began to stress that electoral reform at Westminster was the essential starting point for any discussions.

Equidistance survived as the Liberal Democrat position during the 1992 general election campaign, but only just. Leading Liberal Democrats managed to stick to the line that they were just as likely to cooperate with John Major's Conservatives after the election as they were to link up with

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or by a bus. The result is just the same.'

In the event of a hung parliament, Ashdown said, the Liberal Democrats would be guided by policies and not by personalities. He told his party conference that he was not especially attracted to the idea of working with either of the 'two old parties', but would do 'what is right for stable, effective and reforming government.' There was a little-noticed hint here of strategic tensions to come. Was there any real prospect that putative partnership with the Conservative Party could provide a reforming government of the sort that Liberal Democrats would find attractive?

As the 1992 general election

Neil Kinnock's Labour Party, despite what was perceived to be a growing list of policy overlaps between the two opposition parties. Even Scottish Liberal Democrats, who had drawn up plans for a Scottish Parliament in direct negotiations with Labour through the Constitutional Convention, and who therefore were under pressure to accept that the agreed devolution package should take precedence over all other constitutional reforms, insisted that proportional representation for Westminster was a higher priority. Only reform at Westminster would entrench a Scottish Parliament, they argued. Since Labour was opposed to electoral reform for the House of Commons, this enabled the Liberal

Democrats to unite around the proposition that both other parties could be treated equally.

To outside observers, however, equidistance came to look more like fiction than fact. For some, this was simply because the Liberal Democrats had more than enough policy in common with Labour to make a decision to side with the Conservatives incredible. Labour's policy review had already shifted their party towards Liberal Democrat positions. Then, in the final days of the campaign, Neil Kinnock started hinting that electoral reform, too, might be on Labour's agenda. John Major and the Conservative press were quick to ram home the message that a vote for the Liberal Democrats was a vote for a Labour government. Paddy Ashdown's protests that he had as many policy disagreements with Labour as he did with the Conservative Government were treated with respect by commentators, but not with much credence.

Another argument also began to eat away at the credibility of equidistance as the campaign went on. By 1992, the Conservatives had been in government for 13 years – though under two, very different, prime ministers. If a hung parliament came about, it would be because the Tory party had lost at least 50 seats. In a real sense, John Major would have lost the election, even if Neil Kinnock had failed to win it. Most Liberal Democrat constituency gains would have come at the expense of a retreating government. In those circumstances, would it really have been possible for the Liberal Democrats to sustain the Conservatives in power? In 1974, Jeremy Thorpe was unable to deal with Edward Heath, who had held office for less than four years. What chance would Paddy Ashdown have if he tried to protect the Conservatives from election defeat after 13 years?

Equidistance served its purpose in 1992. It enabled Ashdown to build an independent identity for his party. He ensured that the Liberal Democrats were not swallowed up by a recovering Labour Party. He com-

municated a determined and distinctive approach to politics. Above all, his party survived an election which might have led to disaster. Only a few years before, the Liberal Democrats had languished in single figures in the opinion polls. After 1992, it looked like they were a permanent fixture in British politics.

## The Chard Speech

Yet by the end of the 1992 campaign, equidistance appeared battered beyond repair, especially since the prospect of a hung parliament seemed to have squeezed the Liberal Democrat vote in the final days before polling. To many leading Liberal Democrats, moreover, equidistance felt like a fraud.

Ashdown moved quickly after the 1992 election to prepare the Liberal Democrats for a strategic review. His first conclusion was that the Kinnock-led Labour Party had been 'unelectable'. His second was that the Liberal Democrats were now strong enough to play a more proactive role.

His response was to make a scene-setting speech in his Yeovil constituency at Chard in May 1992.

The job of the Liberal Democrats in the coming Parliament, he said, was threefold: 'to create the force powerful enough to remove the Tories; to assemble the policies capable of sustaining a different government; to draw together the forces in Britain which will bring change and reform.'

Ashdown warned of the dangers of 'almost permanent one-party Conservative government'. He said that the Labour Party needed to change, highlighting many of the deficiencies to which Tony Blair would turn his attention when he later became Labour leader. But his most significant words were reserved for his own party, when he called on Liberal Democrats 'to work with others to assemble the ideas around which a non-socialist alternative to the Conservatives can be constructed.' He called for a National Electoral Reform Commission 'to consider the most appropriate form of proportional voting', and told his party that 'we must be much less exclusive in our approach to politics than we were in the last Parliament, and much more inclusive to others in this one.'

He concluded: 'What we need is

## Membership Services

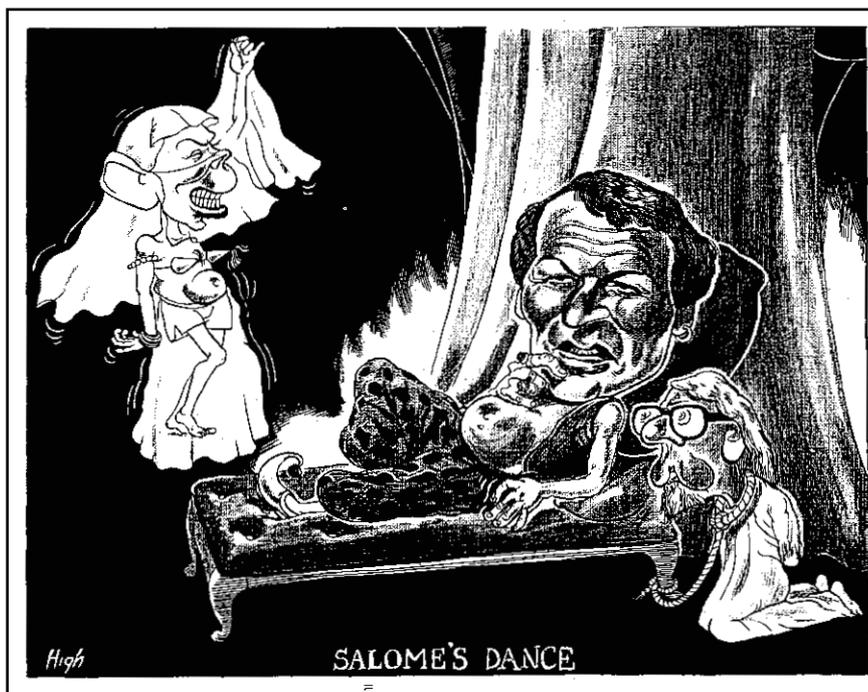
*The following listings are available to History Group members:*

**Mediawatch:** a bibliography of major articles on the Liberal Democrats appearing in the broadsheet papers, major magazines and academic journals from 1988; plus articles of historical interest appearing in the major Liberal Democrat journals from 1995.

**Thesiswatch:** all higher degree theses listed in the Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research under the titles 'Liberal Party' or 'liberalism' (none yet under SDP or Liberal Democrats).

*Any member is entitled to receive a copy of either listing free; send an A4 SSAE to the address on page 2. Up to date versions can also be found on our web site ([www.dbrack.dircon.co.uk/ldhg](http://www.dbrack.dircon.co.uk/ldhg)).*

**Help needed:** due to Richard Grayson's move to London to become Director of the Centre for Reform, we need a volunteer to replace him in keeping these listings up to date. Anyone with access to the *British Humanities Index* (Bowker Saur) and the journal *Theses Completed* (both should be available in university libraries) would find it quite easy. Anyone willing to help should contact the Editor at the address on page 2.



*The Scotsman*, 19 September 1995

a new forum and a debate on a much wider scale – one which is owned by no particular party and encompasses many who take no formal part in politics, but wish to see a viable alternative to Conservatism in Britain.’

This more open approach to politics – reflected in the cross-party membership of the Borrie Commission on Social Justice and the Liberal Democrat Dahrendorf Commission on the economy – was quickly interpreted by journalists and many within the Liberal Democrats as the first move in a new courtship with Labour. So Ashdown had to spend time emphasising two points – that he had no intention of seeing the Tory/Labour duopoly replaced by a Tory/Labour-Liberal duopoly; and that he did not wish for any sort of electoral pact or other arrangement.

After a rather inchoate and difficult debate at the Liberal Democrat conference in Harrogate that autumn, Ashdown was rewarded with a conference motion which agreed that the party’s policy development should be ‘inclusive’ and that: ‘Liberal Democrats should develop and debate ideas by working with people, of all parties and none and at all levels, who believe that fundamental change in the governance of Brit-

ain and the building of a sustainable economy are the keys to all other necessary changes.’ Yet, despite this evident movement, equidistance was still in place.

## No quarter for the Tories

The years between 1992 and May 1995 were extraordinary ones in British politics. Sterling’s exit from the Exchange Rate Mechanism took place as the Liberal Democrats were meeting at their Harrogate conference. And, for a while, it was the Lib Dems who were the main beneficiaries of the collapse in support for the Conservatives which followed. Byelection victories in Newbury and Christchurch put Ashdown’s party centre stage. A lacklustre Labour Party under John Smith’s leadership was failing to capture the public’s imagination, and showing little interest in the Lib Dems. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats were making progress in each round of annual local elections.

The two opposition parties had very different approaches to the legislation implementing the Maastricht Treaty. Liberal Democrats wished the Bill well, and were prepared to co-

operate with John Major’s administration to ensure that it survived. The Labour Party front bench played a more traditional opposition game, looking for ways in which they could, with support from Conservative Eurosceptics, defeat the legislation, even to the point of putting the Treaty at risk. Dramatically, this divergence came to a head when Liberal Democrat MPs voted with the Government on the paving motion which preceded a resumption of the Bill’s passage. Mutual recriminations flew across the opposition benches of the House of Commons. On that night, the new forum and debate that Ashdown had called for in his Chard speech looked a considerable distance away.

By 1995, however, the political atmosphere was very different. The Liberal Democrats were in the doldrums. The 1994 European elections had turned out to be a disappointment, even though the party had won its first-ever seats in the Strasbourg Parliament. Tony Blair’s elevation to Labour’s leadership, and his ability to determine the agenda of the centre ground, left many Liberal Democrats not knowing how to respond. Some were anxious to praise him; others rather wished they could bury him. Moreover, the 1994 Liberal Democrat conference in Brighton was a chapter of mishaps and mistakes, making it a public relations disaster. Commentators started to speculate that the Liberal Democrats would now be pushed aside by the Blair juggernaut. Many in the party feared that they were right.

Nagging away all this time was a continuing internal Liberal Democrat debate about how to deal with equidistance and what, if anything, should be put in its place. Tony Blair’s leadership of Labour had (to many eyes) made a change more possible, building as it did on shifts in Labour policy towards Liberal Democrat positions that had already taken place since 1987. It had certainly made a reconsideration more urgent.

For a few months, the Liberal Democrats trod water while they tried to settle this decision. Despite

this sense of preoccupation, and Labour's renewed campaigning effort in areas of third party strength, the Liberal Democrats were bolstered by success in the local elections of May 1995. It was decided then that the party had to move to a resolution: in part, because there was such a head of steam and press speculation behind the issue that it was distracting the party from other activity; and in part because it was important to establish a clear position well in advance of the coming general election. Senior Liberal Democrats had concluded that they had spent too much of the 1992 campaign explaining their attitude to a hung parliament – at the expense of time which could have been spent on issues with more direct appeal to the voters. How much better to set out the positioning arguments well in advance of the campaign, and then to move on to promoting an attractive and distinctive policy platform.

The result was the position statement adopted by the party's senior committees and published in *Liberal Democrat News* on 28 May. It had been put together following detailed discussions with leading Parliamentarians and other figures within the party. The statement contained a number of elements:

- a) The Liberal Democrats will continue to be an independent political party, fighting elections on a distinctive programme;
- b) The Liberal Democrats are committed to the defeat of John Major's Conservative Government, as a 'precondition for maximum Liberal Democrat influence';
- c) If the Conservatives lose their majority in the House of Commons, they will therefore not be sustained in power by the Liberal Democrats;
- d) The Liberal Democrats will keep their distance from Labour.

All of this was summed up in the key paragraph: 'No quarter for the Tories. No let-up on Labour. Liberal Democrats will continue to campaign and win for the principles and policies that we believe in.' The crucial decision had been taken. The

Liberal Democrats were now firmly and overtly an anti-Conservative party, committed to ousting the Government from office. The *Independent* newspaper next day described the announcement as an 'historic shift'.

## Was there any alternative?

With the benefits of hindsight, many people have treated this shift as a statement of the blindingly obvious, hardly historic at all. Indeed, it did possess the considerable political virtue of being true – it accurately reflected the mood and long-established convictions of most Liberal Democrats, and therefore provided a much more secure basis for fighting a general election campaign. Yet, at the time, Labour officials were

was still considerable scepticism within the Liberal Democrats about Tony Blair's new Labour Party, and about his personal commitment to pluralistic politics. It was also important for Paddy Ashdown himself to emerge from this debate as a force for unity within the party. The Liberal Democrats had to fashion an argument for voting for a distinctive Liberal Democrat platform at the coming election. They needed space and distance from Labour in order to fight the campaign.

Other internal pressures were pointing in the opposite direction. Some Liberal Democrats argued that equidistance should not be abandoned – not because they felt particularly attached to it, but because they viewed the alternatives with horror. If pushed, nearly all these people would admit in private that sustaining the Conservatives in of-

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quoted describing the ending of equidistance as the Liberal Democrat equivalent of Tony Blair's dumping of Clause 4. And it was the result of a series of hard-fought arguments within the party.

Some alternatives were seriously canvassed internally. There was a small group within the Liberal Democrats which would have liked to see a full accord with Tony Blair's Labour Party. They argued that the position eventually adopted would be seen as an uncomfortable half-way house, and that the party should be open about a desire to seek coalition or some other form of alliance with Labour. But this argument was soured by a trickle of defections from amongst this group to Labour, and it was undermined by the fact that it did not represent the real centre of gravity within the party. There

was inconceivable. But their dislike of the Labour Party (or their tactical calculation that they needed to appeal to Conservative-inclined voters) was sufficient to impel them to want to deny this in public.

Another group of leading Lib Dems argued that, while it would be right to rule out any sort of arrangements with a defeated Conservative Party, the Liberal Democrats should also commit themselves not to enter any relationship with Labour. But this would have been a strange position for a third party to adopt – effectively opting itself out of any formal post-election influence, and appearing indifferent to what, for most people, is the key election question: who should govern? It certainly would not have sat well with the rhetoric of cooperative politics that had marked out the Liberal

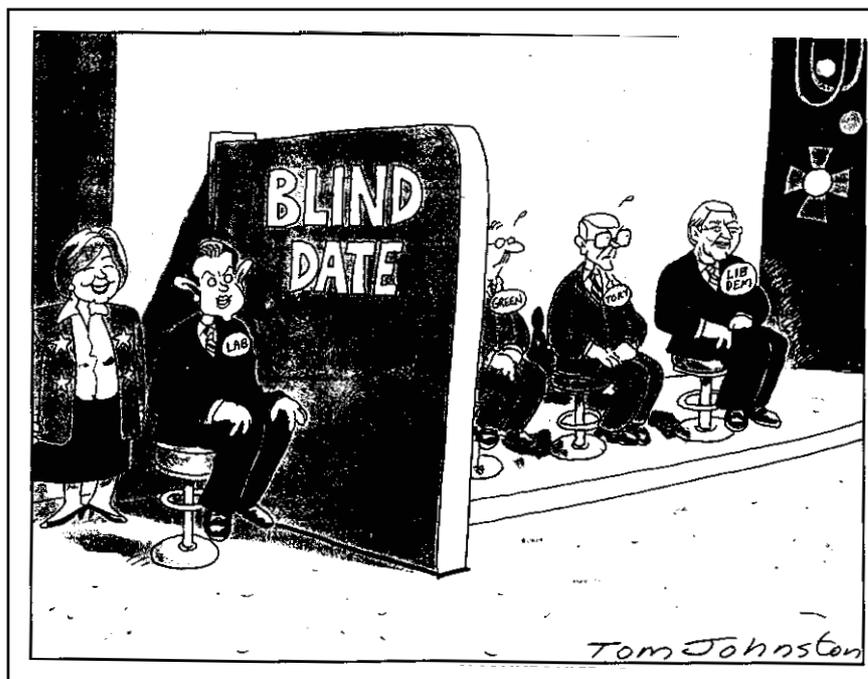
Democrats and their predecessor parties. Nor was it consistent with habits of cooperation in local government, where many councils are now hung. By taking up this position, the Liberal Democrats would have committed themselves to a lifetime in opposition, whatever the result of the general election. It was hardly an attractive proposition to put to the electorate.

Others pressed a minimalist case. They did not want an announcement of any sort. They argued that, while the presumption that the Liberal Democrats would not deal with the Conservatives would surely become obvious to anyone who thought about it, there was nothing to be gained from advertising this reality. After all, Liberal Democrat MPs were not being stopped in local high streets and asked whether equidistance had been abandoned yet. Why raise a difficult issue when you may not need to?

But this position did not suit the temperament of Paddy Ashdown, who was anxious to settle a clear and public position and who wanted a mandate from the forthcoming election campaign for what he called cooperative politics. Nor would it have survived until polling day. After all, whether fairly or not, commentators and broadcasters knew that this was a potential weak point for the Liberal Democrats. They would probe the issue. Could the Liberal Democrats have survived a 1997 campaign in which, however theoretically, they had to keep open the possibility that they might sustain a defeated Conservative Government in office, or worse, had looked like an obstacle to the defeat of Mr Major's administration? This was not a question that could easily be fudged.

## The 1997 election

The abandonment of equidistance was essentially a negative act – Liberal Democrats would not put the Conservatives back into office. But it created the opportunity for much that was positive.



'Well, Cilla .... Paddy sounds nice ....' *The Sun*, 19 September 1995.

By resolving this question relatively early in the Parliament, the Liberal Democrats were able to clear the way for the positive platform on which they fought the 1997 election campaign. Starting with *The Liberal Democrat Guarantee*, which was debated and approved at the autumn conference in 1995, the party spent two years refining and promoting the policies that became the *Make the Difference 1997* manifesto. In contrast to 1992, when much of their election campaign was bogged down in nuances of different post-election scenarios, coverage of the Lib Dems over this period progressively concentrated on significant policy messages. Candidates and local activists reported that the old complaint 'We just don't know what you stand for' was hardly heard on the doorsteps in 1997.

In some measure, this transformation came about simply because there was such a powerful popular mood for a change of government, though this did not really become clear until the campaign itself. A large Labour lead in the opinion polls meant that the issue of a hung parliament was hardly raised at all during the campaign, though many believed that Labour's Commons majority would be far smaller than,

in the event, it was. The broader issue of the Liberal Democrat role was only raised in the form of questions about tactical voting, which enabled the party to emphasise its ability to win its target seats and to confirm its anti-Conservative stance.

The relatively specific content of their manifesto enabled the Liberal Democrats to develop a useful line of argument about their potential role in a Labour-dominated parliament. Commentators started to refer to the Lib Dems as a possible 'backbone' for a Labour government, ensuring both that Labour delivered on its promises and that new Labour did not relapse into old Labour habits. On the ground, voters were presented with the proposition that a vote for the Lib Dems would help secure the defeat of the Conservative Government and, in addition, increase the chances that any new government would take the right decisions on key issues such as education, health and the environment. A vote for the Liberal Democrats became a vote to 'add value' to a new government.

To achieve this outcome, however, it was essential that Liberal Democrats were not drawn into speculations about possible post-election scenarios, and that no-one expressed any

preference for a particular type of relationship with a Labour government. Early in the internal discussions about the abandonment of equidistance, it was agreed within the party that such hypothetical questions should be avoided. There was no public (and little private) discussion of possible ways of working with a Labour government, and leading spokesmen were encouraged not to throw any policy issues into the pot of post-election calculations. On only one occasion was this informal rule breached.

Instead, a simple formula was devised in 1995, which was then repeated at every opportunity up until polling day: 'Every vote cast for the Liberal Democrats and every seat we win in Parliament will be used to secure these goals [Lib Dem policy priorities]'. This had two virtues: it enabled the campaign to concentrate on promoting policy, and it provided the electorate with a positive incentive for voting Liberal Democrat – the more seats won, the more Lib Dem policies will be implemented.

## Tactic or strategy?

It would be easy to dismiss the abandonment of equidistance as opportunist tactics. And it is true that, tactically, it worked. The Liberal Democrats were successful in winning a record 46 seats at the 1997 general election, despite a slight fall in their overall share of the vote. Their campaign was almost universally praised for its clarity and effectiveness. The shift of position matched and reinforced the anti-Conservative mood, gave fair wind to tactical voting,<sup>2</sup> and dealt ahead of the campaign with a significant area of potential weakness. It also united the party (with few exceptions) on a central political issue.

The abandonment of equidistance was also a child of its time. Tony Blair's leadership created a new dynamic between the two parties. He insisted that his senior colleagues cease their attacks on the Lib Dems. And the warmth with which he was received by some leading Liberal Democrats meant that Ashdown had

to move to respond. Above all, the unpopularity of John Major's Conservatives would have made the maintenance of equidistance suicidal for the Liberal Democrats.

But events since the 1997 election confirm that something more significant has happened. Labour and the Liberal Democrats, while remaining independent and distinctive, have acknowledged that they have interests in common. They have started to cooperate, as well as to compete.

The Liberal Democrats moved quickly in the face of Labour's huge Commons majority to adopt a position of 'constructive opposition'.

## The road to realignment

The strategic significance of ending equidistance may be even stronger. Ever since Roy Jenkins' Dimpleby lecture in 1979, the centre-left in British politics has been searching for ways to reformulate the party-political structure and to transform British politics itself in order to compete with a dominant Conservative Party.

For a short while, it looked possible that the SDP/Liberal Alliance might be able to pull this off, on the back of a broken Labour Party. The Alliance was in turn broken by the

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This has enabled them to take their place on the opposition benches, while also accepting an invitation to join in an innovative Cabinet committee in which Labour and the Liberal Democrats will work through the implementation of agreed constitutional reforms. Even before the announcement of this new committee, this strategy had borne fruit in government legislation for a proportional system of elections to the European Parliament in time for 1999, and in the pre-election agreements on constitutional issues put together by Robin Cook and Robert Maclennan.

Despite a massive Labour majority in the Commons, therefore, Liberal Democrats have become significant players in Westminster politics. Their involvement in the Cabinet committee confirms that, having abandoned equidistance, Liberal Democrats are not about to re-adopt it. And Tony Blair's continuing rhetoric of new, cooperative and pluralistic politics points the way to further rapprochement between the two parties.

combination of Labour's recovery under Neil Kinnock and David Owen's falling out with his colleagues. So an alternative vehicle needed to be found for what has traditionally been known as the 'realignment' of the left.

The abandonment of equidistance is a signal that the Liberal Democrats are now capable of playing a role in this alternative. Many commentators assumed that this shift could not be achieved without a serious split at the top of the party, or, at least, without a classic old-style Liberal Assembly row. They were proved wrong. This new maturity strengthens the ability of the Lib Dems to become participants in the next phase of realignment. But it will be their capacity to secure electoral reform at Westminster that determines their prospects of success.

The Labour Government's plans for devolution to Scotland and Wales will introduce proportional systems of elections to Britain. Proportional representation to the European Parliament is certain for elections in 1999. These elections will entrench a more plural party-political system

and, hence, the national role of the Liberal Democrats. They will also add to pressure for reform of the voting system for the House of Commons (now under consideration by a Commission under Roy Jenkins) which will look increasingly anomalous if it retains its first-past-the-post elections.

Liberal Democrats will naturally work hard to ensure that this momentum is sustained. Their relationship with the Labour Government will depend on it. For it is difficult to see how 'constructive opposition' or any other relationship between parties short of merger can survive for long if Britain remains stuck in its two-party political model and with its first-past-the-post electoral system for the House of Commons: the pressures all push in fissiparous directions. Cooperative, or pluralist, politics will flourish in the longer term only under a voting system that allows for more diversity and choice, and which rewards those who practice it. Pluralism is not easily compatible with the plurality system of elections.

Realignment is a process, and not

an event. It had no beginning, and it will have no end. But, following 18 years of Conservative rule, the next phase of realignment may be coming into focus. Tony Blair's transformation of the Labour Party into New Labour and the Liberal Democrat abandonment of equidistance have opened up a new and creative period in centre-left politics, based on a model which allows for parties to cooperate as well as compete, and which, in turn, could modernise and transform our political system.

This realignment will not require any party to split, or to conquer another. Indeed, it will depend on both Labour and the Liberal Democrats remaining independent, presenting a distinctive but complementary appeal to the electorate under a new electoral system. A merger of the two parties would narrow their joint constituency, offering the voters a diminished choice and artificially binding different traditions into a single organisation, making it far more difficult for the two parties of the centre-left to keep the Conservatives out of office.

New Labour now seeks reassurances that the Liberal Democrats will not jump ship if the going gets tough and the Conservatives recover; the Liberal Democrats are probing for confirmation that Labour understands that multi-party politics is here to stay and should be welcomed. As their relationship deepens, there is no reason why both parties should not get what they want. Should either turn their back on this possibility, they will pass up an historic moment of reform.

*Alan Leaman was Liberal Democrat Director of Strategy and Planning 1995–97 and was previously head of Paddy Ashdown's office.*

#### Notes:

- 1 David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1987* (Macmillan, 1988).
- 2 John Curtice and Michael Steed calculate that tactical voting in 1997 was worth up to 21 seats for Labour and 14 for the Liberal Democrats. See David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1997* (Macmillan, 1997), Appendix 2.

## Research in Progress

*This column aims to assist research projects in progress. If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other helpful information – or if you know anyone who can – please pass on details to them. If you know of any other research project in progress for inclusion in this column, please send details to the Editor at the address on page 2.*

**Liberals and the local government of London 1919–39.** *Chris Fox, 173 Worplesdon Road, Guildford GU2 6XD; cfo1@cableol.co.uk.*

**The political and electoral strategy of the Liberal Party 1970–79.** Individual constituency papers from this period, and contact with individuals who were members of the Party's policy committees and/or the Party Council, particularly welcome. *Ruth Fox, 7 Mulberry Court, Bishop's Stortford, Herts CM23 3JW.*

**Liberal defections to the Conservative Party, c.1906–1935.** *Nick Cott, 24, Balmoral Terrace, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1YH; N.M.Cott@newcastle.ac.uk.*

**The grass roots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945–64;** the role of local activists in the late 1950s revival of the Liberal Party. *Mark Egan, First Floor Flat, 16 Oldfields Circus, Northolt, Middlesex UB5 4RR.*

**The party agent and English electoral culture, c.1880 – c.1906.** The development of political agency as a profession, the role of the election agent in managing election campaigns during this period, and the changing nature of elections, as increased use was made of the press and the platform. *Kathryn Rix, Christ's College, Cambridge, CB2 2BU; awr@bcs.org.uk.*

**The Liberal Party and foreign and defence policy, 1922–88.** Book and articles; of particular interest is the 1920s and '30s; and also the possibility of interviewing anyone involved in formulating the foreign and defence policies of the Liberal Party. *Dr R. S. Grayson, 8 Millway Close, Oxford OX2 8BJ.*

**The Liberal Party 1945–56.** Contact with members (or opponents) of the Radical Reform Group during the 1950s, and anyone with recollections of the leadership of Clement Davies, sought. *Graham Lippiatt, 24 Balmoral Road, South Harrow, HA2 8TD.*