

THE LIBERAL THE FUNCT

Twenty-five years on from the foundation of the Liberal Democrats, many commentators still fixate on the party's political positioning and electoral strategy. Questions about whether the party has moved decisively to the right under Nick Clegg echo questions in the 1990s about the party's movement towards Labour. The party's rise and fall is generally seen in similar terms: equidistance before 1992, an unofficial electoral pact with New Labour in 1997, moving away from Labour in a progressive direction under Charles Kennedy, but then an internal coup by the so-called 'Orange Bookers' leading to coalition with the Conservatives, contradicting the direction of the previous twenty years.¹ Former MP and Federal Policy Committee member **David Howarth** examines the functions of policy within the Liberal Democrats.



THERE IS ANOTHER story, in which the party's policies are important. The Hong Kong passports issue, when Paddy Ashdown broke with the political consensus to argue for granting Hong Kong residents the right to leave Hong Kong for Britain, gave the party the profile it needed to survive. The proposal of adding a

penny on income tax to be spent on education gained the party crucial support from public sector professionals. The constant emphasis on environmental policy not only helped the party recover from the disastrous European elections of 1989, when it finished behind the Greens, but also put it on a path very different from that of many

DEMOCRATS AND IONS OF POLICY

other European Liberal parties. Opposition to the war in Iraq, a policy born of the party's membership in the country as much as in parliament, and so arguably itself an outcome of the process of attracting progressives to the party, established the party as distinctively left of centre, a process complemented by the party's resolute championing of civil liberties and human rights. And, after 2010, it was a policy issue, the abandonment and reversal of the party's opposition to university tuition fees, a policy the internal coup by the right had failed to change, that lay at the heart of the electorate's rejection of the party, with poll ratings below 10 per cent, the party's local government base close to being wiped out and its delegation to the European Parliament reduced to one MEP.

This article looks at the party in the quarter of a century since 1988 through the lens of its policy-making. It draws on manifestos and policy documents published in that period, but it also draws on the author's own recollections and reminiscences as an active participant in the process – as chair of the party's first working group on economic policy, as a member of the Federal Policy Committee for the whole of the 1990s, as a member of policy working groups from 2000 to 2005, as a Member of Parliament from 2005 to 2010 and as a conference representative for the whole period. But instead of looking at sequences of events that took the party from one policy to another, it looks principally at the question

of what functions policy-making served in the Liberal Democrats in that quarter of a century.

'No policies'

Liberal canvassers in the 1970s and 1980s were often faced by contemptuous voters telling them that their party 'has no policies'.² Canvassers would splutter back, 'But we have loads of policies' and threaten to send the elector vast piles of policy papers to prove it. But those Liberal activists fundamentally misunderstood what voters were telling them. By 'policies' voters did not mean lists of detailed proposals or even lists of election 'pledges'. They meant that the Liberal Party was not obviously on the side of an identifiable group in British society. Labour, as voters declared, was 'for the working man' (or sometimes 'the working class'), and the Conservatives were for 'business'.³ There was no need to know any details of their policies. One could just guess them. But who were the Liberals for and who were they against? It was difficult to say, especially as Liberals seemed not to know themselves. 'The reasonable man', said David Steel.⁴ 'Radicals', they said to themselves, though more rarely to outsiders.⁵ Instead, Liberals made a virtue of not representing one of the 'sides' of industry and claimed to stand not for a social group but for an idea and an ideal, for liberalism and a liberal society.⁶ They were a party of values, not of class interests.⁷ For the two great parties of interest and

for their supporters, however, this amounted not to a position but to sitting on the fence.

The birth of the SDP in the early 1980s brought with it a different political tradition. The SDP was born of the Labour Party, a party whose history was steeped in the politics of sectional interest. The SDP of the early '80s hoped to inherit Labour's working-class vote and held on to the idea that they could represent the interests of the working class even while expanding their appeal into the middle class.⁸ SDP supporters expounded a theory, much derided by urban Liberal community politicians, that the Liberals should leave the cities to the SDP, because the SDP could beat Labour, whereas the Liberals could only beat the Conservatives in the countryside.⁹

The election of 1983 tested the SDP's theory to destruction. Dozens of SDP MPs went down to defeat in working-class constituencies, and of the surviving six, two held Scottish Highland seats and one the distinctly upscale former Conservative constituency of Glasgow Hillhead. By the time of the Liberal Democrats' first general election in 1992, when the party's manifesto promised to 'put people first' without any attempt to specify which people, little sign could be discerned of the politics of interest. The Liberal Democrats, like the Liberals before them, saw themselves as a party of values, not of class. Perhaps as a consequence, the 'no one knows what they stand for' syndrome continued to haunt the party.¹⁰

Liberal canvassers in the 1970s and 1980s were often faced by contemptuous voters telling them that their party 'has no policies'.

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS AND THE FUNCTIONS OF POLICY

To attempt any account of Liberal Democrat policy in the first twenty-five years of the party's existence is, for this reason, potentially a futile exercise. For much of that period, despite the party's efforts, large swathes of most of the party's policies.¹¹ Moreover, the chances of any of the party's proposals being put into practice were for much of that time slim. This was not 'policy' in the sense used within government. That was especially true, paradoxically, of policies that only the Liberal Democrats advocated. Those policies were distinctive precisely because the other parties were united in rejecting them.

Liberal Democrat policy-making is thus a puzzle. What exactly was it for? The question is especially puzzling because the party made so much of it. Two party conferences a year were taken up largely with making policy. To begin with, conferences debated policy papers that had emerged from an elongated process in which expert working groups produced 'green' and 'white' papers (later 'consultation' and 'policy' papers) for the Federal Policy Committee, which debated them at length before putting them to the parliamentary party (later to the shadow cabinet and then to the parliamentary party).¹² Eight to ten of these papers would be debated every year, sometimes even more. In 1993 and 1994, for example, the FPC produced thirty-one papers on twenty-five different topics. Later conferences saw more time devoted to lengthy policy motions closer in style to those of the Liberal Party, submitted by local parties or individual conference representatives or parliamentarians, especially by parliamentary spokespeople.

The submission of policy motions by parliamentary spokespeople became particularly significant following the emergence, under the pressure of parliamentary events, of a new policy-making process separate from the official route, a process that largely consisted of parliamentary spokespeople writing a 'spokesperson's paper' (previously a pamphlet designed to draw attention to policy not to make it) and publicising it.¹³ These papers would emerge from a process that might include discussion

within a parliamentary team, the shadow cabinet and the parliamentary party, and might also include endorsement by the Federal Policy Committee, but their status as party policy was doubtful in the absence of a vote by the conference. Parliamentary spokespeople were therefore encouraged to align the positions they were taking in parliament with official party policy by proposing motions to the conference. Positions taken by the leader of the party required conference endorsement in the same way, although this would often occur without the stage of producing a paper.

The functions of policy-making in the Liberal Democrats

So what was the purpose of all of this policy-making? Of course there does not have to be a purpose. In all organisations whose ultimate objectives are up for grabs one will find elements of 'garbage can' processes, that is to say processes in which individuals use the organisation to further their own agendas, and in which the outcome of the process is ultimately a function of which people had access to opportunities to make decisions.¹⁴ Policy entrepreneurs within a party can use whatever access they have, as committee members, members of staff, MPs, frontbenchers or just as conference representatives to lob into the process their own pet solutions and problems. Much depends on their energy and determination. The impact, for example, of Donnachadh McCarthy as a member of the Federal Executive on policy on the Iraq War or Evan Harris as an MP or as an FPC member on any number of policy areas was very great. Party leaders, through their ex officio position as chair of the FPC, had more access to the process than anyone else, but that mattered only if they wanted to use it. Paddy Ashdown was engaged and eager to use his position as FPC chair to get his way on policy issues, at least in the early part of his leadership.¹⁵ Charles Kennedy, perhaps discouraged by the sulphurous atmosphere of the FPC in the latter part of the Ashdown leadership, took a more hands-off approach, although arguably one that allowed for more consultation with the party than the

late-period Ashdown would have tolerated.¹⁶ Subsequent leaders disengaged even more from the party's formal policy-making processes, to such a degree that chairing the FPC came often to be seen as a minor incident of the job of leader's parliamentary private secretary.

But 'garbage can' theories tend to explain better the content of decisions than how those decisions are made. What is interesting about the Liberal Democrats is their tendency to generate a very large number of opportunities to make decisions about policy even though no one seemed to be listening. The most obvious function of policy-making by a political party is to attract electoral support,¹⁷ but Liberal Democrats made so much policy unlikely to be read by voters that other explanations are required. Admittedly at one point in the political cycle, right at the start of the general election campaign when the media briefly publish comparisons of all the parties' manifestos, a party's policies might possibly be electorally relevant (or perhaps an absence of policy might be embarrassing), but the same point applies: the party produced a quantity of policy way beyond that required for a potted manifesto in a newspaper.

Another possibility is that policies were designed to attract financial support from lobbyists or special interest groups. But not only is it unclear why lobbyists or special interest groups should want the endorsement of a party with so little prospect of entering government, it is also evident from the Liberal Democrats' lack of major donations from industry interest groups (as opposed to from value-driven bodies such as the Rowntree Trust and perhaps, as was sometimes alleged, from individuals in search of ennoblement¹⁸) that if gathering financial support was one of the purposes of policy-making it was singularly unsuccessful.

Positioning and ideology

The overproduction of policy also limits the explanatory power of another, often plausible, view of policy-making, that it is subsidiary to political positioning. On this view, policies are designed to illustrate a party's political position or changes of its position. Certainly some Liberal Democrat

Liberal Democrat policy-making is thus a puzzle. What exactly was it for? The question is especially puzzling because the party made so much of it.

policy-making was designed to signify or to facilitate changes of political positioning. In the period before the 1997 election, for example, Paddy Ashdown set out to reduce the party's policy differences with Labour, a process designed to encapsulate his 'end of equidistance' change in positioning and to facilitate a coordinated electoral campaign against the Conservatives. In this way, for example, the party's support for a 'citizens income' – the full integration of income tax and benefits – disappeared from the party's programme in favour of a more conventional social security policy, and all references to the party's favoured electoral system, the single transferable vote, were replaced in the 1997 manifesto with vaguer references to 'proportional representation'.¹⁹ Similarly, in 2013, Nick Clegg supported a policy motion committing the party to the coalition's 'fiscal mandate' as a way of signalling a decisive change in the party's positioning and facilitating an electoral strategy based on attacking the Labour Party's economic competence.

The problem is that the amount of policy-making required for positioning purposes is tiny, and a party committed to putting politics ahead of policy would not produce anywhere near the quantity of policy generated by the Liberal Democrats. One explanation might simply be that party members thought that a party with pretensions to being serious needed a full slate of policies, and certainly that seemed to be an important motive for policy-making in the very early days of the party. Why it carried on with such verve after that first phase, after the 1992 election, is far less clear. A subsidiary explanation might be a kind of political overshoot. Detailed policymaking might have been appropriate at local authority level where the party was a real contender for power, and where policy could be designed for the real world purpose that it might help guide officials about what the party wanted to do, but that drive towards detail carried over into national policy making where it was not needed. The problem with that explanation is that the party's local government association, ALDC, for all of this time discouraged the party's local councillors from making

One of the most important tensions in the Liberal Democrats was that between policy and campaigning. Those who saw themselves as 'campaigners' rather than as 'policy wonks' often expressed dissatisfaction with the failure of the party's policy-making process to produce policies that could be reproduced in large type in Focus leaflets.

serious policy while in opposition, all the more to release energies for campaigning.

Another possible explanation is that policy is designed to illustrate larger themes and ideological commitments. A party begins with its fundamental commitments, but needs constantly to explain, both to itself and to the electorate, how those commitments apply more concretely. That process in turn reinforces the ideological commitments. Unfortunately, if that was ever the intention of Liberal Democrat policy-makers, it was rarely put into practice. The party has issued overarching ideological statements, but they appear to have had little influence on subsequent detailed policy positions, being more a summary of where the party had arrived rather than an attempt to guide further development. The problem in writing manifestos was the opposite – how to reduce the mass of material to a manageable number of ideas, such as the cumbersome five 'E's of 1992 (education, environment, the economy, Europe and electoral reform – or, as some wanted 'ealth), or the apple pie 'Freedom, Justice, Honesty' of 2001.

Even more puzzling for the reinforcement part of the thesis, the two most important ideological statements, 'Our Different Vision' of 1989 and 'It's About Freedom' in 2002 are themselves so different that one might be forgiven for thinking that they emerged from different parties. 'Our Different Vision', written by a group chaired by ex-SDP grandee David Marquand, could have emerged from the pages of 'Marxism Today'. Its starting point is an analysis of the forces of production and its normative conclusions seem to depend on the idea of 'going with the grain' of inevitable social change. 'It's About Freedom', written by a group chaired by ex-Liberal grandee Alan Beith, starts with the normative, with liberalism as a political idea that prioritises freedom, and proceeds to suggest how that commitment applies to contemporary problems. Even where some of the vocabulary overlaps – for example both papers speak of the 'Enabling State' and of 'Community' – their meaning is entirely different. In 'Our Different Vision' the enabling state is a way to reconcile liberty and equality. In

'It's About Freedom' it is a decentralised state in the tradition of Mill's *Representative Government*. In 'Our Different Vision' we owe obligations to communities, but in 'It's About Freedom' communities have to be voluntary.

The early policies of the merged party show very little sign of coming from the same stable as 'Our Different Vision', and chairs of working parties, of which I was one, were not expected to conform with it in any way, or even to read it. 'It's About Freedom' might have had more influence, but its function was mainly symbolic, to confirm that although Charles Kennedy himself might have come from the SDP, he was entirely unconcerned about the party identifying itself as Liberal. Indeed, it is possible retrospectively to interpret 'Our Different Vision' in a similar fashion, as a move by a party leader from the Liberal tradition, Ashdown, to reassure the SDP wing of the party that the new party welcomed them.

Campaigners versus wonks

One of the most important tensions in the Liberal Democrats was that between policy and campaigning. Those who saw themselves as 'campaigners' rather than as 'policy wonks' often expressed dissatisfaction with the failure of the party's policy-making process to produce policies that could be reproduced in large type in Focus leaflets. For them, 'policy' should mean nothing beyond 'three points to remember' or a good slogan. The policy wonks, however, argued that policies needed to be able to withstand public, and especially media, scrutiny, since even in campaigning terms, policy positions that fell apart in five minutes would be electoral liabilities. The campaigners' response was that, in that case, there should be much less policy. But the FPC continued to churn out substantial, sometimes elaborately argued papers. Occasionally candidates for FPC elections would openly present themselves as 'campaigners' and would promise to make the FPC concentrate on producing short messages that their fellow campaigners could work with, but when elected they usually disappeared without trace. What FPC debates usually demonstrated was that the hoped for simple message would fail to get

a spokesperson through a second question in a Today Programme interview before being shredded.

A view of some former Directors of Policy for the party (including the editor of this journal) is that policy creation was often driven by another aspect of campaigning, a desire to placate values-based interest groups – especially campaigners about the environment, education and democracy. It is certainly the case that the party's officials were very keen to gain endorsements from such groups, or at least to come out ahead of the other parties in their various scorecards and checklists. The manifesto checklist of the Green Alliance was particularly influential. The problem, however, is that the party generated policy after policy of little interest to such groups, or of interest only to groups of microscopic size. In 1993 and 1994, for example, when the FPC produced papers on twenty-five different topics, one can see that some of those papers might have been generated by pressure from substantial external interest groups, for example the papers on disabilities, pensions and consumer rights, and external interest group pressure might have been a contributing factor for a few more, for example those on women, environmental taxation, health and transport. Of the remaining topics, however, some seem driven by forces within the party itself, for example papers on community politics, rural policy and urban policy, but most seem not to be reacting to any kind of pressure at all. Some reflect the party's long-term obsessions, such as the constitution and tax and benefits, some are conventionally important political topics, such the economy, defence and security, jobs, and Northern Ireland, and others seem to be ploughing a furrow of the party's own choice: prostitution, press and broadcasting and genetic engineering. External campaign group pressure was a driver, but very far from a complete explanation.

Another possibility related to campaigning is that the party was generating media opportunities. That is certainly part of the explanation for spokespersons' papers, but as an explanation for policy papers it leaves a great deal unexplained. For example, the papers themselves were often long and

The theory is that the party acted as a policy avant-garde, staking out positions, for example on Keynesian economic policy, the welfare state, joining the European Community, gay rights and the environment, that the main parties would not dare to be the first to adopt, but might adopt if they seemed to be gaining traction.

densely argued, not the kind of material busy journalists would absorb, and they often contained policies stunning only in their erudition and refusal to chase headlines. In addition, the yearly timetable produced policy papers at times of the year – especially the summer – guaranteed to generate as little media impact as possible, especially when papers had to be issued with the caveat that the conference might throw them out or pass a different policy. In fact, a vociferous section of the party objected to the promotion of policy papers at all before the conference, on the ground that the conference was supreme over the Federal Policy Committee and any pre-publicity was attempt to bounce it (which, admittedly in the case of Paddy Ashdown, it often was). The objection was often phrased as a complaint that policy papers were 'unamendable', which was technically true even though the party's policy as expressed in the motion referring to the paper was amendable. A curious compromise was reached in which policy papers were published in plain black and white paper covers to symbolise that the text was not final until the conference had agreed the policy.

In contrast, on the 'wonk' side of the divide, there is a wholly different way of understanding of the party, according to which the Liberals and the Liberal Democrats were not so much political parties as a type of think tank associated with a few largely independent MPs who were there to supply credibility and occasional political leverage.²⁰ The theory is that the party acted as a policy avant-garde, staking out positions, for example on Keynesian economic policy, the welfare state, joining the European Community, gay rights and the environment, that the main parties would not dare to be the first to adopt, but might adopt if they seemed to be gaining traction. The function of policy-making in the party was thus to float new ideas for the governing parties to steal, and the attraction of being a party member was that one was always on the cutting edge of new policy thinking, although never in a position to implement it. There is certainly one very important example of such policy theft from the Liberal Democrats in their first

twenty-five years, namely making the Bank of England operationally independent. The Liberal Democrats adopted the policy in the *Economics for the Future* white paper in 1991, the first and only UK party to commit to it. It was put into effect by the Labour Party, entirely without warning and with no mention in their manifesto, within weeks of their being elected in 1997. The difficulty, however, with this as a theory of Liberal Democrat policy-making is that party members' reaction to such theft was not to be pleased that someone else had put their ideas into operation but anger that they had received no credit.

Control mechanism

Another theory is that policy-making in the Liberal Democrats was a form of control mechanism. Although the Liberal Democrat policy process was originally set up to be 'deliberative', in imitation of that of the SDP as opposed to that of the supposedly anarchic Liberal Party, it was still resolutely democratic.²¹ Although the leader and the parliamentary party were very well represented in the FPC and able, informally, to block objectionable proposals in policy papers in parliamentary party meetings, they had no power beyond their own votes as representatives and their own organisational and rhetorical capabilities to influence what was passed by the conference as party policy. All they ultimately could do was to attempt to limit what went into the party's manifesto through a procedure under which the manifesto had to be agreed by the FPC and the parliamentary party (a process that sometimes felt like ping pong between two houses of a parliament, especially when it took place in the Palace of Westminster in different committee rooms). Policy-making could, therefore, provide a way in which party members might constrain and even attempt to control the leader and parliamentary party. The volume of policy proposals and amendments might then be thought to measure the degree to which the party had to intervene to control the leadership.²² Although examples of successful insurrections against the leadership are not as numerous as one might think (the failure of the 'neighbourhood school trusts' concept in 1998 is one of the few on major issues), the

threat of rejection was a real deterrent for a leadership anxious to avoid headlines implying that it had no control over its troops.

There was a particular problem, which the Liberal Democrats inherited from both predecessor parties but of which the Liberal Party had longer experience, a problem that made the control function of policy-making more important. The parliamentary party was geographically unrepresentative of the wider membership and contained a disproportionate number of mavericks and local champions for whom constituency interests overrode all else.²³ In environmental and energy policy, for example, there was often serious tension between the principled goal of reducing carbon emissions from transport and the view of residents of large rural constituencies represented by Liberal and then Liberal Democrat MPs that they should not pay more for petrol. Some of the oddities of Liberal Democrat policy, for example the 2005 manifesto's enthusiasm for road-pricing and a carbon-related variable vehicle excise duty combined with phasing out an already existing carbon tax, namely petrol duty, can only be explained as uneasy compromises between the principled views of the wider membership and the electoral interests of certain MPs.²⁴

There is, however, a question mark over whether the control function of policymaking continued to work in the era of the coalition. There certainly were some attempts by the party's left and centre, excluded almost entirely from the leader's entourage but still numerous in the party's membership, to use policy motions to constrain a leadership perceived as rapidly tacking to the right, especially over the Health and Social Care Bill 2011, in which the party's commitment to democratic control of the NHS at local level was watered down and accusations were levelled that decisive steps had been taken towards commercialisation. 'Secret courts' (the possibility of closed proceedings in all courts) provided another example, although one in which the whole party was alarmed, not just the left and centre. The tangible results of passing motions in opposition to the leadership line, however, were negligible. In the case of secret

courts, the leadership and much of the parliamentary party simply ignored the conference and the offending coalition bill passed. In the case of the NHS, some concessions were won, but the party conference, despite leadership attempts to keep the issue off the agenda, voted to withdraw support for the bill. The leadership carried on regardless.²⁵

A further complication of coalition contributed to the decline of the control function of party policy-making. The government made policy as well as the party, policy that might be announced and even voted on in parliament before the party conference could decide the party's line (a fact the party leadership tried to exploit by deliberately scheduling controversial parliamentary votes ahead of party conferences, for example the third reading of the Health and Social Care Bill in the Commons in September 2011). The party found it difficult to manage the relationship between government and party policy-making. Ministers tended to regard the government's policy, even if the result of compromises in which Liberal Democrat positions had been completely abandoned, as the party's position. For parliamentary purposes that was true in a literal sense, since the party had agreed to the concept of a single government whip, so that there was no separate official Liberal Democrat position for MPs to support. Ministers would also have had a keen sense that 'policy' within government was much closer to action in the real world than 'policy' in the political marketing sense they would have been used to when making party policy. That contrast might have contributed to the starkest version of the view that government policy took precedence over party policy, namely the idea that the Coalition Agreement with the Conservatives had somehow replaced the party's manifesto as the authoritative source of the party's policies.²⁶ The party conference, however, and some of its representatives on party committees, treated the party's policy and the government's policy as entirely separate. A further layer of complexity was a distinction that seemed to arise between party policy about the current government's decisions and party policy for the purposes of

the next manifesto. The net result of these developments seems to have been a slowing of the pace of the production of policy on important issues and the devotion of more time in conferences to ministerial speeches.

Distinctiveness and identity

Although several of the factors so far discussed played a part in Liberal Democrat policy-making, the most obvious goal of much of the party's policy-making was to create distinctiveness for a party not clearly associated with a social group or class interest.²⁷ The goal of distinctiveness, endlessly stated by Paddy Ashdown in FPC meetings in the 1990s, became second nature to all who took part in policy-making at that time. Ashdown reversed direction in the period of his project with Tony Blair, but distinctiveness returned as a goal under Charles Kennedy, and, although it was briefly abandoned for a second time during the politically disastrous period at the start of the 2010 coalition, it came back yet again as a goal of policy-making in the second half of that government, albeit in great tension with the desire of the leadership to take credit for actions of the coalition as a whole.

There is a theory of the behaviour of political parties that says that since in two-party systems the parties have an incentive to move towards one another, a new entrant party can profitably place itself anywhere on the political spectrum except for the remaining space between the two incumbents.²⁸ The position between the two incumbents is always small and liable to get smaller, but there is space everywhere else. That explains why Ashdown eschewed any form of centrism and chose positions – especially on the Hong Kong passports issue and a penny on income tax for education – where he suspected the major parties would not go. It also explains why Kennedy, despite all his inner caution, was eventually drawn into opposing the Iraq War.²⁹

But the part of the theory says that an insurgent party might advantageously take any position outside the mainstream provides no explanation of precisely where Liberal Democrats put themselves.³⁰ As UKIP would later demonstrate, an anti-European, anti-immigrant

The goal of distinctiveness, endlessly stated by Paddy Ashdown in FPC meetings in the 1990s, became second nature to all who took part in policy-making at that time.

stance would have been just as distinctive, but there was never any chance of the party adopting that kind of distinctiveness. The party's liberal internationalist values and humane instincts placed very severe constraints on the kind of positions it could take.

So where could the party look for distinctiveness and definition? The most obvious place to look was in the constitutional reform tradition of the Liberals, which was shared by many in the SDP. It was an area in which the party felt at ease with itself. Unfortunately, it was also an area in which most of the public were completely uninterested. During the entire period from the foundation of the party until the 1997 election, constitutional reform received precisely zero support in MORI's monthly poll of the most important issues facing the country, with the sole exception of August 1992, when it scored an asterisk, signifying less than 0.5 per cent.³¹ In the course of the 1990s, the party looked for other, more everyday themes.

One might have expected economic policy to be a prime candidate, given its high salience and the Liberal Party's history of radical thinking in macro-economic policy. The recent history of both the Liberals and the SDP, however, effectively put macro-economic policy off limits as a place to seek distinctiveness, since both parties had formed a deep commitment to fuzzy macro-economic centrism. Admittedly the party's first attempt at macro-economic policy, *Economics for the Future*, did contain several distinctive proposals, the independence of the Bank of England being not the least of them, but it is striking how fast the ones not adopted by other parties were dropped. In particular, a commitment to a New Keynesian aggregate savings target (a policy which, incidentally, might have reduced the impact of the crash of 2008 had it been adopted³²) was abandoned almost as soon as it was passed. Having no distinctive approach to macro-economic policy, the party tried to make a virtue out of generating a great deal of micro-economic policy, though with no great pretensions at originality or distinctiveness. In the 2001 manifesto, for example, the section entitled 'Economy' comes last and says

little more than that the party is for entry into the euro and for 'a competitive and sound economy to deliver prosperity for all'.

Specific taxation and spending decisions, however, were not off limits. Both could illustrate the party's distinctiveness and were safe to use as long as they balanced out and so did not leave the party open to charges of fiscal irresponsibility (for which purpose much effort, at least in the 1990s, went into the manifesto costings). Hence the party produced, for example, proposals for a local income tax to replace the poll tax and spending commitments on social care for older people. Above all it meant the penny on income tax for education, which had the additional advantages of being both easy to understand and a rare example of a policy that illustrated many of the party's values. The use of distinctive spending commitments also led to the ill-fated policy on university fees, which was also easy to understand and illustrated fundamental values.

Green policies provided another opportunity. The two predecessor parties had very different approaches to the environment. The Liberals had embraced pollution taxes in the 1970s and were moving in a distinctly deep green direction, questioning economic growth as conventionally measured and distrusting nuclear power. In contrast, the SDP, with some notable exceptions (including the influential activist Mike Bell) was largely a conventional productionist party, a difference that caused tensions from the start of the Alliance.³³ The shock of coming behind the Green Party in 1989 removed political objections to taking advanced environmentalist positions – indeed it created urgent if short-term political reasons to adopt them to see off the threat from the Greens. The party set about making the environment a priority in a wide range of policy areas,³⁴ culminating in the manifestos of 2001 and 2005 carrying 'green action' sections on practically every page. Admittedly, the Liberal Democrats never fully returned to the radical zero-growth green trajectory of the Liberals, but the party's championing of environmental taxes, its willingness to talk about climate change and

its enthusiasm for green policies at local authority level resulted, by 2004, in an enormous opinion poll lead over both the other parties on environmental issues.³⁵

How does distinctiveness explain the volume of policy? No doubt distinctiveness might be achieved using only a few, strategically chosen policies, but there are two reasons why distinctiveness was not compatible with concision. First, the party was in no position to know which policy initiatives would succeed in giving it a distinctive public profile, so that it had an incentive to offer more and more policies that might do the job. Secondly, and more importantly, the function of distinctiveness was not merely to give Paddy Ashdown something striking to say in media appearances (although that motive cannot be discounted). It was also to give the party a sense of itself as a political force. In a party eschewing social characteristics as a unifying theme, policy-making helps to define the party to itself, and to reassure members that they are in the right party. According to a study of party members in 1998–99, more than 50 per cent of party members reported that they had joined because they agreed with Liberal Democrat principles or policies and another 8 per cent said they had joined specifically to support proportional representation and constitutional reform.³⁶ The policy process gives participants a feeling of taking part in politics and of keeping the party going. Policy-making can thus create and maintain a feeling of communality and common purpose, and the apparent over-production of policy can be seen as the constant manufacturing of that reassurance. It might even be seen as responding to an unspoken anxiety about the fact that the party began as a merger between different parties, so that policy-making became a way of continually asking and answering the question of whether the party really was a cohesive body. At the time of the foundation of the party, some from the Liberal side, particularly Michael Meadowcroft, questioned whether the two political traditions of liberalism and social democracy were compatible enough to exist within a single party,³⁷ and one can see the constant production of detailed policy as a

So where could the party look for distinctiveness and definition? The most obvious place to look was in the constitutional reform tradition of the Liberals, which was shared by many in the SDP.

response to that questioning – that even if the two traditions might not be fully reconcilable at a theoretical level, the fact that the party could produce reams of detailed policy demonstrated to those within it that it was nevertheless a viable political organisation.

The identity-creating function of policy-making should not be underestimated. It is one of the reasons policy can be so hard to change in the Liberal Democrats. The university fees issue illustrates the point in many ways. Those who wanted to maintain the party's position on fees during the crucial period of 2008–10 did so because of what it represented: that the Liberal Democrats were a party that valued education for its own sake. They saw education as an instrument of liberation not of economic planning. Loading young people with debt and encouraging them to take high-paid jobs to pay it off seemed to them the antithesis of what education should be for and of what the party was for. For their part, the opponents of the fees policy might have thought of themselves as hard-headedly sacrificing students to secure more resources for primary schools, or as proponents of social justice, slashing away at a subsidy for the middle class, but their real difference with the supporters of the fees policy was that they treated it as technical matter, not one that defined the party or themselves.

The notorious breaking of the pledge to vote against increasing tuition fees, the source of many of the party's subsequent woes, is a separate matter. It is one thing to shelve a policy to abolish fees, quite another to increase them threefold. But there is a connection with the identity function of policy-making in the way the party in government dealt with the issue over the summer and autumn of 2010. It dealt with it in a purely technocratic way, ignoring the emotional impact that abandoning the pledge would have. That would not have happened had the policy meant more to those involved. Enormous efforts went into devising an elaborate scheme that, if one followed it through, had certain advantages – for example, that although students would be indebted for longer many would be paying off less per month. Little or no time or effort seems to have gone into dealing with the

For another set of members, what has kept them going within the party is both the activity of making policy itself and the feeling that the resulting sets of proposals were more detailed, better thought through and more rational than the policy of other parties.

impact of betraying the trust of a generation of student voters and their parents.³⁸

Finally, there is a darker side to the identity politics of policy. Policy-making allows the party's leadership to attempt to define the party, so as to attract, or even to repel, members with particular views. The attracting function would have been particularly important for a small party born from two different political traditions, but the repelling function is not entirely to be dismissed. Even in small parties, leaders might want to consolidate their position by winning symbolic victories and encouraging enemies to leave. Paddy Ashdown used to talk at FPC meetings about embarking on 'bumpy rides' which would inevitably lead to some people 'falling off'. It is a legitimate question to ask whether the Clegg leadership has taken up such a repelling strategy in an attempt to remake the party in its own image. Certainly it is difficult to understand in any other terms the leadership's rhetoric about being a 'party of government' not a 'party of protest' which seems to imply that those who joined the party in protest against, for example, the Iraq War or Labour's authoritarianism should now go elsewhere. There is a similar flavour to policies such as the approval of fracking (very difficult to reconcile with the party's zero carbon ambitions) and conference debates such as the one the leadership initiated in September 2013 on the fiscal mandate, the main message of which seemed to be that economic recovery was the result of austerity and that anyone who thought otherwise (which includes many mainstream economists³⁹) was some kind of weakling or deserter.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Although Liberal Democrat policy-making was influenced by factors one would expect to influence policy-making in all political parties – electoral appeal, political positioning, satisfying external campaign groups and internal interest groups and generating media opportunities – its specific characteristics, particularly the disproportion between its sheer volume and scope and the lack of interest in it

on the part of the public, require further explanation. Part of that explanation is the need for the party to be distinctive, albeit with a distinctiveness constrained by its values. But distinctiveness in itself is not a complete explanation of how much policy the party produced. After all, UKIP managed to be distinctive even though its leader ditched its entire manifesto and replaced it with a 'blank sheet of paper'. Another part of the explanation is the use of policy-making to play out tensions between the wider membership and the party elite, although when the party entered government that particular process tended to become more symbolic than effective. A third and perhaps the most important explanation is the use of policy-making, to a degree possibly unique in British parties, as a means of creating a sense of identity within the party. It is not the only means of creating identity. Campaigning, in some ways the antithesis of policy, also produces a sense of common purpose, especially for the thousands of party members who have delivered leaflets and knocked on doors at parliamentary by-elections or local elections. But for another set of members, what has kept them going within the party is both the activity of making policy itself and the feeling that the resulting sets of proposals were more detailed, better thought through and more rational than the policy of other parties.

It remains to be seen what effect the 2010 coalition will have on the identity-creation function of policy-making within the party. The experience of seeing policy positions abandoned or reversed by the party in government has been deeply disillusioning for the policy-making section of the party. The ultimate failure of attempts to use the party's policy process as a way of controlling the decisions of the party within government has strongly reinforced that feeling of disillusion. In some parties, those effects might be unimportant. They can resort to other powerful sources of unity and identity – common social characteristics, common enmities, common histories and mythologies – but those sources are not as powerful within the Liberal Democrats. We might therefore expect those

whose identification with the party has depended on policy and policy-making to drift away. Perhaps a few whose enjoyment derives entirely from the process itself might remain and perhaps some new members not aware of the disconnection between the party's policy and what it actually does might come in. But anyone who felt connected with the party because of the content of its policy and democratic nature of the way it made it will increasingly find little to hold them. That would leave the field to the leadership and those motivated primarily by campaigning, a situation the leadership would no doubt see as ideal: a party that never raises its eyes above the letterbox is one that will never threaten its leaders. But it would also be another step towards a hollow and empty politics, a politics purely of manoeuvre. It would represent the ultimate vindication of those voters who used to tell Liberal canvassers that they had no policies.

David Howarth is Reader in Law and Director of the MPhil in Public Policy at the University of Cambridge. He was the MP for Cambridge between 2005 and 2010 and Leader of Cambridge City Council from 2000 to 2003. He served as a member of the Liberal Democrats' Federal Policy Committee from 1990 to 2000.

It remains to be seen what effect the 2010 coalition will have on the identity-creation function of policy-making within the party.

- 1 'Orange Bookers' refers to D. Laws and P. Marshall, *The Orange Book: Reclaiming Liberalism* (Profile, 2004), meaning right-wing, small-state liberalism. The contents of the book do not justify the epithet, but the views of its editors and their political allies are another matter.
- 2 See also A. Beith, *The Case for the Liberal Party and the Alliance* (Longman, 1983), p. 138.
- 3 See e.g. J. Goldthorpe, D. Lockwood and F. Bechhofer, *The Affluent Worker* (Cambridge 1968), p. 18ff.
- 4 D. Steel, *Militant for the Reasonable Man* (LPO, 1977).
- 5 Notably the group around Radical Bulletin, later incorporated into Liberator magazine.
- 6 The attack on the phrase 'the two sides of industry' has a long history in the party, but was a particular theme of David Steel, back to his earliest days in the Commons – see e.g. HC Deb 20 June 1966, vol. 730 col. 228.
- 7 See M. Meadowcroft, *Liberalism and the Left* (Liberator, 1983).

- 8 See J. Curtice, 'Why Owen Is Wrong', *New Statesman*, 14 Aug. 1987, pp. 20–21. See also I. Crewe and A. King, *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (Oxford, 1995), p. 170 (Bill Rogers assuming that the SDP would fight in Labour seats, the Liberals in Conservative seats). This was also the 'Labour Party Mark II' view of the SDP mentioned by Crewe and King on p. 125. The SDP was in reality an overwhelmingly middle class party: see Crewe and King, pp. 272–282.
- 9 Curtice, 'Why Owen Is Wrong'; cf. Crewe and King, *SDP*, p. 170.
- 10 See e.g. A. Russell and E. Fieldhouse, *Neither Left Nor Right: The Liberal Democrats and the Electorate* (Manchester, 2005), p. 258
- 11 See *ibid.*, ch. 8, and pp. 258–9. The one policy that did break through into public consciousness was the penny on income tax for education, although Russell and Fieldhouse say that even in that case more voters who agreed with it voted Conservative than Liberal Democrat.
- 12 See e.g. R. Brazier, *Constitutional Texts* (Clarendon, 1990), pp. 464–466 for the original version of the party's constitutional provisions on policy-making. For the current text see the Constitution of the Federal Party article 5.4 (which, as a result of an arcane dispute, also makes clear that the FPC may put options to the conference). See also Russell and Fieldhouse, *Neither Left Nor Right*, p. 58 for a very brief account, although they do spot the fact (p. 258) that the parliamentary party developed an informal veto on policy papers, a theme taken up in full in A. Russell, E. Fieldhouse and D. Cutts, 'De facto Veto? The Parliamentary Liberal Democrats', *Political Quarterly* (2007), 89 (1), pp. 89–98. For an account of the process in a period in which I had less personal experience of it, see C. Bentham, 'Liberal Democrat Policy-making: An Insider's View, 2000–2004', *Political Quarterly* (2007), 89 (1), pp. 59–87.
- 13 There are many examples, but one of the clearest is C. Huhne, S. Kramer and V. Cable *Towards carbon free transport* (Liberal Democrats, 2007), whose proposals were incorporated into a larger conference motion on climate change policy.
- 14 See M. Cohen, J. March, and J. Olsen, 'A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice', *Administrative Science Quarterly* (1972), 17 (1), pp. 1–25. See further John Kingdon,

Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies, 2nd edn (Longman, 1994).

- 15 Later on he became more manipulative, as his *Diaries* perhaps inadvertently reveal (e.g. vol. 2 (Allen Lane, 2001), p. 417: 'I had hoped to get the widening of the remit of the JCC [Joint Cabinet Committee] through the FPC, but in the event there were too many of the awkward squad there for me to be sure, so I slipped it sideways to the next meeting'). I should add that Ashdown's accounts of the key FPC meetings of 1997 to 1999 are not entirely reliable. In particular his account of the 17 November 1998 meeting on the first expansion of the remit of the Joint Cabinet Committee (vol. 2, p. 339) is greatly at variance with my own recollection, and not just the part where Ashdown says that I acted 'angrily, bitterly and almost beyond reason' (I cherish the 'almost'). For example, he unaccountably omits any mention of the defeat of his attempt to induce the FPC to support his position. He successfully resisted discussion of my motion critical of him by claiming that the FPC had no jurisdiction over party strategy. He then contradicted himself by proposing that the FPC welcome his strategy and was furious when the FPC applied the same logic to his proposal as it had applied to mine. He also fails to mention that the FPC voted 17 to 2 in favour of a motion regretting his failure to consult and saying that it saw no scope for any further expansion of the JCC's remit. But all that is perhaps for a different occasion.
- 16 See P. Dorey and A. Denham, 'Meeting the Challenge?' The Liberal Democrats' Policy Review of 2005–2006', *Political Quarterly* (2007), 89 (1), p. 68–77. The 'Meeting the Challenge' exercise was impressively consultative, although, because of Kennedy's fall, it had less effect on subsequent policy-making than might have been hoped.
- 17 Cf. Russell and Fieldhouse, *Neither Left Nor Right*, p. 11.
- 18 See e.g. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/lord-oakeshott-resigns-read-lib-dem-peers-scathing-parting-comments-about-party-leader-nick-clegg-in-his-statement-in-full-9446189.html>.
- 19 No doubt one could point to practical problems with both policies, but these had been known for some time. The timing was entirely about positioning. STV later returned to the party's programme, albeit once

- again to be sacrificed to the cause of inter-party agreement in the coalition negotiations of 2010. The citizens' income has yet to return, though it has become the official policy of the Green Party, which is positioning itself to attract the old Liberal vote, and it continues to attract many idealists and even some economists. See e.g. E. Skidelsky and R. Skidelsky, *How Much is Enough? Money and the Good Life* (Allen Lane, 2012), pp. 197–202.
- 20 E.g. V. Bogdanor, *Liberal Party Politics* (Clarendon, 1983), pp. 275–285.
- 21 That the Liberal policy process was anarchic was certainly the view of the SDP and of David Steel (see e.g. Crewe and King, *SDP*, p. 470), and the central principle of the process, that the Assembly was sovereign, could certainly lead to results the leadership did not like. It was not, however, as anarchic as some of the myths, for example those about the 1986 Eastbourne Assembly vote on nuclear weapons, would make out.
- 22 One would have to discount the volume of proposals coming from the leadership itself, but I am grateful to one of the reviewers of this article for pointing out that in periods in which the membership was comfortable with its leader, notably under Charles Kennedy, the number of conference motions submitted by local parties seems to have fallen.
- 23 I am grateful to the same reviewer for reminding me of this important fact.
- 24 See *The Real Alternative* (2005 manifesto), pp. 16–17. This policy was later replaced by a proposal almost as curious that petrol tax should rise with GDP but petrol sold in rural areas should attract a substantial relief. See the Huhne, Kramer and Cable (2007) spokespersons' paper, p. 10.
- 25 Defenders of the leadership say that the conference was ignoring the realities of coalition politics. The most important reality, however, was that the leadership fatally undermined its own bargaining position within the coalition by announcing in advance that it would never endanger the continuation of coalition itself.
- 26 See e.g. 'Lib Dems broke no tuition fee promise – Vince Cable', BBC, 21 Nov. 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-11803719>.
- 27 Cf. Russell and Fieldhouse, *Neither Left Nor Right*, p. 11.
- 28 Cf. Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York, 1957), pp. 47–49, 128–132.
- 29 It further explains why the explicit adoption of 'centrism' by Nick Clegg is likely to be a disaster, but perhaps that is a topic to consider at a much later date.
- 30 Russell and Fieldhouse, *Neither Left Nor Right*, come to a similar conclusion at pp. 258–259.
- 31 See the Ipsos-Mori archive at <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemID=2440&view=wide>.
- 32 R. Barrell and M. Weale, 'Fiscal policy, fairness between generations, and national saving', *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* (2010), 26 (1), pp. 87–116. Martin Weale was a member of the working group that produced *Economics for the Future*.
- 33 See e.g. M. Meadowcroft, *Social Democracy, Barrier of Bridge* (Liberator, 1981).
- 34 See e.g. *Agenda for sustainability* (1994), *Transporting people, tackling pollution* (1995), *Conserving tomorrow: energy problems for the future* (1996), *Living in the greenhouse: policies to tackle climate change* (1997) and *Making the environment our business: proposals to improve business efficiency and environmental performance* (1998).
- 35 <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemID=24&view=wide>. See also P. Burall, 'The Environment: A Winner for the Liberal Democrats?', *Political Quarterly* (2007), 89 (1), pp. 50–57. Burall throws some doubt on the environmental record of Liberal Democrats in local government, and it is true that some Liberal Democrat groups, for example in Oxford and Norwich, allowed themselves to be entirely outflanked by the Greens, but the failure of the Greens in many other Liberal Democrat controlled councils points to a different story.
- 36 P. Whiteley, P. Seyd and A. Billingham, *Third Force Politics: Liberal Democrats at the Grassroots* (Oxford, 2006), p. 70 (Table 4.2).
- 37 See e.g. 'A Critique Towards Realignment', in F. Dodds, *Into the 21st Century* (Greenprint, 1988).
- 38 This is, of course, not the full story of the fees debacle, which deserves its own separate article. One point that might be made in advance of that future article is that the amounts at stake were not high and the real problem was lack of political will on the part of the Liberal Democrat leadership. According to the Department of Business, Innovation and Skill's own impact assessment, the amount saved by government from introducing the £9000 fee was to have been £1.6bn a year, i.e. the proposed cut in the universities' teaching grant minus financing costs (the Resource Accounting and Budgeting charge – subsequently found to have been underestimated) – see BIS, *Interim Impact Assessment: Urgent Reforms To Higher Education Funding And Student Finance* (Nov 2010) p. 20. At the same time as making that rather modest saving, the government was, for example, proposing cuts in corporation tax netting out at £5bn a year (see HM Treasury, *Budget 2011*, pp. 42–44), sums that ended up in the massive and immobile cash balances of the UK corporate sector (see A. Smith, 'Cash held on balance sheets of largest companies at record high', *Financial Times*, 15 Sept. 2013). The idea that the fees decision was inevitable because of the need to reduce the deficit is nonsense. It was a political choice. The key to understanding why it happened is who made that choice. Both the Liberal Democrat coalition negotiating team and Liberal Democrat members of the 'Quartet' at the heart of government (for which see R. Hazell and B. Yong, *Inside the Coalition* (Constitution Unit, 2011)) were dominated by individuals who in the internal debates in 2008 to 2010 had opposed the party's fees policy – in particular, Nick Clegg, David Laws and Danny Alexander.
- 39 E.g. S. Wren-Lewis, 'UK growth numbers highlight the gap between rhetoric and reality on recovery', *The Conversation*, 30 Apr. 2014.
- 40 See e.g. R. Mason and P. Wintour, 'Nick Clegg persuades Lib Dems to stick with austerity', *The Guardian*, 16 Sept. 2013.

Liberal Democrat History Group online

Email

Join our email mailing list for news of History Group meetings and publications – the fastest and earliest way to find out what we're doing. Fill in the form at: <http://bit.ly/LDHGemail>.

Website

See www.liberalhistory.org.uk for details of our activities and publications, guides to archive sources, research resources, and a growing number of pages on the history of the party.

Facebook page

News of the latest meeting and publications, and a discussion forum:
www.facebook.com/LibDemHistoryGroup.

Twitter

The History Group is now on Twitter! A daily posting of Liberal events on this day in history. Follow us at: [LibHistoryToday](https://twitter.com/LibHistoryToday).