

- does the Bones Report look?’, Lib Dem Voice, 1 June 2011.
- 28 Polls conducted by Lib Dem Voice; these are unweighted but participation is large enough to make them reasonably representative.
- 29 Paddy Ashdown, open letter to leadership contenders, *The Guardian*, 11 June 1999.
- 30 Paddy Ashdown, *The Ashdown Diaries: Volume One, 1988–1997* (Penguin, 2000), pp. 50–51.
- 31 Paddy Ashdown, *Citizen’s Britain: A Radical Agenda for the 1990s* (Fourth Estate, 1989) and Paddy Ashdown, *Beyond Westminster: Finding Hope in Britain* (Simon & Schuster, 1994).
- 32 Ashdown, *The Ashdown Diaries Volume One*, p. 452
- 33 See Duncan Brack, ‘Liberal Democrat Leadership: The Cases of Ashdown and Kennedy’, *Political Quarterly* 78:1, January – March 2007.
- 34 Andrew Rawnsley, ‘Burst out of the pinstripes and show us some passion’, *Observer*, 17 September 2006.
- 35 Chris Bowers, *Nick Clegg: The Biography* (Biteback, second edition, 2012), p. 249.

# REPORT

## The Progressive Coalition that never was – lessons from the Ashdown–Blair ‘project’

Evening meeting (joint with the Labour History Group), 22 January 2013, with Paddy Ashdown, Roger Liddle and Pat McFadden MP; chair: Steve Richards

Report by Douglas Oliver

AS THE LIBERAL Democrat–Conservative coalition enters its parliamentary mid-term, the Labour and Lib Dem History Groups met in Westminster to reflect upon another, past, attempt at inter-party collaboration: the 1990s ‘Project’, initiated by Tony Blair and Paddy Ashdown, to defeat British Conservatism and redefine the British political centre-ground.

The fourth successive Tory general election victory in April 1992 provided an existential challenge to the British political left and liberal centre: despite the difficulties of the post-Thatcher transition, John Major’s victory led many to believe Conservatism was in danger of holding indefinite sway over British public life, and that the forces of ‘Progressivism’ could never win in Britain again.

Whilst the 1997 general election did result in an eventual defeat of Toryism, the historic Blair landslide also eventually left the

Red–Yellow cooperative initiative buried, at least by the time of Ashdown’s retirement from the Liberal Democrat leadership in 1999. However, despite this, almost two decades on, in the context of a Yellow–Blue coalition, the period’s relevance to British political life seems enduringly salient. As evidence of that, three of the key protagonists in the ‘Project’ – Paddy Ashdown, Pat McFadden and Roger Liddle – chaired by *The Independent’s* Steve Richards, were re-united to speak of its impact and moment, as well as its relevance for today, in front of an audience of over a hundred members of the History Groups of both parties.

Pat McFadden was a key adviser to the Labour Party throughout the 1990s, and his career spanned John Smith’s leadership as well as Tony Blair’s ascent to power as party leader and Prime Minister, in the aftermath of Smith’s untimely death in May 1994. McFadden later

became a Labour government minister under Gordon Brown, and remains in Westminster today as MP for Wolverhampton South East. Pat McFadden said that the ‘Project’ could primarily be understood through the prism of personality: Tony Blair ‘was, like Ashdown, a big leader ... and he believed in a Big Tent’.

Paddy Ashdown’s first general election as leader of the Liberal Democrats was in many ways one of political containment, following the trauma of unification with the SDP in 1988. However, within days of the result, and with Labour in flux, Ashdown delivered a landmark speech in Chard in Somerset on the need for a new, non-Socialist, centrist approach to British politics. Looking back, in 2013, on the post-1992 period, he described his feeling that a bi-partisan approach was necessary, as ‘we genuinely feared defeat again to the Tories ... everyone believed this, including Tony, until his phone call to me at a Somerset secondary school on the day before the 1997 election’.

Roger Liddle was a key bridge between the two parties during the era and an advocate of cooperation from within both: he described himself as having ‘ratted and re-ratted’ à la Winston Churchill, after leaving Labour to join the SDP and then the Lib Dems, before being lured back by his good friend Peter Mandelson, following Tony Blair’s rise to power. He described his sadness at Neil Kinnock’s defeat, despite being a Liberal Democrat candidate that year in North Hertfordshire, because, he said, he sensed common purpose between the two parties. Throughout the period Liddle retained strong friendships and a network of powerful connections in both parties.

Pat McFadden said that the ‘Project’ failed critically in two out of three respects. He felt that ‘leadership, arithmetic and subject’ were the three factors that ‘mattered’, but that although the first was strong, failures in the latter two aspects doomed the project.

Ashdown and Blair, he felt ‘were “big leaders” who believed in something transformational’. Blair liked and trusted Ashdown, and felt that, like himself, he was an outsider to his own party. However, the ‘arithmetic’ of Labour’s domination in

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throughout the 1980s and '90s, and was a figure of inspiration for many in the Liberal Democrats, both in terms of constitutional matters and other areas.

In the early years of Blair's government, there was limited cooperation between Liberal Democrats and Labour over the issue of constitutional reform, and in 1998 Jenkins delivered a radical report on electoral reform, recommending a form of 'AV Plus'. However, it ultimately foundered on the apathy of the Labour Party: whilst modernisers like incoming Foreign Secretary Robin Cook signalled support, many conservative elements inside it did not, notably Cabinet members John Prescott and Gordon Brown. Indeed, according to Liddle, even moderate members of Labour were sceptical, because they feared that, under PR, Labour would be usurped as the party of the centre-ground by the Liberal Democrats.

Blair's attitude to electoral reform remained ambiguous; indeed, according to Steve Richards, who said he had interviewed the new Labour leader extensively during the period, he was ultimately negative throughout, even in the mid-1990s. Ashdown noted that, once in government and as time went on, it became clear that Blair 'was not a pluralist ... he wanted power for himself'. Paddy Ashdown felt that electoral reform was the 'critical framework' within which the realignment of the left could occur and without it the 'Project', as a whole, was undermined.

McFadden stated that whilst PR was an area of common interest, it was not a strong enough 'subject matter' in itself and that there was a lack of common purpose in other areas that New Labour felt were important: public services, pensions and other domestic issues. According to McFadden, whilst Blair had faith in Ashdown, he had little faith in the Liberal Democrats as a whole, a suspicion that grew in the years of government as, under Ashdown and later Charles Kennedy, the Lib Dems opposed reforms to Higher Education and initiatives to provide greater administrative autonomy for schools and hospitals.

McFadden felt that 'New Labour' was then – and now

Westminster after the 1997 landslide precluded further cooperation, and he sensed that Blair underestimated the importance of forces throughout the Labour Party resistant to cooperation with liberals and unenthusiastic about the case for electoral reform.

A key subject of connection between the two groups was the desire to reform the voting system. Despite four powerful parliamentary majorities, the Conservative popular vote in the 1980s and 1990s was always smaller than that accumulated by Labour and the Liberal Democrats combined.

Top: from left – Roger Liddle, Steve Richards, Paddy Ashdown, Pat McFadden. Bottom: standing room only at the meeting.

Pat McFadden described Tony Blair's feeling that 'the divide in the progressive vote had allowed a period of mostly Conservative dominance'.

In his 1979 Dimpleby Lecture, Roy Jenkins – liberal Labour Home Secretary and founding father of the SDP – had famously outlined the case for electoral reform, and its importance in defending a strong political centre, from the irrational whims of the extremist factions of Britain's two right and left-wing parties. Jenkins was an influential figure for many modernising figures within the Labour Party

– misunderstood as an extension of right-wing Labour, and a resurrection of the Gaitskellite tradition in the party. According to McFadden, Blair believed in broad-church politics that went beyond traditional notions of party; however McFadden also stated that proportional representation was an insufficient point of connection between the two parties.

In response to McFadden, Ashdown rebuked the idea that Blair was ultimately a positive agent for reform. He argued that, within the Liberal Democrats, the historic foundation that the ‘Project’ sought to build on was deep: the intellectual legacy of Liberal leader Jo Grimond in the ‘50s and ‘60s – who rejected Socialism as an antidote to the perceived bleak imperialistic Conservatism of the post-war era – and the strategic approach of the ‘Gang of Four’ who aimed to ‘break the mould’ of politics through the creation of the SDP in the 1980s. As Liberal Democrat leader, Ashdown said he felt like a custodian of this legacy, and that this was the rationale behind his centrist political positioning between 1992 and 1994, and his frustration that Blair had ‘occupied Liberal Democrat ground’ once he became leader of the Opposition.

Liddle highlighted Blair’s address to the Fabian Society on the fiftieth anniversary of Labour’s post-war landslide as evidence of Blair’s pluralistic feelings and awareness of the Liberal heritage. In the speech, Blair had said that Clement Attlee’s victory was as much to do with the legacy of Liberal members Beveridge and Keynes, as of Nye Bevan and others within the Labour movement.

Ashdown said that throughout the process he had wished to maintain the Liberal Democrats’ independence and stressed that even where alignment was possible, it was conditional upon his own party’s consent. Ultimately though, Ashdown argued the Liberal Democrats had a positive attitude to cooperation: by way of evidence, he highlighted its relatively united and pragmatic approach to government shown since 2010, in juxtaposition to the attitude of their Tory coalition bedfellows.

Each of the three panellists highlighted the ‘personal political risks’ both political leaders faced:

throughout the ‘Project’ both were cognisant of the need for approval from their own parties, and this party approval, or lack of it, proved important in the eventual collapse of the ‘Project’. But Liddle and Ashdown both felt that Blair was unwilling to cede power from central government and the Labour Party; McFadden did not demur.

The Joint Cabinet Committee (JCC) aimed at promoting common endeavour between the two parties gradually broke down following Ashdown’s retirement and Charles Kennedy’s succession to Liberal Democrat leadership in 1999. This development marked the ‘Project’s’ ultimate demise by the decade’s end.

A lively discussion ensued in the audience about the ‘Project’ and the reasons for and degree of its failure. Speaking from the floor, Bill Rodgers, member of the ‘Gang of Four’ and Liberal Democrat leader in the House of Lords in the early years of Blair’s premiership, speculated that ‘self-deceit’ was key to understanding the project: ‘it was never going to work from the beginning’.

Ashdown was more positive about its aims: whilst he accepted that the odds were against success, ‘romanticism is the hallmark of all great political movements – including the SDP – and without it very little is achieved, even when the main objectives are left unachieved’. Although the ‘Project’ did not live up to the high aspirations held for it, it did succeed in bringing about reforms such as devolution in Scotland and Wales, as well as helping to double Liberal Democrat parliamentary representation in May 1997, in the face of the Labour surge, through a combined association with anti-Toryism.

One audience member asked how the Labour era would have been different had the Liberal Democrats been able to work alongside the other party effectively in some form of coalition. Ashdown said that in the context of Liberal Democrat coalition, Labour’s perceived disdain for Human Rights as well as the lack of challenge it provided to Euroscepticism, could have been much altered and improved. Liddle and Ashdown spoke of their disillusionment with certain aspects of Blair’s legacy.

Most notably, Liberal Democrats disagreed with Tony Blair over the 2003 Iraq war (though curiously not Ashdown, who was by then outside Westminster, as NATO High Representative in Bosnia). Pushed for a counter-factual historical analysis, Ashdown would not be drawn on how history might have been different. Instead he related a colleague’s anecdote of the first meeting between Chairman Mao and Henry Kissinger in the 1970s and the stochastic nature of history: asked how history would have been different had the Russian leader been assassinated in 1963 and not the American President, Mao reportedly stated that it was unlikely Mrs Krushchev would have ended up married to the Greek shipping magnate Onassis.

Mark Twain once remarked that ‘History does not repeat itself, but it does Rhyme’. In that light, there has been much speculation that the cross-party relationship might be reconceived after the 2015 election, particularly if the ‘arithmetic’ test can finally be passed.

Liddle stated that the ‘Project’ ‘is not yet dead’ and that there was a strong chance that the two parties might be thrust together: as in the 1990s, the purpose remained unchanged – ‘dishing the Tories’.

McFadden was cool on the subject and warned against presumptive allocations of vote shares to parties long before people had voted: ‘it’s up to us as politicians to offer solutions to the ongoing challenges to people’s living standards’. Ashdown said that, for Liberal Democrats, pluralism could involve any party that believed in the national interest and liberal values, and he praised Nick Clegg’s flexible approach to coalition and his decision to take his lead from the electorate in 2010.

Pressed by Richards on his ultimate attitude to post-2015 cooperation with Labour, Ashdown referred to the transferable skills he had developed in the military and how they were of use to him in his later political career: ‘in my time in the Marines, I spent time in Borneo, and was trained in how to discover elephant traps – this is one!’

*Douglas Oliver is Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group.*

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