

Alan Leaman assesses Paddy Ashdown's and Tony Blair's attempt to realign British politics – 'the Project' – and draws lessons for the future.



NOTES ON A POLITICAL RELATIONSHIP BLAIR AND ASHDOWN

OBERVERS OF Liberal Democrat politics in recent decades might feel a little confused – and with some justification. There was the Alliance in the 1980s, with its doctrine of 'equidistance' from the Conservatives and Labour and explicit hope of a hung parliament. Then Paddy Ashdown took his merged party in the direction of greater cooperation with Labour, particularly after the accession of Tony Blair as its leader, prefigured in his 1992 speech in Chard.¹ Charles Kennedy spoke during his time as Lib Dem leader of replacing the Conservative Party while repositioning his party to the left of the Labour government. And, to bring the story right up to date, Nick Clegg has written that the Labour Party's 'time is up', that the Liberal Democrats can 'replace Labour as the dominant force of progressive politics',² and has taken his party into a governing coalition with the Conservative Party.

It is easy to caricature this as the opportunism of a flexible and pragmatic third party. I once explained to a gathering of BBC

journalists that the first job of a Lib Dem leader is to spot what is happening in politics, work out how to benefit, and then announce with confidence that it was always your plan to bring this particular circumstance about. The truth is that all political parties have to tack to prevailing winds and take advantage where they can.

But this is also the story of a long, consistent and hard-fought effort to redesign the battle lines of UK politics; in particular, to realign the centre-left. Some argued that Paddy Ashdown's approach was the exception to the Lib Dem strategic rule – an attempt to create a shortcut to power. They contrasted this with the 'long march' that would keep the Lib Dems more independent of other parties and ensure that its policies were not compromised.

In truth, Ashdown's contribution is exceptional only in the sense that it was almost a triumphant success. It suited its times – electorally as well as politically. It delivered a number of reforms and benefits for the Lib Dems – particularly constitutional reforms – that would otherwise have been lost. And it very nearly secured the fundamental changes in the

structures of British party politics that Liberal Democrats seek.

Personal background

My credentials for writing about this are partial, as many will no doubt rush to point out. A long personal history of involvement in the Liberal Party – on policy committees, working in the office of Paddy Ashdown when he was leader (including drafting the Chard speech), as a parliamentary candidate and, finally, as Lib Dem Director of Strategy in the run-up to the 1997 general election – meant that I spent around two decades immersed in these strategic issues. I even wrote a journal article called 'Ending equidistance'.³ I was closely involved in what, I believe, was the most serious attempt to realign British politics since the creation of the SDP.

I also came to those roles with a grounding in what might be called the pluralism of the left. At University the Liberals participated in organisations called the Broad Left and the Left Alliance. Campaign organisations such as the Anti-Apartheid Movement and Charter 88 brought Liberals into close and often cooperative

contact with members of the Labour Party as well as others. The long period of Conservative electoral domination from 1979 onwards, mirrored in many parts of the country by a Lib Dem advance in local government, the arrival of 'no overall control' councils and tactical voting by Labour and Lib Dem supporters in constituencies, all added to the experience. To me it was natural that Liberals should look around for allies and partners.

Of course, there is plenty of anti-pluralism on the centre-left as well. Tribalism runs deep and wide in the Labour movement, where it mixes with a particular suspicion of liberalism and electoral reform. Liberal Democrats also hold their party dear for the best and worst of reasons.

None of my experience led me to believe that Labour were anything other than a serious competitor, an obstacle to the Liberal Democrat ideal of a more open, decentralised, reformist, progressive and forward-looking alternative to the Conservatives. They were too closed and statist to be the answer; but they were too large and obstinate to be ignored. Any Liberal Democrat strategy has to have a coherent answer to the question: what do you do about Labour?

The build up to Blair – up to 1992

It is important to understand that the Blair–Ashdown relationship came at the end of a long process. Lib-Labbers had been around for years. When Ashdown eventually moved to end equidistance, we felt that we were returning the Liberals closer to their core and historic strategy and purpose, on the reasonable enough basis that modern Liberal history begins with Grimond.

In the 1960s, Jo Grimond talked about realigning the left around a non-socialist alternative to Conservatism. David Steel led the Liberal Party into a formal relationship with the Callaghan government via the Lib–Lab pact. Both Grimond and Steel were drawing, *inter alia*, on strong networks of cross-party relationships and discussions. The creation of the SDP and formation of

the Alliance – from Roy Jenkins' Dimbleby lecture onwards – all fitted with this narrative of realignment.

As Mrs Thatcher consolidated the Conservatives in power during the 1980s, the opposition parties naturally became more interested in each other and, from time to time, would learn how to cooperate. When Paddy Ashdown published his 1989 book, *Citizen's Britain*, we made sure that Labour luminaries such as Giles Radice and Raymond Plant were aware of it and encouraged to respond. Subsequently, Plant went on to chair a commission for Neil Kinnock on electoral reform which reported in 1993, while Radice was a voice for sanity on Europe and much else.

In local and other elections, too, we became more and more conscious of the so-called 'tactical vote'. This phenomenon was being driven from the grass roots – by voters as much as by politicians. But it subtly altered the atmosphere at Westminster as well. By the time of the 1992 general election it was a natural and widespread view that some sort of Labour–Liberal Democrat arrangement could emerge if the result was indecisive, even though the party's formal position remained one of 'equidistance'. Paddy and I had even been to Germany to talk with the FDP about how they prepared for coalition talks.

When Neil Kinnock used the last week of the 1992 Labour campaign to suggest movement on proportional representation towards the Lib Dem position, he pushed Lib–Lab relations to the top of the election agenda. The Conservatives quickly saw their chance, linking the two opposition parties together and using fear of a Labour victory to squeeze the Lib Dem vote. The circumstances that Lib Dems had often hoped for – a high prospect of a hung parliament with a converging Lib–Lab policy agenda – had rebounded to our disadvantage.

The build up to Blair – 1992 onwards

We drew some lessons from the 1992 experience. The first, and the one that turned out to be most

wrong, was that the Labour Party was unlikely to be able to win a future election on its own. At the time, no one could have foreseen the creation of New Labour. This occasioned a certain amount of chutzpah on our part. I recall giving a press briefing for the Sunday papers on the weekend after the election in which we said that Paddy was now gearing up to take on the role of effective leader of the opposition.

The second lesson was more significant and robust. The final days of the campaign had been uncomfortable for us. John Major had made a lot of the uncertainty implicit in a hung parliament or a Lib–Lab arrangement. It had pushed many voters back to the Conservatives. The conclusion we drew was that, next time, the political ground would have to be prepared in advance of the election, not while the campaign was in full force. The electorate would need to have evidence – prior to going to vote – that cross-party cooperation could work and that it could support stable and effective government.

Much of the Lib Dem approach to the next parliament flowed from this second conclusion. Yet, at first, it gained little traction. Paddy threw himself into his *Beyond Westminster*⁴ project, to the frustration of many of his senior colleagues. The election of John Smith as leader of the Labour Party closed down many possibilities (though, curiously, he did resurrect the old Liberal Party slogan – One More Heave – to describe his political strategy). The Lib Dems and Labour then fell out – spectacularly on many occasions – over the ratification of the European Union's Maastricht Treaty, with each accusing the other of bad faith and poor judgement.

Yet, still, the logic of the Chard speech was pushing both parties and their thinking. When Michael Heseltine abruptly announced a massive pit closure programme, we made sure that Paddy spoke at the main protest demonstration alongside Smith. Numerous political conferences, seminars and private dinners enabled progressives in both parties to get to know each other and to seek common cause. Charter 88 was a rallying point for reformers across

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the whole of the centre-left and was steadily building and winning the case for the wider political and constitutional reforms that were eventually to find their way into the Lib Dem 1997 manifesto and, though with less enthusiasm, into that of Tony Blair's Labour Party.

Blair becomes leader – 1994–97

The election of Blair as leader of the Labour Party then added enormously to the possibilities of the Ashdown approach. Blair had a freedom and a potential seen in no Labour leader before him. He had no time for the traditions and dogmas of his own party. There was no sense in which he was a socialist. His talk of the need to mend the schism in the centre-left suggested a real potential for a new pluralist settlement.

So Blair marked a break with traditional Labour. He was distant from the trades unions, unambiguous about support for free trade and the market economy, and eminently pro-European. He was interested in public sector reform. He was also, palpably, a modern person, with little social conservatism (though his views on criminal justice were a running sore with the Lib Dems).

In the aftermath of Iraq, cash for honours, and the financial crisis of 2007–09 his reputation has tumbled. Much of his premiership is now viewed as opportunity lost. But we should not underestimate just how different he was (and was felt to be) when he emerged as Labour leader in 1994.

Blair also added to the imperative that was driving the Chard speech strategy. For a while, the Lib Dems were totally eclipsed. Labour's new leader seemed to reach out and to win new friends wherever he wanted. The maintenance of equidistance in those circumstances would have left Britain's third force at best irrelevant, and at worst an obstacle to the fresh start that Britain yearned for.

With the passage of time, it is easy for us now to forget that Blair was an extraordinarily dominant and imaginative leader of the opposition, carrying almost everything before him and commanding an unprecedented coalition of support. Equally, and in contradiction, we forget that

the prevailing view amongst non-Conservatives was that the election result would be close (certainly not a landslide). To fail to react to these circumstances – to appear to be standing in the way of the tide – would have risked political suicide. More importantly, it would have also effectively meant turning our back on the most significant political opportunity for Liberal Democrats in a generation.

So the pace quickened, supplemented by the cooperation and dialogue that was now possible between those at the top of each party. We talked about a 'project' and politicians and journalists understood what we meant. We spoke with Labour about joint work on unemployment – then climbing fast towards three million: Cook was in favour, Dobson opposed. Attempts were made to ensure that both our conferences were successes and targeted at the Conservatives – though Blair himself was not above intervening in Lib Dem conferences via press interviews and other manoeuvres. Above all, we managed to create the Cook–MacLennan Commission on Constitutional Reform, a joint working party of Labour and Lib Dems to agree on a process for the implementation of key reforms.

Paddy also started making speeches about the importance of securing at least ten years – two parliaments – of reforming government and was happy that this implied a period of consistent cooperation on the centre-left. By the time of the election, informal lists of seats had been given to supportive newspapers which were then able to advise their readers on how to use their 'tactical' votes in order to maximise the chances of defeating sitting Conservatives.

Blair and Ashdown clearly enjoyed their working relationship, and the mutual respect that lay behind it. Each would have found in their conversations a certain amount of release from the tribulations of their own party. They both were brilliant practitioners and thinkers about politics, with an instinctive feel for the bigger picture and how voters were responding.

This was no cosy love-in however. Battles were fought when they were needed. The 1995

Littleborough and Saddleworth by-election was probably the toughest of the parliament, with the Lib Dem Chris Davies eventually emerging as the victor over Labour's Phil Woolas following an aggressive and personal campaign. This burgeoning relationship was about two political leaders who saw personal, party and broader political advantage in drawing closer together.

There were some important personal differences as well. Blair had no real understanding or appreciation of the effort and dedication that was required to become a Lib Dem MP, or of the emotional and political attachments this built. Ashdown found Blair's relative caution frustrating. As a military man, his instinct was to confront problems and move quickly to put himself in a better place. Blair, the lawyer, was more often looking to work and talk around problems, buy some more time, and keep his broader coalition on board.

The 1997 election and beyond

In a sense, this strategy delivered too well. The Lib Dems more than doubled their number of MPs in 1997, benefiting significantly from their association with the wider cross-party effort to defeat the Conservatives. But we were faced with a New Labour landslide.

The immediate aftermath of the election campaign was just about the only moment when a further deepening of the relationship would have been possible – and that proved, as we know, impossible. As Paddy Ashdown's diaries confirm, Blair pulled back over the weekend following the election. His majority was too large. He was not prepared to press the issue with his party.

True, the creation of a Joint Cabinet Committee helped deliver much of the constitutional reform programme, and to hold off those in the Labour ranks who wanted to minimise the changes. It also helped to sustain some badly needed momentum behind the 'constructive opposition' approach that the Lib Dems adopted. Ashdown was able to use his influence with Blair to considerable effect during the remaining

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two years of his leadership, not only helping to keep the government to commitments previously made and to press forward on others but also preventing the Lib Dems from lapsing into full-out opposition to the Labour government. But this influence was a declining asset.

In 1997 I argued to the Lib Dem Conference that the party now had an electoral and political interest in the success of New Labour. But I was already pushing against prevailing party sentiment. The perception that the 'project' was the personal creature of Paddy and Tony meant that it was too easily dismissed as an elite undertaking. The party had decided, consciously or not, that it wanted a quieter life.

Strangely, a lot of our focus at the time was on the potential for two referendums: one on entry to the euro and the other on electoral reform. Both, had they taken place, would have required and fostered a new sense of partnership and common purpose amongst centre-left politicians who were prepared to back each cause. Thousands of words were written about both, with much speculation about when they would happen, in which order, and which would be more difficult to win. As we know, the government ducked out of both.

In late 1998 I said to Paddy Ashdown that he would need to stay on as leader in order to help secure a yes vote in the two referendums. He nodded, but I could tell from the look in his eyes that his thinking was heading in a different direction. He announced his resignation as leader of the Lib Dems a few weeks later.

An evaluation

Was all this worth it? Unquestionably. Even in its limited form, the Blair–Ashdown relationship delivered electoral and political benefits that would otherwise not have been available to the Liberal Democrats. Arguably, it has produced better government for the country as well.

As a result of the relationship, a far larger number of Lib Dems now hold elected positions – in Strasbourg, Edinburgh, Cardiff, Westminster and in local government.

Why fight so hard to become the leader of a political party if you are not prepared to use that position in the pursuit of ambitious political goals?

Proportional electoral systems are entrenched in many parts of the UK. In Scotland and Wales, too, the Lib Dems have now had experience of holding office, and coalition governments have proved effective, making the Cameron–Clegg coalition following the 2010 general election that much easier to construct. The Blair government implemented significant reforms that will not now be undone. And the Blair–Ashdown relationship has left a template for others to pick up and use in the future. The simple fact that this happened means that it will be that much easier next time around.

More than that, this very nearly became the moment when centre-left politics was changed much more fundamentally in the direction that Liberal Democrats exist to promote. A Blair–Ashdown administration could have achieved a great deal more.

In the end, Blair's failure to answer the question put to him by Ashdown (increasingly in public) – Are you a pluralist or a control freak? – meant that the project could not be sustained. But Ashdown was surely right to try to force the issue. Why fight so hard to become the leader of a political party if you are not prepared to use that position in the pursuit of ambitious political goals?

Lessons for the future

Nick Clegg has written recently that he wants the Liberal Democrats to be leaders of a wider liberal movement that is capable of being an effective alternative to the Conservatives.⁵ He is right to do so. He also argues that the current Labour Party (it is insufficiently *New Labour*?) is out of tune with its times. He makes a persuasive case. Implicit in this thesis is a recognition that the centre-left must reorganise itself further if it is to be a real success.

Inevitably, the onset of the 2010 election campaign and subsequent coalition negotiations with the Conservatives put such a restructuring of politics on hold. The party electoral battle took precedence and the opportunity to construct a serious and governing coalition with the Conservative Party after the election has dramatically altered

the relationship between Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party. Clegg's answer to the old Lib Dem question – what do you do about Labour? – made a lot of sense in this context; he fought them and fought them hard, though it was noticeable that significant numbers of Labour seats did not fall to the Lib Dem challenge as many had hoped and expected.

Clegg himself has distanced himself from previous thinking about realigning the centre-left, telling one interviewer that it underestimates 'quite how fluid British politics has become'.⁶ However, the party is likely to return to the question at some point, provoked, perhaps, by a future referendum on electoral reform.

Labour, of course, may retreat to a comfort zone of oldish Labour, unlearning many of the lessons that Tony Blair insisted on in the 1990s. Alternatively, a new Labour leader might make a fresh start, ditch the union link, be prepared to face down a weakened left and reach out to build new alliances and refashion the centre-left. Liberal Democrats will want to be prepared for either eventuality.

The conditions for a new realignment could once again re-emerge quite quickly – only more so. At that point, the Liberal Democrats will want to study and build on the experience of Blair and Ashdown.

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- 1 Paddy Ashdown, *A Fortunate Life* (Aurum Press Ltd, 2009), p. 268.
- 2 Nick Clegg, *The Liberal Moment* (Demos, 2009).
- 3 Alan Leaman 'Ending equidistance', *Political Quarterly*, April–June 1998, pp. 160–169 Reprinted in the *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 19, Summer 1998.
- 4 Paddy Ashdown, *Beyond Westminster: Finding Hope in Britain* (Simon & Schuster, 1994).
- 5 Nick Clegg, 'Welcome to the new era of Liberal politics', *The Times*, 17 September 2009.
- 6 Interview with Nick Clegg, *The Observer*, 7 June 2010.