Lessons for Leaders

Robert Ingham considers the options open to Charles Kennedy and draws some lessons from the historical record.

Now that Charles Kennedy has eased his feet comfortably into Paddy Ashdown's shoes, he has time to reflect on how best to lead the Liberal Democrats into the next general election and beyond. The experiences of his predecessors may offer some guidance about the dos and don'ts of the job, the route he should seek to take and the pitfalls he might encounter.

Firstly, Mr Kennedy will not need telling that, for the Liberal Democrats as much as for its predecessor parties, relationships with other parties matter more than almost anything else. Relations with Labour have long been a thorny subject. At first, Liberal leaders were able to delegate the task of dealing with the developing Labour movement. Before 1900 the key issue for Liberals was how to square collectivist ideas with mid-Victorian laissez-faire Liberalism. Joseph Chamberlain tackled this agenda head on and, after he left the Liberal Party over Irish Home Rule, a number of young Liberal thinkers and politicians — including Green, Ritchie, Hobhouse and David Lloyd George — were able to devise and articulate a 'New Liberalism' of social reform and economic freedom. After 1900, Herbert Gladstone, Liberal Chief Whip, offered the new Labour Party the famous pact which helped reduce Tory strength in many areas previously impervious to Liberal advances, and which allied a considerable section of the Parliamentary Labour Party to the Liberal Government.

Since the First World War, however, the relationship between the Labour and Liberal Parties has been of first importance to Liberal leaders. During the 1923 Parliament, Asquith gave the minority Labour Government unenthusiastic support but in the 1924 election appeared to describe the Labour Party as the 'common enemy' of both the Liberal and Conservative Parties. Trapped between the two millstones of capital and labour, right and left, the Liberals were crushed in 1924. Jo Grimond faced the prospect of offering Liberal support to a minority Labour administration during the 1964 Parliament, hoping that Liberal teeth would again sink into the real meat of power. Grimond raised the prospect of a realignment of the left in British politics to form a non-socialist alternative to the Tories, built on the Liberal Party but incorporating the right wing of the Labour Party and, for good measure, left-wing Tories. Grimond was perhaps the first Liberal leader to acknowledge that the Liberal and Labour Parties had emerged from broadly similar stock and were on the same side, that of progress and reform, in opposition to the Tories. But realignment was a vision, not a practical call to arms, and Labour's hundred-seat majority in the 1966 election put paid to Grimond's ambitions.

In many ways, the realignment Grimond sought has come and gone. The SDP, from which Mr Kennedy has sprung, was the vehicle by which some members of the right wing of the Labour Party joined forces with the Liberal Party. Tony Blair's Labour Party perhaps resembles the non-socialist progressive party which Grimond called for, especially in Scotland where the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties govern in coalition together. Paddy Ashdown succeeded in ensuring that the rise of Blair did not spell the end of the Liberal Democrats without clearly defining how Labour and the Liberal Democrats should now relate to each other. In considering the way ahead, Mr Kennedy must be mindful not only

David Lloyd George

Jo Grimond

of Asquith's experience in 1923–24, but also of David Steel's experiment — the Lib-Lab Pact. Although successful in terms of stabilising the political and economic situation in 1977–78, too few specifically Liberal achievements arose from the Pact either to convince Liberal activists to continue with it or to persuade the electorate to return more Liberal MPs to Parliament.

Although relations with the Labour Party are important, the Liberal Party's position with respect to other parties must not be overlooked. For thirty years from the mid 1920s to the mid 1950s the Liberal Party seemed closer in terms of its outlook, policies and leadership to the Conservative Party than to Labour. This was particularly true of the immediate post-war period, when Lord Woolton encouraged the creation of joint Conservative-Liberal constituency associations to counter the socialist menace and when pacts were offered and accepted in Bolton, Huddersfield, Colne Valley and elsewhere. Clement Davies' greatest achievement as Liberal leader was to refuse a cabinet post in Churchill's 1951 government. Had he accepted, it is difficult to see how the Liberal Party could have survived. This is a precedent Mr Kennedy will need to examine carefully. Other Liberal leaders have considered coalitions with the Conservative Party at national level, not least Jeremy Thorpe in 1974. The new Liberal Democrat leader might find it difficult to find points of agreement with the present Conservative leadership and periods of Liberal/Conservative government, particularly under Lloyd George after 1918, are scarcely propitious. The new leader will be mindful that, even while pursuing an agenda of cooperation with the Labour Party, Liberal Democrat MPs and candidates need the votes of Conservative supporters in many constituencies. Mr Kennedy will soon realise, if he has not done so already, that the Liberal Democrats continue to operate between the Tory and Labour millstones.

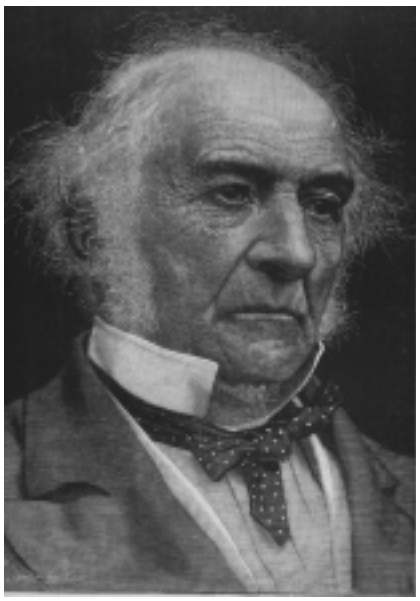
Jeremy Thorpe

Now that devolution is a reality, Mr Kennedy, and his Welsh and Scottish counterparts, will need to look carefully at the relationship between the Liberal Democrats and the nationalist parties. The rise of Welsh nationalism has sapped Liberal strength in much of north and west Wales and now the nationalists are making inroads in the valleys of the south. Can the Liberal Democrats challenge the rise of the nationalists in Wales, or is the party doomed to sit on the margins of Welsh politics? And in Scotland, can the Liberal Democrats break out of their areas of traditional strength, including winning support from the SNP? The Liberal Party's attitude to the SNP was for many years ambivalent ,with Jo Grimond in particular seeing opportunities for Liberal/SNP collaboration. Mr Kennedy is well placed to define a Liberal Democrat approach to nationalism in Scotland and, by extension, to Wales and England as well.

It is perhaps the tragedy of Liberal politics since 1920 that strategy has often seemed to matter more than policy. The most attractive Liberal policies down the years have often been pinched by the two larger parties, and commentators have concentrated not on the arguments advanced by Liberal leaders, but on how the Liberals might react to a hung parliament. Mr Kennedy will surely need no lessons about this, having contested the 1983 and 1987 elections when the hung parliament question bedevilled the Alliance campaigns.

Some Liberal leaders have tended to distance themselves from policy formation. The battles within the Liberal Party about the implementation of the policy of industrial co-ownership and the extent to which the state should support agricultural markets went on during the 1950s virtually unchecked by Clement Davies, for instance. Jo Grimond, however, recruited prominent academics and others to comprehensively rewrite Liberal policy in the early 1960s and personally devised Liberal policy on the nuclear deterrent. Paddy Ashdown stated at the outset of his leadership that he wished to move on from the policies of the Grimond era and succeeded, in particular, in making prominent the Liberal Democrats' pledge to increase income tax to improve the education system.

David Steel



William Ewart Gladstone

Electors do, sometimes, care about policies, but activists care more. Like David Steel before him, Mr Kennedy is the members', not the activists', choice as leader and he must appreciate the importance of keeping the party's activists on his side. The reception given to Jo Grimond at the Liberal Assembly in 1956 helped persuade Clement Davies to retire in favour of his younger colleague. Grimond was popular with Liberal members for his charisma, oratory and intellectual approach to politics but was criticised by some activists for being out of touch with the grassroots, particularly local councillors. Several Liberal leaders have been criticised for appearing to jeopardise the independence of the Party — Ashdown, Steel, Sinclair and Lloyd George in particular. SDP leaders, mostly keen to work with the Liberal Party and suspicious of the power of activists in the Labour Party, tended to emphasise their responsibilities to the party's members, rather than to its activists. These influences from Mr Kennedy's SDP background may be the source of conflict with some Liberal Democrat activists in the years ahead.

Paddy Ashdown

Every Liberal leader since 1935 has spent about a decade in the job. One — Archibald Sinclair — lost the leadership as a result of losing his parliamentary seat, something Mr Kennedy obviously needs to avoid doing. Most of the rest have retired at times of their own choosing, although Jeremy Thorpe was forced to resign by revelations about his private life and resulting pressure from parliamentary colleagues. SDP leaders changed more quickly. Roy Jenkins' resignation was assisted by the presence of a younger, more dynamic colleague with Cabinet experience on the SDP benches — David Owen. Mr Kennedy need not fear that any of his fellow Liberal Democrat parliamentarians will challenge his position. He saw off four in the recent leadership contest and some of his most able colleagues -–Ashdown, Beith, Campbell — are now approaching retirement. Indeed, one of Mr Kennedy's greatest challenges will be to successfully avoid the perception that the Liberal Democrats are a one-man band, something which his predecessors generally failed to achieve. The new leader might benefit from studying the circumstances of Jeremy Thorpe's resignation closely, however. Criticisms about Thorpe's management of the party and strategic thinking influenced those senior colleagues who chose not to stand by him when the Scott affair broke. Although Mr Kennedy will, in all likelihood, avoid damaging factional fighting within his party, Liberal politicians are no more inclined to tolerate failure or mismanagement than their Conservative and Labour counterparts.

Roy Jenkins

Finally, Liberal leaders have long championed unfashionable causes. Gladstone championed the Afghans, Bulgarians and Armenians. Campbell-Bannerman stood up to the jingoists during the Boer War. Samuel and Sinclair lent support to the League of Nations and advocated rearmament rather than appeasement. Davies campaigned for Seretse Khama, Thorpe fought (almost literally at one stage) for minorities in Africa and Ashdown backed giving full British passports to the Hong Kong Chinese. That is not to stay that Liberal leaders have ever shown much interest in the single-issue advocates often attracted to the Liberal Party — the land taxers, temperance reformers and Cornish nationalists. The main task of Liberal leaders was often to persuade electors that the Liberal Party was a credible, national force, with something relevant to say about the most significant contemporary problems facing the UK, rather than a small party, invisible or insignificant in much of the country, and obsessed with issues of marginal importance. This will remain a key task for Mr Kennedy in the years ahead.

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