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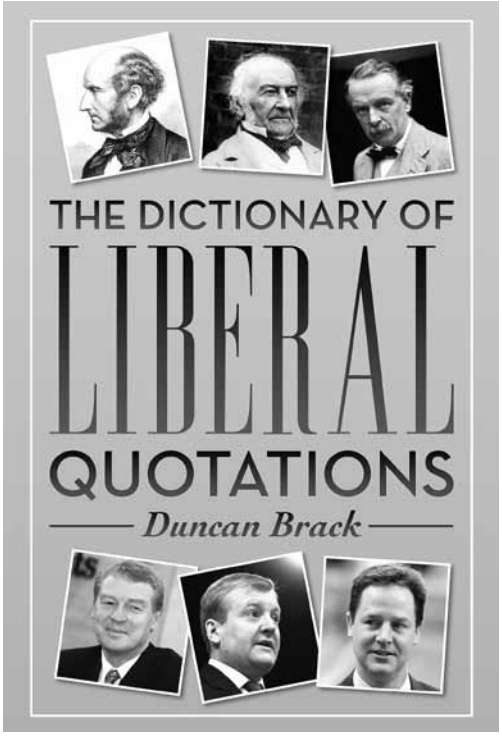

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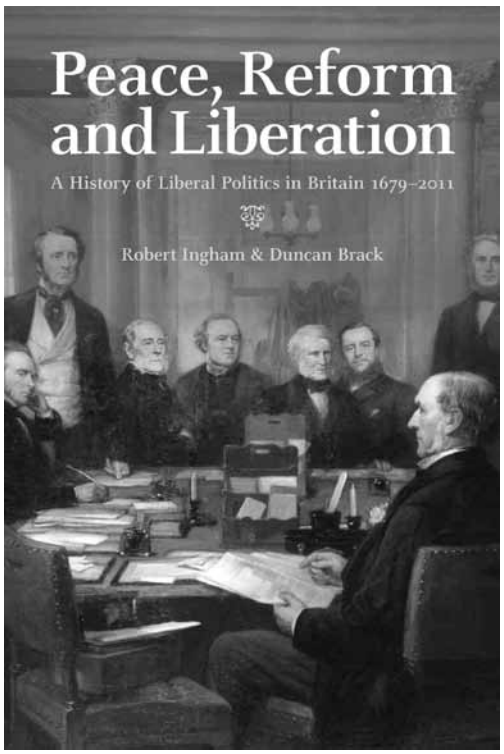

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The Liberal Democrat History Group promotes the discussion and research of topics relating to the histories of the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party, and SDP, and of Liberalism. The Group organises discussion meetings and produces the *Journal of Liberal History* and other occasional publications.

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THE LIBERAL
THE FIRST

On 3 March 2013, the Liberal Democrats marked their twenty-fifth birthday. The story of the party since 1988 has been a dramatic one, from near-extinction, through a failed realignment of the left, a period of rapidly changing leaders, and then into government, for the first time for a third party for sixty years.

The Liberal Democrat History Group's history of British Liberalism, *Peace, Reform and Liberation* (published in 2011; see advert on page 2), analysed the history of the Liberal Democrats in six phases: survival, 1988–92; an attempt to realign the left, 1992–99; a return to more traditional protest politics, 1999–2005; a period of instability, including two leadership elections, 2005–07; the search for a definition in the wake of the disintegration of New Labour, 2007–10; and coalition, 2010–.

With the exception of the last phase, these are familiar themes from earlier periods of Liberal history – though a major difference, at least from 1997 onwards, is that the party succeeded in targeting its vote effectively, overcoming to a certain extent the drawbacks of the first-past-the-post system and delivering the highest number of Liberal MPs since the 1920s. In turn this led to the party being strong enough to hold the balance of power after the 2010 election, enabling its entry into government.

The party's twenty-fifth birthday seemed an obvious topic for a special issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*, but rather than simply tell the story chronologically, we have aimed to identify the key factors in the party's survival and success, at least up until entry into coalition.

On 3 March 2013, the Liberal Democrats marked their twenty-fifth birthday.

First, the party's campaigning ability. As noted above, from 1997 onwards the Liberal Democrats have managed to win significantly greater numbers of seats than their predecessor parties, often on smaller shares of the national vote. This has been the outcome of a combination of intensive local campaigning – both contributing to and reinforced by local government success – an increasing targeting of resources on winnable seats and a steadily more professional organisation. Parliamentary by-elections have also helped, and sometimes proved vital, to the party's national image. Eastbourne in 1990 demonstrated that the party had survived (and contributed to Mrs Thatcher's downfall). Newbury and Christchurch in 1993 showed that the Liberal Democrats could challenge the Conservatives even in their strongholds, while Brent East in 2003 and Leicester South in 2004 achieved the same with respect to Labour. In 2006, Dunfermline & West Fife rescued the party from the aftermath of the resignation of Charles Kennedy, and in 2013 Eastleigh showed that the party could still hold on in its strongholds despite the impacts of coalition. In the first article in this issue, **Mark Pack** examines the evolution of the party's campaigning techniques and structures.

Although the Liberal Democrats have never managed to win as much as 10 per cent of Parliamentary constituencies, they have been much more successful at local level. The Liberal Party had built up its local strength to almost 1,500 councillors by the time the SDP was formed in 1983; the Alliance took this to over 3,500 by 1987. For most of the lifetime of the Liberal Democrats, the party has had over 4,000 councillors, briefly topping 5,000 in 1996–97, 22 per cent of the UK total. Local Liberal Democrats have had a focus for their efforts and, in most areas, a taste of electoral success and a demonstration of the way in which effective campaigning and organisation can lead to results. There was a strong correlation between local government success and many of the Westminster seats gained in the 1997 and subsequent elections. **Matt Cole**'s article looks at the party's record in local government elections and its impact.

Throughout its life, the party has attempted, with some success, to sharpen its definition, developing policies that the electorate came to recognise as distinctly Liberal Democrat – including, in particular, support for investment in education, opposition to university tuition fees, opposition to the war in Iraq and support for green policies. As a party based more on ideology than class or sectoral

DEMOCRATS: 25 YEARS

support, policy-making has been important internally, one of the ways to define what being a Liberal Democrat means. The party's retention of a democratic policy-making process is no accident; and when leaders have decided to ignore it, as over university tuition fees, the outcome has not been happy. **David Howarth** examines the functions of policy for the Liberal Democrats.

The role of the party leader has often been crucial. For smaller political parties the media tends to focus on the leader to the exclusion of his or her colleagues. Compared to other parties, therefore, the Liberal Democrat leader occupies a larger part of the kaleidoscope of impressions that together form the overall image of the party in the mind of the electorate – along with the party's national policies, its local record and its local representatives. Overall, the party has been well served by its leaders, particularly during general election campaigns, which is when most electors see and hear them; Ashdown, Kennedy and Clegg all performed creditably in the elections in which they led the party, except for the opening of the 2005 campaign. This in turn, of course, places a greater premium on their effectiveness, which is why Kennedy's and Campbell's perceived shortcomings caused such concern. **Duncan Brack**'s article describes the key characteristics necessary in a Liberal Democrat leader, and analyses the extent to which the four leaders to date have possessed them.

The Liberal Party both benefited and suffered from being primarily a repository for protest votes. To a certain extent the Liberal Democrats have strengthened their social bases of support, appealing most strongly to the educated middle classes, particularly those working in the professions and the public sector. This made it well placed to pick up the support of discontented Labour voters after 1997, and especially after the Iraq War. This helped to ensure that it was the main beneficiary from the accelerating decline in support for the other two major parties (which in 2010 fell below two-thirds for the first time since 1918). The impact of coalition, however, and the party's actions in government, has been substantial, severely testing the electorate's support for the party. In the fifth article in this issue, **Andrew Russell** considers who votes for the Liberal Democrats.

Constraints of space prevented us, in *Peace, Reform and Liberation*, from affording detailed consideration to the achievements of the Liberal Democrats in Scotland and Wales, who both participated in coalition governments with Labour before the UK party entered into coalition with the Conservatives. This issue of the *Journal* has enabled us at least to begin to redress the balance. **Caron Lindsay** analyses the record of the Scottish Liberal Democrats' two periods in coalition, 1999–2003 and 2003–07, and draws parallels with the later UK experience. **Russell Deacon** looks at the Welsh Liberal Democrats' period in coalition in 2000–03, and reflects on the experience of working with the Labour Party.

The story of the party since 1988 has been a dramatic one, from near-extinction, through a failed realignment of the left, a period of rapidly changing leaders, and then into government, for the first time for a third party for sixty years.

The impact of the current coalition government on the Liberal Democrats is of course of huge significance, and we aim to consider it properly in the *Journal* after the 2015 election. **Douglas Oliver**'s write-up of the History Group's meeting in January 2013, however, provides a chance to look a different coalition that never happened, when Paddy Ashdown, Roger Liddle and Pat McFadden discussed 'the Project' – the attempt by Ashdown and Tony Blair to realign the centre-left of British politics by closer collaboration between the Liberal Democrats and Labour. There may be lessons here for the aftermath of the 2015 election.

The publication of this special issue has been delayed well beyond the Liberal Democrats' twenty-fifth birthday for a series of reasons (including the fact that party activists are even worse at meeting deadlines than academics!), but we hope you find it an interesting read – and, with the approach of the 2015 election marking an uncertain future, a thought-provoking one.

Duncan Brack is the Editor of the Journal of Liberal History *and co-edited this special issue with guest editor Dr Mark Pack.*

THE LIBERAL APPROACH TO

Started by pioneering academics such as David Denver, Gordon Hands and Justin Fisher,[1] there is now a well-established tradition of research into the impact of local campaigning on British election results. This work, however, tends to be cross-party and to rely heavily on evidence such as officially recorded spending figures, election results, questionnaire findings and statistical analysis of all three. As a result, there is still very little written about the development of particular campaign techniques, especially where they were specific to one party for a long period of time. By **Mark Pack**.

L DEMOCRAT CAMPAIGNING

This article fills part of that gap in the historical record, by considering the Liberal Democrat (and before that Liberal Party) campaign techniques, and the evolution of party strategies and structures to support them.[2]

The Liberal Democrat inheritance from its predecessor parties

The techniques, strategies and structures were not all created afresh when the party was formed out of the merger of the Liberal Party and SDP. Rather, the merged party inherited most of its initial approach from its predecessors.

In establishing a campaign tradition for their merged successor to inherit, the Liberal Party had two big advantages over the SDP: it had been around, doing campaigning, for longer and, at least as far as local campaigning was concerned, had been seen even by many in the SDP as being the more skilled party.

Moreover, in adopting community politics in the 1970s, the Liberal Party had taken both a philosophical and a practical approach that venerated local activity and regular communication. It was about being active on the doorsteps and via letterboxes all year round and not simply (as was traditional with election campaigns) in the few weeks before a polling day. Elections were, in the old Liberal Party saying, but the punctuation marks in community politics.

The degree to which community politics should be about winning elections, and accusations that it was being dumbed down into an election-only approach, was a regular feature of Liberal Party debates over the future of the idea. As one of its seminal texts warned (and note that its authors felt the need to issue this warning): 'Community politics is not a technique. It is an ideology, a system of ideas for social transformation. For those ideas to become a reality there is a need for a strategy of political action. For that strategy to be successful it needs to develop effective techniques of political campaigning. Those techniques are a means to an end. If they become an end in themselves, the ideas they were designed to promote will have been lost'.[3]

By contrast, the SDP's roots were predominantly in national politics and national issues, which did not in the same way lead naturally to a distinctive approach to local campaigning. A Labour MP who left his party for the SDP over Europe, trade union power or voting rights at a national party conference did not as a result adopt a different approach from that of other parties to grassroots politics in the same way that a Liberal attracted to community politics did.

Moreover, the relative results of the two parties in 1983 and 1987 reinforced the existing perception of the Liberal Party as being the skilled exponent of grassroots political campaigning. Despite a tortuous process to ensure a 'fair' allocation of seats between the two Alliance partners, at both elections the Liberals were far more effective at winning seats than the SDP (by the margin of seventeen to six in 1983, and by seventeen to five in 1987). For all the importance the SDP attached to bringing a sense of professionalism to the (as they saw it) amateurish approach of the Liberals, when it came to votes being counted it was the Liberal Party approach that consistently did better.

It is no surprise, therefore, that comparing the different campaign manuals produced for the two predecessor parties, for the Alliance and then for the Liberal Democrats reveals a strong continuity in both content and authors from the Liberal Party through to the Liberal Democrats.[4] Indeed, in many cases large pieces of text were copied over and then updated for new editions or nominally new titles, so that even where the author's names and titles are new, the continuity is still there.[5]

Some of the SDP election manuals did have a distinctive approach from the contemporary Liberal Party ones. For example, the SDP's first *Local Government Election Handbook*, published in January 1982, highlighted the importance of 'Policy Formulation', which features as early as page 2, giving it a prominence that equivalent Liberal Party publications of the time did not grant. But subsequent Liberal Democrat publications followed the Liberal Party and not the SDP choice of emphasis.

This documentary and authorial trail from the Liberal Party through to the Liberal Democrats was also reflected in the nature of the grassroots campaigning that the Liberal Democrats specialised in. The

Liberal Democrat campaigning: Brent Central in the 2010 election (photo: Liberal Democrats).

various techniques described below all had antecedents in Liberal Party activities. It is hard to identify a distinctive SDP contribution, save for perhaps one crucial one: many in the SDP viewed themselves as taking the fight for Westminster constituencies seriously, in a way that the Liberal Party, with its – in their view – undue concentration on local councils, had not.[6]

The need for leaflets

Central to this inheritance for the Liberal Democrats was the role of leaflets. If one image can sum up the approach to campaigning taken by the Liberal Democrats across twenty-five years, it would be a piece of paper on a doormat emblazoned with a bar chart and a headline screaming that 'Only the local Liberal Democrat can beat Party X round here'.[7]

Then Liberal Party MP David Penhaligon coined the phrase that many activists have since quoted, 'If you believe in something, write it on a piece of paper and stick it through a letterbox'. However, it was Chris Rennard, first as the Liberal Democrats' Director of Campaigns and Elections, and then subsequently as Chief Executive, who turned it into an effective seat-winning tactic at general elections for the party.[8]

Both when Penhaligon first coined the phrase and during Rennard's time in charge of the party's campaigning, the party suffered from not only an absence of favourable newspaper owners but also a paucity of coverage on impartial radio and TV channels. As a result, the Liberals and subsequently Liberal Democrats had turned to intensive and local leafleting to get out the party's message.

Moreover, the workings of Britain's first past the post electoral system required that leafleting – and other campaigning – be tightly targeted geographically in order for support to be turned into seats. That is because, outside of parts of the Celtic fringe, the third party's vote was usually fairly evenly distributed around the country, which is not the route to winning under first past the post. Only by concentrating on building up support within particular seats could votes secured be turned into actual seats won.

By the time of the Liberal Democrats, the idea of intensive leaflet campaigns and careful targeting to win local elections was well established and, in many parts of the country, successful. However, it had not achieved similar levels of success at a national level.

Targeting

Part of the reason for this distinction between local level success and Westminster-level disappointments was the difficulty of applying targeting effectively at parliamentary-level elections.

At the local level, the Liberals in particular in their most successful areas had honed a very strict approach to targeting, pouring efforts into winnable wards whilst neglecting other wards – often in those doing no more than putting a candidate's name on the ballot paper, if that. But when it came to general elections, it was far less common for candidates and their helpers to similarly abandon no-hope seats and move instead to help in winnable constituencies.[9] (Parliamentary by-elections were an exception to this due to the paucity of other elections usually taking place on the same day – and it was no coincidence that this made it easier to encourage large volumes of help and that the party developed something of an expertise at winning such contests.)

The relative reluctance on the part of activists to move during general elections was in part because Westminster elections came with elements that made it harder for candidates to turn their back on their own seat and concentrate on helping someone who could win. Public meetings may be in a long-term decline in British politics, but most candidates felt they had to turn up for those in their own seat. Similarly, the provision by the Royal Mail of a free delivery service for one election leaflet to every voter encouraged candidates and their teams to feel that they had to 'show the flag' and at least get one election address out. Although the Royal Mail did the delivery of the freepost election address, its production could still require significant local campaign effort, such as to address and stuff envelopes to hold the election address, reducing the amount of time available to help in winnable constituencies.[10]

Chris Rennard liked to tell the story of how he met with the Liberal Party's 1987 General Election Campaign Committee and was firmly told that, 'which seats the party won at a general election was just a matter of luck, completely out of the control of the central campaign'.

Also, for local council elections, targeting usually meant asking people to travel less far than for targeting at parliamentary elections. Parliamentary constituencies are considerably larger, and winnable constituencies fewer. As a result, going to your nearest target constituency might even mean travelling 100 miles or more. By contrast, going to your nearest target ward usually meant only a short trip, save for the most rural of areas.

Moreover, at a national level many believed that very little could be done to influence the chances in individual seats, if indeed that was even the point of a national campaign. Thomas (Jack) Daniels, the Liberal candidate for Luton in 1966, recounted[11] how despite his very low prospects of victory, he received an election visit from then Liberal leader Jo Grimond because Grimond simply thought it was the right thing for him to do to visit everyone who was standing as a candidate.

That sort of attitude lasted over the decades. Chris Rennard liked to tell the story of how he met with the Liberal Party's 1987 General Election Campaign Committee and was firmly told that, 'which seats the party won at a general election was just a matter of luck, completely out of the control of the central campaign'. That was a belief that he did not share and set out to change, and during his time in charge of the party's campaigning it did change radically.

The most notable example of the party's improved ability to win seats under the British electoral system was 1997. At that election the party's vote share fell, and was less than the party's previous 1974 peak. Yet the number of seats the party won went up, to more than three times the number of seats won during the two 1974 elections.

A semi-autonomous campaign organisation

Under Chris Rennard, targeting also meant strong central control, with funds and staffing under his direction pointed towards a limited number of seats.

To be successful, this required two internal debates to be won, repeatedly. First, the ability of a well-resourced targeting operation to win seats was so important

that the party should dedicate more resources to target seat campaigning. Second, that the selection of target seats should be sufficiently narrow to make it meaningful – and so only giving target seat status to those performing at a level which could bring victory.

Rennard therefore believed that effective targeting also required him to have significant power and discretion within the party organisation. It meant he argued both for an increasing share of the party's resources to be dedicated to the key seats operation and for him and the party's campaign staff working for him to have substantial autonomy over the key seat operation. This was only partly tempered by a need to cooperate with other parts of the party in order to bring in their resources to the operation. As a result, the selection of target seats in England in the run-up to the 1997 general election, for example, involved regional parties in helping to evaluate seats against performance criteria such as level of members and regularity of leaflet delivery. Central party staff and funding resources were only available for those seats and regions that complied with the scheme.

Supporting activity in key seats became an increasingly important funding priority for the party, with the £120,000 allocated to the Campaigns Department for key seats in 1992 growing to £1m in 1997 and continuing to grow subsequently. Controversy came from the three different sources of financial power for the 1992 and 1997 general elections. There was the mainstream federal (UK-wide) party budget. There was Rennard's growing campaign operation. There were also specially created, autonomous structures for running the 1992 and 1997 election campaigns, under Des Wilson and Richard Holme respectively. Those separate general election structures came with their own budgetary autonomy.

All this caused some in the voluntary party's democratic structures to complain about lack of clarity or control over what was being spent, by who and on what basis. A significant part of the party's federal (UK-wide) funds were, for example, put into a campaign fund and a by-election fund, whose income (in particular, its sources of fundraising) and expenditure had far less detailed scrutiny from the party's elected committees and conference than the main federal party budget. The general election budget itself received even less scrutiny from the party's democratic processes.[12]

There was a significant benefit for the party's campaigning from this opacity. It protected 'commercially confidential' information from the prying eyes of other parties, such as over the relative amount of resources put into contesting different seats and whether or not any particular parliamentary by-election was going to see a serious campaign launched.

The party's Medium Term Review following the 1997 campaign decided that the party's election campaigns should in future be more accountable to the mainstream party structure and that the Campaign & Communications Committee Chair should chair the election campaigns. Tim Razzall was elected to this position following Charles Kennedy's election as leader and he in turn and in accordance with the Medium Term Review appointed Rennard as a 'Chief Executive of the General Election' (he was not then party Chief Executive). This both simplified the structures and solidified Rennard's influence, which had spread from key seats in 1992 to an increasingly important role in deciding messaging in 1997 to being the day-to-day person in charge for 2001.

Alongside this integration of budgets and structures around general elections, the Parliamentary Office of the Liberal Democrats (the operations in parliament, funded by public money and employing much of the party's London-based staff) became more integrated with the federal HQ's operations. Such integration brought many benefits for the party and its ability to make the best use of its resources. It also meant that Chris Rennard's role was an increasingly powerful one – a trend strengthened by the need to fill the vacuum caused by Charles Kennedy's lack of interest in organisational details and by his health issues at the time.[13] Consequently, whatever benefits these changes brought, they did not assuage – and if anything increased – the concerns of some critics about the semi-autonomous nature of the campaigning control he exercised.

Some steps were taken by Chris Rennard in response to these concerns – such as the creation of a new senior management team to take on some of the powers newly concentrated at party HQ. There were also many vocal and passionate defenders of his approach, especially from the party's organisers, agents and candidates. In part this came from a simple record of success (see Table 1) that seemed to justify this approach and which suggested that the more of the party's funds that went on campaigning, and the more that was under Rennard's control, the better the party did.

It also reflected the mixed reputation of the party's Federal Executive (FE) and Federal Finance and Administration Committee (FFAC) who had control over the federal budget and were therefore sidelined when funds went elsewhere. Comments such as 'it's the worst committee I've ever served on' were common from FE members during this time, and spanning several different FE chairs.

Table 1: Liberal, Alliance and Liberal Democrat general election performance

Election	*Seats won*	*Share of the vote*	*Votes:seats ratio*
1970	6	8	0.8
1974 Feb	14	20	0.7
1974 Oct	13	19	0.7
1979	11	14	0.8
1983	23	26	0.9
1987	22	23	0.9
1992	19	18	1.1
1997	46	17	2.7
2001	52	19	2.8
2005	62	22	2.9
2010	57	23	2.5

Moreover, there was a more subtle, cultural factor at work, arising from the way that election law requires individual ward or constituency election campaigns to be conducted. By making the candidate and their election agent legally responsible for all the campaign activities carried out on behalf of a candidate and their party, election law encourages a very centralised approach to election campaign management, which was widely reflected in the party's general election agent manuals and similar publications for local elections.[14] The logic was simple: if someone is going to be legally responsible, then they should be in charge and other bodies – such as the local party executive – should not have power, otherwise they would be making decisions for which someone else then has to carry the legal responsibility. Although there was no directly similar legal requirement to concentrate power at the national level for elections,[15] the culture that elections are run by a small number of individuals who have complete control did seep over from local to the national level, especially as many of those involved at the national level in election campaigning first learnt their skills at the local level.[16]

Finally, there was also a tradition dating back to the Liberal Party days of general election campaigns or key seat activities being run in semi-autonomous ways.[17] When this was added to the SDP heritage, with its revulsion at the way Labour's cumbersome committees had mismanaged elections, and a continuing tradition of Liberal Democrat leaders liking to put general election campaigns outside the party's usual democratic structures,[18] there was a very open door for Rennard to push at with his actions to have centralised, semi-autonomous control.

Parliamentary by-elections

This applied first with parliamentary by-elections and then with constituency campaigning for general elections.

As with the Alliance and before them the Liberal Party, parliamentary by-elections played a large role in the party's fortunes, especially in its early days. The Eastbourne by-election victory in 1990 was credited by many with helping to save the party after the traumas of merger, and all through the next two decades, high profile by-election victories gave the party much needed bursts of publicity and credibility.[19]

They often also helped set the political mood, helping to shift the journalistic consensus as to what the party's fate was likely to be. For example, after the 1997 general election gains, the media generally assumed the next general election would be about the Liberal Democrats trying to minimise the degree to which they slipped back – until the Romsey by-election victory in 2000 set the political story as being one in which the party would make further progress.

More than just leaflets

Chris Rennard's approach to winning parliamentary constituencies was always heavily rooted in local campaigns and leaflets. When in subsequent years he recounted his role in achieving the biggest swing against the Tories in the country in 1983 with David Alton's re-election in Liverpool Mossley Hill, it was the number of leaflets and the size of the swing that most frequently featured, even though an intensive door-knocking campaign and a growth in the volunteer base from 100 to 600 were also key parts of the campaign.[20]

Yet there was always more to Rennard's approach to winning elections than simply delivering leaflets. He set out his campaigning style most clearly in a guide to winning local elections, originally written for the Liberal Party but anticipating the merger.[21] He used to offer would-be candidates a bet: he was so sure that if they did everything in the book they would win, that if they followed everything in the book and failed to win, he would refund the cover price. According to the tales, he never had to make a refund. The book covers more than just leafleting, including a key place for a regular 'residents' survey', asking people what issues are important to them and what problems in the area needed fixing. Find out what the public is concerned about, then tackle it and report back regularly through repeated leaflets was the formula.

It was both a winning formula and became a controversial one for its focus was on volume of activity and populism, taking up issues that concerned people rather than preaching political philosophy at them. It was clearly effective but always risked, especially in untrained or naive hands, lapsing into crude populism without a distinctive liberal tinge. This point is explored further below (see *The Rennard strategy*).

Bar charts

Both the electoral effectiveness and ideological doubts of this approach were heighted by the heavy

A typical bar chart / two-horse race leaflet, from Broadland in the 2010 election

emphasis on appealing to tactical voters. It was an effective way of turning the disadvantages the third party faced under first past the post on their head, making the electoral system count against one of the other main parties within a particular constituency.

Where the third party was in second place (or could plausibly argue that it had moved into second place since the previous election), a strong appeal could be made to the supporters of the major party that found itself in third place, arguing they should switch their votes to the Liberals/Alliance/Lib Dems, as their favoured party could not win but by switching they would at least be able to stop the other main party winning. Moreover, in making the tactical voting case, the party was also implicitly making the case that the party could win, at least in that seat, which was also an effective tactic for appealing to voters, many of whom were willing to vote for the party as long as it would not end up being a wasted vote.[22]

A key part of making this point effectively was to present it graphically, in the shape of a bar chart. The origins of the first bar charts on leaflets painting a contest as a two-horse between the party and its main rival, with the other party or parties labelled as unable to win are lost to history although most likely date to the late 1970s.[23] By the early 1980s Chris Rennard was promoting tactical voting, authoring a guide for the Association of Liberal Councillors that included advice on how to use what he then called 'block diagrams'. By the time of the Liberal Democrats the use of tactical voting appeals illustrated by bar charts was a major part of the party's target seat campaigns.

Tabloid newspapers

Another distinctive feature of Liberal Democrat campaigns, less remarked on than bar chart but as with them ending up widely copied by other parties, was the use of four-page constituency newspapers. Given a non-party masthead to encourage readership, and with no prominent logo on the first page, these newspapers made clear who they were from but were written in a third-person local newspaper style and designed to attract the interest of people who would not normally give a conventional political leaflet a second glance.

The delivery of a newspapers, including one over the last weekend of the campaign containing an extremely strong tactical voting message, became a staple of the party's electioneering for decades until reductions in printing prices, more generous expense limits and imitation from other parties made newspapers spill over into repeated appearances during a campaign.

As with other techniques, such newspapers often showed up the variation in skill levels amongst campaign teams. The newspaper produced for high-profile by-elections usually had production quality matching the independent local media. However, the format of the item showed up particularly harshly any falling short of such standards, with local campaign teams not in receipt of direct central artwork support not infrequently producing newspapers so amateurish in appearance as to undermine the concept.

Yet such newspapers continued to be produced because, as with bar charts and other parts of the successful campaign paraphernalia, in less skilled hands they became totemic concepts to copy. Copying concepts is much easier, of course, than copying quality – and with the rationale behind such paraphernalia rarely discussed widely in the party, it became easy for people to copy poorly without understanding why what they were doing was inferior.

'Blue ink' letters

In the search to find formats that would result in voters actually reading political literature, hand-addressed envelopes containing a reproduced handwritten letter also became common. Typically the letters used blue paper and envelopes, with the printed handwriting often in dark blue ink, giving them the name 'blue ink letters'. The first such blue ink letters were invented by Rennard when he was organising the Liberal breakthrough in Leicester in the 1980s.

As with other campaign techniques, such as the old Liberal Party's habit, born in 1970s Liverpool, of delivering a 'Good Morning' leaflet before voters had woken up on polling day, they started as a distinctive technique and ended up being copied by the other parties. Indeed, by the time of the Cheadle by-election in 2005, not only were the Conservatives closely copying the campaign tactics of previous Liberal Democrat by-elections, but many of the standard phrases and wording used in them were also being copied. It led to increasingly questions over whether the party's campaign techniques were fresh enough and modernising at a pace to keep up with the other parties.

The problem was not so much the lack of policy consistency across different seats, for there was high consistency at Rennard's instigation, but rather that the 'we're nice, hard working and concerned about the same issues as you' message was not sufficiently distinctively liberal.

The Rennard strategy

Part of these criticisms was a view that Rennard-style campaigning added up to less than the sum of its parts. By fighting a series of very intensive local constituency campaigns, each shaped by the varying particular issues and concerns in the individual constituencies – so the argument went – the party was failing to build up a clear, consistent image of itself or carve out a clear core vote. Instead, it was accumulating different sets of diverse supporters in various seats, with the only possible progress coming from putting together new bespoke coalitions of supporters a few seats at a time.

This criticism can be overdone, for the party's polling actually found rather similar results across its different key seats. The typical key-seat constituency polls with a sample size of around 450 found a consistent pattern – both around the country and across the years – of voters liking hard-working Liberal Democrats, with strong local credentials, who concentrated on the issues that the public told the pollsters were the most important to their family. These were usually health, crime and education, with issues such as constitutional reform and Europe as a result being heavily downplayed.

If anything, the problem was not so much the lack of policy consistency across different seats, for there was high consistency at Rennard's instigation, but rather that the 'we're nice, hard working and concerned about the same issues as you' message was not sufficiently distinctively liberal. As a result, the party's pitch was one any other party could – and sometimes did – copy and match. By concentrating on promoting the virtues of individual candidates, their local connections and their local

campaigns, the approach built up support for individuals who happened to be Liberal Democrats, rather than for the party in its own right. This made it hard to transfer that support to their successors as candidates. Where an incumbent MP was standing down, there was some scope for them to support the building up of their successor. However, where the party had come close but not won and the defeated candidate retired, or where an MP was defeated and a new person was seeking to regain the seat next time round, it was extremely hard to pass on the accumulated support for their predecessor to the new person.

Rennard's response to this was partly that it was a better approach than anything that anyone else had tried or suggested, in that it did at least get Lib Dem MPs elected in far greater numbers than before. He also argued that there was a long-term strategic element to it: the aim was to build up the number of seats the party could win until it was big enough to force a hung parliament. At that point, he hoped, the party would be able to get the rules of the game changed, with a new voting system and party funding reform then letting the party fight future elections on a level playing field with the other main parties.

On that basis, the election-fighting part of the strategy almost delivered in 2010. But the mathematics of the hung parliament did not make a Labour–Lib Dem deal feasible, and so the party's negotiating position for electoral reform was weakened. That plus the subsequent disastrous AV referendum campaign meant the strategy did not end in triumph.

Where the party did succeed in changing the rules of the electoral game – with electoral reform for Scotland, Wales, London and the European Parliament elections – this simply extended the controversy. For critics of Rennardism, the party's failure to shine in those ballots conducted by versions of proportional representation showed its limitations. If the party could not do well in elections of the very sort it wanted, freed from the shackles of first past the post, what long-term future for the party was there?

The answer to that, for Rennardism's defenders, was that the future required more of the same. Namely that the best results in PR elections, where votes were counted up over a much larger area than a single Westminster constituency, were garnered by concentrating activity on the strongest constituencies and wards within those larger areas. Rennard-style concentrated campaigning generated more votes overall than alternative approaches to spread the party's activity more thinly over wider areas.[24]

A related criticism frequently made, especially in the pages of *Liberator* magazine, was that by concentrating party resources on a limited number of target seats, the party failed to grow in other parts of the country and instead was left to whither. In truth, though, the number of seats being seriously fought by the party doubled across the 1997, 2001 and 2005 parliaments before Chris Rennard's departure as Chief Executive.[25]

Post-2005 reviews

Following the 2005 election, within the Campaigns Department there was a limited review of the general election result and revision of the party's template campaign strategy for target and held seats. More generally there was debate in the party over how the general election was conducted, and whether the result constituted a missed opportunity given the political damage to Labour thanks to the fallout from the Iraq war.[26] The party had some dramatic wins from Labour, such as in Manchester Withington and in Hornsey & Wood Green, but should there have been more given the political environment offered up by the Iraq war and resulting widespread centre-left disenchantment with Tony Blair?

Within the Campaigns Department the thinking was much more about how the party had performed against the Conservatives, and the failure to win a string of seats that on paper were promising prospects and appeared to have run the sort of campaign which had in the past resulted in victory.

After the 2001 general election, the implicit[27] lesson drawn by the party was that a very effective key-seats operation could only get the party so far, and in addition to an effective 'ground war', the party needed to be better at the 'air war' in the national media and the like so that the ground war took place against a more welcoming backdrop. As a result, and in one of the least frequently commented on episodes during Rennard's time at party HQ, the party's press team[28] was roughly doubled in size. The ground tactics changed little, for as in 1997 there was a compellingly clear and neat pattern of the seats which followed the standard Rennard campaign template winning and those that did not, losing.

For 2005, the pattern was much less clear cut, and as a result the campaign activity template that seats were expected to follow underwent significant changes, including a big increase in the volume of direct mail. This was in part a reaction to the large Conservative direct mail operation in 2005, although whilst the latter relied overwhelmingly on postage, the lower-budget Lib Dem operation was reliant on hand-delivered direct mail.

More widely in the party this still left a sense that further modernisation of campaign tactics was required. Such modernisation was part of Ming Campbell's pitch for the party leadership in 2006 and, after he won, a campaign review headed up by Ed Davey MP was carried out. This included a study trip to Canada and the US to learn lessons from sister parties there. Before there was a chance to see the result of these changes at a general election, Chris Rennard departed as Chief Executive.

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Post-Rennard

The new Chief Executive, Chris Fox, set out to organise party HQ in a very different style (more flip charts and less bar charts was the quip). His Director of Campaigns, Hilary Stephenson, nonetheless took an approach to campaigning that was very rooted in the mode of the 1997 and 2001 successes, and as a result the focus was on fighting those sorts of campaigns better and on a larger scale rather than significant changes in the party's campaigning style.[29]

The 2010 general election saw a huge bump in the opinion polls for the party after the first TV Leaders' Debate, and as a result the party started putting effort into a much wider range of seats. In addition, the focus of party campaigners on

targeting weakened, as more activists started staying at home to work their own seats, thinking they could win, rather than travelling to near-by more marginal seats.[30]

As a result, when the votes came in the 2010 election was the worst for the party since 1992 when judged by the campaign machine's ability to turn national vote share into actual seats (see Table 1). For pessimists this was the result of the Conservatives in 2005 having largely cottoned on to how to do intensive key-seat campaigning, and by 2010 Labour doing so too, leaving the party's ability to out-perform the national picture in selected constituencies hugely reduced.

One issue that was clear is that the party called several seats wrongly in the last few days before polling day, misdirecting resources as a result. For example, a great deal of effort was directed to Oxford East on polling day, which Labour held on to by a significant margin – 4,581 votes – whereas, had the effort been directed instead to neighbouring Oxford West & Abingdon, Evan Harris would not have ended up losing by just 176 votes.[31]

The party's own official review was a relatively low-key affair. It made many detailed recommendations, and some significant organisational ones – particularly that the party should change its computer database software for fighting elections.[32] In addition, the increasing emphasis in the Labour Party on the virtues of canvassing has rubbed off on the Liberal Democrats, with a switch from viewing canvassing as a data-gathering opportunity, where a virtue is made of talking to each person for as little time a possible, to an attempt to get into longer conversations about issues.

Whether such changes are the right ones and are radical enough, remains to be seen with the 2015 election yet to cast its verdict.

Conclusion

The Liberal Party, then the Alliance and subsequently the Liberal Democrats all set out to remake British politics. With the post-2010 coalition government not yet run its course, it would be premature for historians to cast a verdict on the extent to which this aim was achieved.

However, what is already clear is that the third party did remake British political campaigning. It was both a tribute to the success of its tactics and a frustration to its further success that other parties ended up so heavily copying its techniques. Whether it is the regular appearance of a leaflet outside of election time, heavy focusing of resources on a limited number of target seats, emphasis on the local roots and local campaign record of candidates or the widespread use of bar charts, electoral politics in Britain has followed where the third party led.

What is already clear is that the third party did remake British political campaigning. It was both a tribute to the success of its tactics and a frustration to its further success that other parties ended up so heavily copying its techniques.

Dr Mark Pack worked at Liberal Democrat HQ from 2000 to 2009, and prior to that was frequently a volunteer member of the Parliamentary By-Election team. He is co-author of 101 Ways To Win An Election and of the party's General Election Agents Manual.

1 For example, see David Denver and Gordon Hands, *Modern Constituency Electioneering: Local Campaigning in the 1992 General Election* (Frank Cass, 1997) and Justin Fisher, David Denver and Gordon Hands, 'Unsung Heroes: Constituency Election Agents in British General Elections', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2006.

2 This gap is not unique to the Liberal Democrats or the tactics that party pioneered. Phil Cowley, now co-author of the Nuffield general election series, has made the point to the author that he and his colleagues know very little about direct mail's impact on election results even though it is clear from his conversations with campaign organisers that they put much time and money into producing it. As a result he has posited, half in jest but also half seriously, 'Cowley's Law', namely that the level of media attention given to a campaign technique is in inverse proportion to the importance given to it by campaign organisers.

3 Bernard Greaves and Gordon Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics* (Association of Liberal Councillors, 1980).

4 The most notable of the names that provides continuity from the Liberal Party through to the Liberal Democrats is Chris Rennard. However, there are others too, such as Tony Greaves.

5 This applies to some of the Liberal Democrat campaign publications which have my own name on the cover, such as the 2011 pamphlet co-authored with Shaun Roberts, *Campaigning in your community*. The origins of parts of the text can be traced back through to 1970s Liberal Party publications.

6 'There were many areas of Liberal local government strength where little or no attempt was made to convert this to parliamentary elections and indeed even those with much experience of local election success had not much idea of how to adapt community politics techniques for parliamentary elections. In contrast many of the seats we did hold were not really bastions of community politics. Campaigning in Liberal-fought South Leicester and SDP-fought Watford in 1985–87, I found the former more dynamic in terms of winning council seats, but the latter more focused on the parliamentary election,' said Iain Sharpe, now a Watford borough councillor, to the author at the Liberal Democrat autumn federal conference, September 2013.

7 The same image would also cover the predecessor Liberal Party's approach to campaigning over several decades too. The distinctive features of the party's approach to campaigning, leaflets, bar charts and all, came overwhelmingly from the merged party's Liberal, rather than SDP, heritage.

8 Director of Campaigns and Elections 1989–2003 and then Chief Executive 2003–9. He was created a life peer in 1999.

9 This reluctance to move resources and people in order to concentrate on target seats is one the other main parties have encountered too, and indeed is a reason why even as they saw the success of targeting for the third party they were not able to match it because of greater resistance to moving effort between seats from within their own organisations.

10 Technology has increasingly made readying a candidate's freepost election address a less labour-intensive operation than it used to be. The ability to print names and addresses and to automatically fold and stuff literature into envelopes has made their production increasingly something for machines rather than volunteers. The impact of this on the willingness of volunteers therefore to move to help in a different constituency is an unresearched area.

11 Conversation with the author, Liberal Democrat autumn federal conference, September 2013.

12 For example, the autumn 1996 federal conference in Brighton had presented to it a draft outline federal budget for

1997, a draft outline campaign development fund budget for 1997 and a by-election fund statement of income and expenditure for 1995. The 1997 federal budget envisaged expenditure of £1,487,300. The campaign development fund was at £292,000 and the previous year's by-election fund had spent £149,909. In addition, there was a general election fund mentioned but with no details provided. Moreover, very little detail was provided for either the campaign fund or the by-election fund, each only getting one side of summary figures. The mainstream federal budget, by contrast, came with more than a dozen pages of detail on expenditure in the previous year.

13 The different personalities of successive party leaders also played a role. As the Helen Morrissey report, *Process and Culture within the Liberal Democrats and recommendations for change* (2013) put it, 'The relatively relaxed management style of the party leader, Charles Kennedy, compared with Paddy Ashdown who has a military background, also contributed to Chris Rennard's power base.'

14 It was also reflected in similar publications in the other main parties too.

15 This changed somewhere following the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 with its introduction of national expenditure controls.

16 The most common route to recruitment by the Campaigns & Elections Department during the Chris Rennard period was to first have been a winning election agent. Even those who did not follow this route, such as the author, usually had other local campaigning credentials.

17 This was particularly a feature of Jeremy Thorpe's leadership, during which there was secretive fundraising for campaign activities with the wider party kept out of the loop.

18 For the early general elections in the Liberal Democrats' history, a separate general election organisation was created. Integrating the general election campaign into the party's usual operations at subsequent general elections was seen across the party as a sensible reform – and one which therefore also gave more power to Chris Rennard.

19 The Eastbourne by-election was also the first by-election to make use of a relatively small sample constituency poll, of the sort that became a regular staple of key-seat campaigning under Chris Rennard. American political consultant Rick Ridder had first introduced very limited polling to the party at the end of the Richmond by-election campaign, but Eastbourne saw the first poll carried out early enough in the campaign to be used to help make decisions on messages and tactics. See Rick Ridder, 'How Margaret Thatcher Advanced My Consulting Career', *Campaigns & Elections*, May/June 2013.

20 Systematic analysis over decades of the volume of leaflets delivered during election campaigns is absent from British politics. However, there are plenty of fragments of evidence that substantiate anecdotal claims about Liberal Democrat campaigns featuring a tidal wave of paper being pushed through letter boxes. For example, the Nuffield general election series publications for the 1960s and 1970s show how even in marginal seats two or three leaflets in total were the norm during a general election campaign. By the time of the Liberal Democrat election guides for the twenty-first century, campaigns were being advised to use that many leaflets simply on election day itself.

21 Chris Rennard, *Winning Local Elections* (Association of Liberal Councillors, January 1988). The central importance of leaflets is revealed by the explanation of strategy in the book's foreword: 'The book explains a strategy for building a campaign. Not just what leaflets should say but when, how and why – with examples'. This quote illustrates both the key features of Rennard's very successful approach to winning elections and also two of the features that most often attracted criticism – 'strategy' meaning a campaign plan for a specific election and campaigning meaning leafleting.

22 As tactical voting became more talked about in the 1980s and early 1990s there was a lively academic debate on how many people voted tactically. The debate was fuelled in part by disagreements over how tactical voting should be precisely defined for the purposes of academic research. However, the party's own polling in marginal seats consistently showed that being able to win over the supporters of the third-placed party, along with a more general message showing that the party was able to win at all, was an extremely important part of building up a winning share of the vote in such seats.

23 The earliest bar chart the author has located is on a Richmond, London leaflet from 1979 (http://www.markpack.org.uk/35442/the-first-bar-chart-richmond-in-1979-possibly/). However, despite questioning several of the main campaigning experts from the 1970s, the answer to who started the use of bar charts, when or where, has not been identified. Anyone able to beat the 1979 date with an earlier example is most welcome to contact the author on mark.pack@gmail.com.

24 However, it should be noted that in the first European elections by PR, in 1999, Rennard himself was a supporter of trying out some thin, blanket activity. He was instrumental in securing the funding to ensure that election addresses via the Royal Mail's election freepost facility went out to the whole electorate. This produced little apparent benefit for the party, and in future European elections the party increasingly moved towards concentrating its funds on more and better election addresses in its stronger areas, with lower quality, cheaper and fewer election addresses elsewhere.

25 This is based on the (unpublished) lists of seats circulated within the Liberal Democrat Campaigns Department during this time.

26 The party's use of ten we propose/we oppose statements during the 2005 election was a particular cause of debate. Each of the ten individual pairs had been market researched heavily ahead of the election and each was generally popular both within the party and with the public. However, many people felt that the ten individual policies did not add up to a coherent overall message or image for the party. Chris Rennard himself afterwards likened the process to being like having had all the right ingredients for a meal but not a recipe.

27 Implicit in that there was not a specific post-election review which came to this conclusion. However, it was conclusion that Chris Rennard came to and communicated to others, and subsequent budget decisions flowed from this.

28 This is a somewhat imprecise term as many of the press team were formally employed by the Parliamentary Office of the Liberal Democrats and reliant on state funding, which limited the range of activities they could engage in. However, as far as the outside world was concerned there was a group of press officers based in the party's HQ and this was seen – and in practice acted as – the party's press team.

29 Nick Clegg's commitment during his successful run for party leader to double the number of the party's MPs added to this sense that what was needed was to fight more seats to the traditional intense template rather than to change what the template contained.

30 A defence of this dissipation of effort is that 2010 appeared to offer a once in a generation opportunity to win new seats. The party may have gambled and lost by spreading its effort thin, but in the face of such an opportunity it is only hindsight that tells us going for the big prize was the wrong move.

31 Some in the party blamed poor constituency polling for these misjudgements. However, given the availability of data also from other sources, simply blaming the polling is unfair on the pollsters.

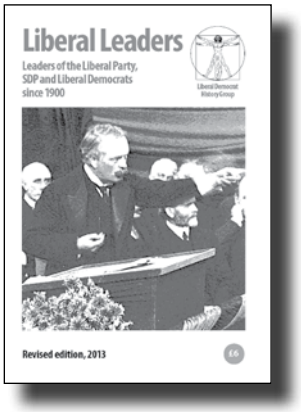
32 It did. After a competitive pitch process, the old EARS programme was replaced not by a new product from the same team but by a product called Connect, based on NGPVAN, a US programme used by the Barack Obama presidential campaigns and by many other Democrat campaigns as well as by the Canadian Liberals. By 2014, only a small number of local parties continued to use EARS.

History Group booklets

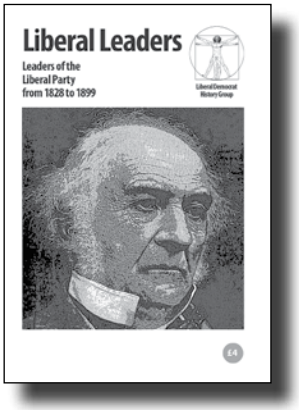
In addition to the Liberal Democrat History Group's reference books (see page 2 for the most recent), we also publish a range of shorter and more accessible booklets – an ideal introduction to aspects of Liberal history.

All the booklets below are available at special discounted prices for subscribers to the *Journal of Liberal History*. To order, please send a cheque (made out to 'Liberal Democrat History Group') to LDHG, 54 Midmoor Road, London SW12 0EN. Postage and packing is included.

Liberal Leaders of the 20th Century



The sixty-page booklet contains concise biographies of every Liberal, Social Democrat and Liberal Democrat leader since 1900. The total of sixteen biographies stretches from Henry Campbell-Bannerman to Nick Clegg, including such figures as H. H. Asquith, David Lloyd George, Jo Grimond, David Steel, David Owen and Paddy Ashdown. Full price £6; available to *Journal of Liberal History* subscribers at the special price of £5.

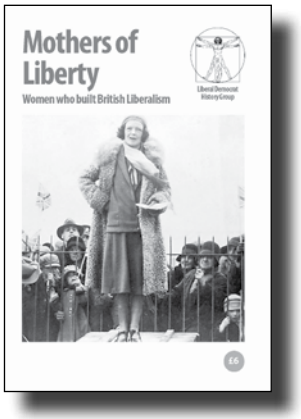


Liberal Leaders of the 19th Century

The forty-page booklet contains concise biographies of every Liberal leader from the Great Reform Act to the end of the nineteenth century – the heyday of the Victorian Liberal Party. The total of eleven biographies range from Lord Grey to Sir William Harcourt, including such towering figures as Viscount Melbourne, Lord John Russell, Lord Palmerston and William Ewart Gladstone. Full price £4; available to *Journal of Liberal History* subscribers at the special price of £3.50.

Mothers of Liberty: Women who built British Liberalism

Even before they gained the right to vote and to stand for election, women played many key roles in the development of British Liberalism – as writers and thinkers, campaigners, political hostesses, organisers and, finally, as parliamentary candidates, MPs and peers.



This booklet contains the stories of the women who shaped British Liberalism – including Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor Mill, the suffragist leader Millicent Garrett Fawcett, the first woman Liberal MP Margaret Wintringham, Violet Bonham Carter, Megan Lloyd George, Nancy Seear, Shirley Williams and many more. Full price £6; available to *Journal of Liberal History* subscribers at the special price of £5.

Coming soon: Liberal thinkers

Concise summaries of the lives and thoughts of the greatest Liberal thinkers, from John Milton to John Rawls, including John Stuart Mill, Tom Paine, L. T. Hobhouse and many more. Available in October; see next issue for details.

CAN THE GRAND OLD DUKE OF
THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL GOVER

As Liberal Democrats recover from the worst local election losses since the formation of the party, **Matt Cole** examines the place of the coalition years in the quarter-century of the Liberal Democrats' life, and finds that these are not the first local losses, nor did the decline start with the coalition. The fall in local representation began before 2005, and the party's peak of local success lies as far back as 1996. Nevertheless, local politics remains at the front line of Liberal Democrat politics: the most vulnerable to attack, the first to suffer losses, and yet the most essential to the heart and to the recovery of the party.

It was asserted in the first major study of the Liberal Democrats that, for both practical and ideological reasons, 'the importance of local politics to the Liberal Democrats cannot be overstated.'[1] Recent setbacks in local council elections are therefore seen by some as more significant than the usual cyclical losses of government parties, and the reputation of the coalition is seen as the poisonous element. Torbay MP Adrian Sanders complained in the run-up to the local elections of 2011 that:

> We have irrevocably damaged our public image. We now face the brutal realisation that we have fractured our core vote, lost a generation of young voters and alienated thousands of tactical voters in seats where it

YORK MARCH BACK UP AGAIN?
RNMENT FOR LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

> makes the difference between electoral success or failure. The message on the doorstep before the election was often 'I support another party, but you seem to have more integrity and do more for local people so you have my vote.' Now it is 'I used to vote for you, you still work hard for your local area, but you are discredited and lied just like the rest of them.'[2]

Analysing the position in 2013, author of the *Local Elections Handbook* Professor Michael Thrasher even warned that Liberal Democrats 'need resurrection, not recovery';[3] and the losses of 2014 prompted pressure for a change of leadership. However, a longer-term view of the Liberal Democrat record in local government shows that the party's participation in the coalition is not the only factor in Liberal Democrat local election performance, and that local politics remains vital to the Liberal Democrats' future fortunes.

Liberals and local government[4]

The Liberal Party was born from the municipal campaigning of Joe Chamberlain, built strength through the campaigns of Lloyd George's rate strike in Wales and E. D. Simon's plans for development in Manchester and found even in the dark days of the 1950s, when the party's MPs could be counted on the fingers of one hand, that council chambers provided the last redoubt of Liberal power, the party remaining in control of a small number of local authorities.

From the 1960s onwards, Liberal achievements were underpinned by the party's commitment to local government. A Local Government Department was established at party headquarters in 1962, the Association of Liberal Councillors first emerged in 1965 and was officially recognised in 1969, and the decade saw a series of parliamentary election victories – including those at Orpington, Colne Valley and Birmingham Ladywood – at least in part built upon success in local politics.

In 1970 the role of local government in the Liberal Party's profile was confirmed by the Assembly's adoption of the community politics strategy, and by the addition of environmental concern to the existing focus on localism and regionalism, to form a policy agenda particularly suited to fighting local elections. In 1977 the ALC's strength was visible with the opening of its headquarters in the Birchcliffe Centre in Hebden Bridge, where its identity as what one supporter described as 'the Liberal Party in exile'[5] was expressed in a programme of publications and campaign meetings, as well as in criticism of the Liberal leadership over pacts and alliances with other parties and departures from distinctive Liberal policy positions.

From a few hundred councillors (some of doubtful association with the party) in the 1950s, the Alliance in 1986 passed the 3,000 mark, of whom 524 were Social Democrats.[6] On the eve of the merger between the Liberals and Social Democrats, the Alliance controlled dozens of councils and took part in administrations on dozens more.

From the 1960s onwards, Liberal achievements were underpinned by the party's commitment to local government.

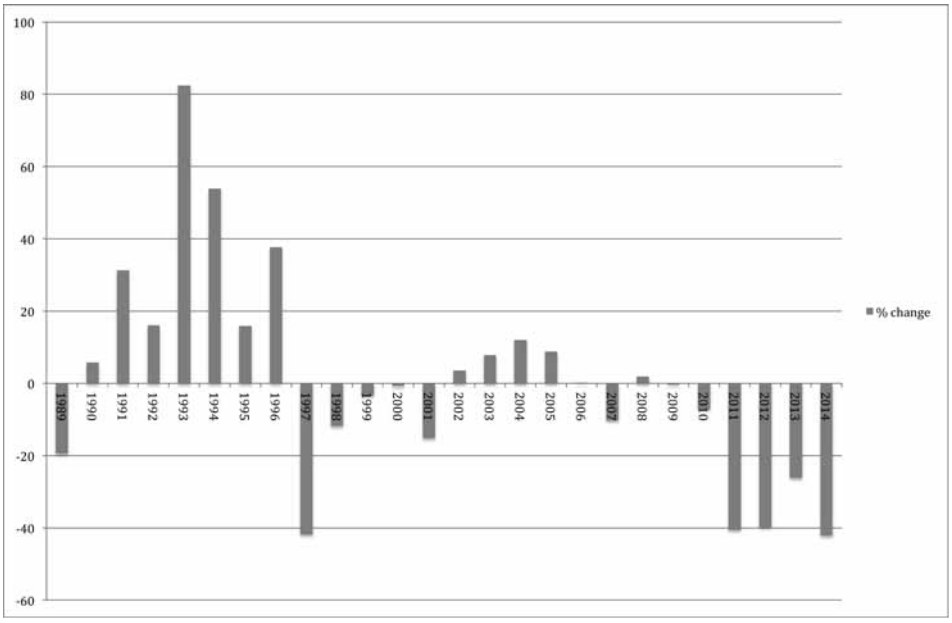
The Liberal Democrats' fortunes

The formation of the Liberal Democrats showed that their strength in local government was an asset at a time of turbulent national leadership. There was considerable continuity in the core organisation of Liberal Democrat councillors, largely because the ALC dominated its Social Democrat counterpart, the Association of Social Democrat Councillors, both numerically and in terms of leadership, experience and resources. SDP councillors were outnumbered by five to one before the merger, and a proportion of these declined to join the Liberal Democrats, leaving their erstwhile colleagues in an even smaller minority. The Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors had its headquarters in the Birchcliffe Centre and the rallying cry for the party's first electoral test in May 1988 was given by former ALC General Secretary Maggie Clay.[7] At a joint ALC and ASDC conference in June a timetable was established (after what was acknowledged as 'some hard bargaining') leading to a launch of the joint organisation in November.[8]

The first two years of local elections were difficult as the Liberal Democrats dealt with the fallout from the merger, and the 1989 county council elections saw the loss of 20 per cent of the seats won in the big advance of 1985. Thereafter the party re-established and expanded its strength, though national circumstances halted and even sometimes reversed the pattern more than once (see Fig. 1).

By 1992 there were 3,800 Liberal Democrat councillors;[9] and

Figure 1: change in Liberal Democrat seats held at contests 1989–2014



in 1996 the figure was over 5,000 and the party controlled over fifty councils.[10] This partly resulted from the disintegration of Conservative support during the second Major administration, but had also been growing since 1990 because of the effective targeting of scarce resources on winnable wards, referred to eight years earlier in Maggie Clay's exhortation to activists to 'get on your bike' to a target seat.

The 'soft' victories handed by the national image of the Conservatives, including the near-doubling of the number of Liberal Democrat county councillors in 1993, proved hard to defend as Tony Blair replaced Major as prime minister in 1997, and consequently almost all of the 392 gains made four years earlier were lost in net terms. The whole of the first Blair premiership was a period of damage limitation for Liberal Democrats in local government, each round of elections seeing the party shed up to 12 per cent of the number of seats it was defending. The period ended with the loss of another eighty county council seats in 2001. The Liberal Democrats controlled twenty fewer councils than four years earlier.

From this period onwards, however – prior to the Iraq War, the first trebling of tuition fees or the intensification of the Blair–Brown struggle – Liberal Democrats in local government showed their ability to achieve growth independently of, and prior to, the party nationally. Each of the next five rounds of elections saw net gains, sometimes of 8 or 12 per cent, in council seat numbers. Significantly, these led to the capture or retrieval of northern, former Labour, administrations such as Newcastle and Pendle – adding to Liverpool and Sheffield, which the party won in 1998 and 1999 respectively. By 2007 the number of Liberal Democrat Councillors had returned to 4,700.

This was, however, a peak. Every year except one since 2006 has seen a decline in the number of Liberal Democrat councillors and councils.[11] Though heightened in 2007 by the party's national leadership difficulties, this pattern clearly predates the formation of the coalition and is reflected in the three case studies below. This strengthens the conviction that Liberal Democrat performance at local elections is only partly a result of national events, and that on occasion the causal relationship can be the other way around.

It would be fatuous to dispute that the record of the coalition, and its perception by the public, has damaged Liberal Democrat strength in local government. After four years of losses – not all unprecedented in scale, but previously unknown in succession – there were by 2013 only 2,700 Liberal Democrat councillors, the lowest number in the party's history; in 2014 this fell to under 2,400. The first and heaviest of these defeats led to calls for Nick Clegg's resignation, but the record of the past suggests that leadership change and national image only determine the shorter-term and most extreme swings in Liberal Democrat strength in local government. The long-term pattern is more complex.

Functions of local representation

As well as carrying out their own work as representatives, councillors and their campaigns can play three types of wider role in a party – an electoral function; a communication function; and a recruitment function – and for the Liberal Democrats these have been especially important.

Council election success is particularly important in giving credibility to the Liberal Democrats as the third party nationally. The slogan 'Winning Round Here' is often held aloft on photographs in Liberal Democrat literature by well-known councillors supporting parliamentary candidates, and many Liberal Democrat MPs owe their seats to the confidence given to voters to back them by preceding local election success for the party. One MP noted that 'most of the '97 intake have seats built on local government success'[12] and this was quantified by a study showing that eighteen of the twenty-eight new Liberal Democrat MPs in that parliament represented areas governed by Liberal Democrat local authorities. 'For the Liberal Democrats, local election success has been vital to their improvement in parliamentary representation since the 1990s' concluded Russell et al. 'Building a strong local base has been one of the main mechanisms the party has used to bridge the electoral credibility gap,' they continue, adding that 'the Liberal Democrat campaign strategy may have worked on a micro-scale since the victories in Cardiff, Leeds and Manchester reflected gains at the local level short of taking the council.'[13] A particularly clear example is Burnley, where the party went from seven councillors (one less than the BNP) in 2003 to twenty-three (and control of the council) in 2008 before winning the parliamentary seat in 2010. There is also a measurable 'horizontal' electoral effect in which success in one council prompts confidence and improvement in neighbouring Liberal Democrat council campaigns.[14]

Secondly, like other parties, the Liberal Democrats use council representation to assist dialogue within the party. 'One of my rules for running the Lib Dems', reflected Paddy Ashdown, 'is that, whenever the Leader and the ALDC act together, we can always get our way.'[15] Leaders who preside over dramatic fortunes for the party would also receive the reaction from council groups, whether a boost as with Kennedy in 2001,[16] or a backlash such as Menzies Campbell suffered in 2007.[17] This exchange also takes place at constituency level, with Liberal Democrat MPs taking the pulse of local opinion from council representatives, and sometimes feeding back parliamentary business or constituency cases to them. 'Politics when it works well is about communication other than through the media', concluded John Hemming after two years as MP for Birmingham Yardley: 'you have discussions in the council group, for instance. Birmingham's council group obviously is more than just Yardley constituency, and we have discussed issues there before coming to a conclusion in Parliament.'[18]

Lastly the Liberal Democrats have used local politics to greater effect than other parties in recruiting, training and promoting members in the party structure. Community politics emphasised the importance of year-round campaigning, and the effects of this are reflected in quantitative studies showing that 'the Liberal Democrats are more able to recruit their members to do election campaigning than is true of other parties'[19] and that 16 per cent of Liberal Democrat members have stood for elected office, compared to 9 per cent for Labour and 3 per cent for the Conservatives.[20] It is interesting to note that at the formation of the Liberal Democrats, the party showed its keenness to promote newer recruits through local government contests by drawing almost half of its council candidates from those under forty-five, compared to figures of a third for Labour and under a fifth for the Conservatives.[21]

Moving to the Commons, two-thirds of the largest-ever group of Liberal Democrat MPs (2005) had council experience, including thirteen former leaders or deputy leaders of authorities, six leaders or deputies of party groups, two cabinet members or committee chairs, and two mayors. Although in 2010 the proportion of Liberal Democrat MPs with council experience fell to 60 per cent, it remained above the comparable figure for Labour (54 per cent) and far ahead of that for the Conservatives (21 per cent). Whilst some have regarded this as regrettable because of its tendency to exclude 'big personalities' or because it inhibits the selection as parliamentary candidates of women, others argue it improves parliamentary discipline. Either way, the distinctively clear role of local government experience in Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate selections is evident.[22]

Three case studies

Three case studies serve to illustrate at ward level the principles first observable through the national data, and to indicate the impact of local variables in such contests. The cases examined here, echoing the regional examples of Orpington, Colne Valley and Ladywood in the 1960s, are from the Midlands, Yorkshire and Greater London.

Birmingham City Council

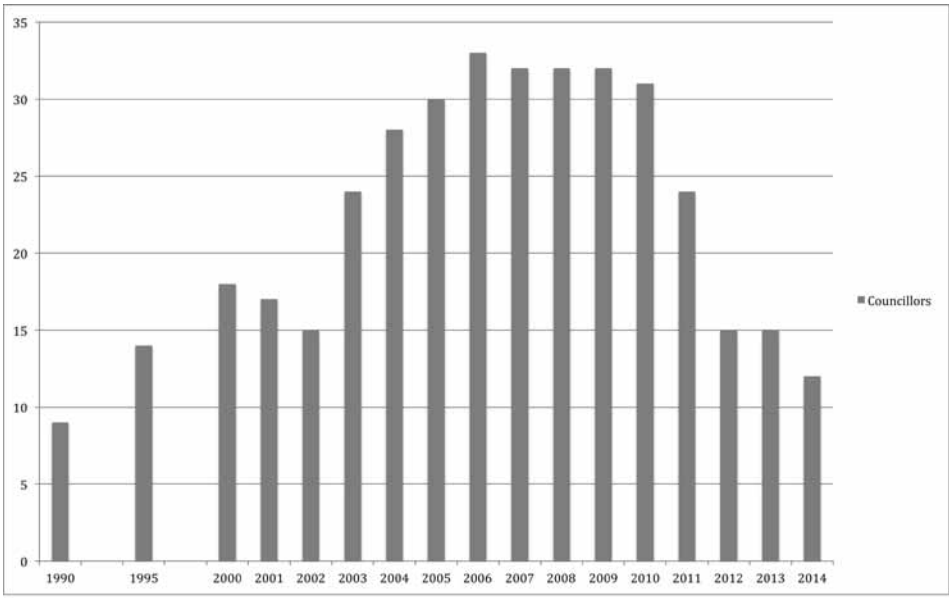
The West Midlands – and especially its urban areas – have proved difficult territory for Liberal candidates at all levels since the Second World War. Birmingham, in particular, suffered until 1940 from the effects of the Chamberlain dynasty's departure from Liberal ranks two generations earlier. By 1953 there were no Liberals on the city's 120-strong council and no candidates at council elections. But Liberal Democrats built on the revival of the 1960s to achieve joint control of the city, from which came their first general election victory in Birmingham since before the First World War (see Fig. 2).[23]

The experience of Birmingham Liberal Democrat council group's longest-serving members dates back to the 1960s when Wallace Lawler used community campaigning and extensive casework in the north of the city to build a group of eight councillors and win the Birmingham Ladywood parliamentary seat at a by-election in 1969. Lawler lost Ladywood at the 1970 general election and died the following year, but his colleagues maintained Liberal representation on the city council through challenging circumstances.

The turbulent fortunes of the Liberals nationally in the late 1970s coincided with major demographic change in the Aston and Newtown areas, which were Lawler's political base, and the Liberal group declined to only two councillors. A strategic decision was made to target wards in the east of the city around Sheldon, and victories there were supplemented by three SDP councillors established by 1986 from neighbouring Hall Green ward.

This group formed the foundation of Liberal Democrat success in Birmingham, which grew from single figures after the merger to

Figure 2: Liberal Democrat councillors on Birmingham City Council 1990–2014



double in size within ten years and peak at 33 out of 120 councillors in 2007. By this time the Liberal Democrat group had shared power with the Conservatives for four years, with Paul Tilsley, first elected to the council in 1969, as deputy council leader. The partnership with the Conservatives was made easier than one with Labour not by ideology, but chiefly by Labour's reluctance and the electoral politics of Birmingham local government, in which only one ward is a genuine contest between Lib Dems and the Tories. In 2005 the Liberal Democrats were able to use the support and credibility they had developed in local government to secure the election of city councillor John Hemming as the MP for Birmingham Yardley, in which constituency the party had already won every council seat.

This success arose in part from the failings of the Conservative and Labour governments of the period, with the controversy over Iraq consolidating support in wards such as Sparkbrook. Added to this was the discredit brought to Labour in Birmingham by the overturning of three of its 2005 election victories following successful prosecutions for fraud.[24] It also relied, however, upon careful targeting of resources and the maintenance of the community politics philosophy of 'actively seek out and deal with constituents' grievances', as group member Roger Harmer puts it. Veteran of the 1960s and 1970s revival David Luscombe was reproached by the city council chief executive for leading a group which brought more cases to the administration than any other, and thanked the chief executive for the compliment.

The formation of the coalition in 2010 clearly raised the prospect that the Conservative–Liberal Democrat administration in Birmingham would become victim to public dissatisfaction at government policy. The Liberal Democrats' support slipped to the point where the group was reduced to less than half its original size, and Labour retrieved control of the council. However, the equation of coalition with collapse of support is simplistic: the support of the Liberal Democrats was in decline from 2007 onwards, and in its heartland the party remained popular, winning the popular vote in the Yardley constituency at the local elections of 2011, 2012 and 2014, when all four wards in the seat were won by the Liberal Democrats.

The impact of the coalition has been to return Liberal Democrat council representation in Birmingham to its pre-Blair level. The long-term resilience of Birmingham Liberal Democrats which was visible in the 1980s, and the continuing higher base in seats which have been won and then lost in the interim, will be important in restoring the balance in the future.

City of York Council

The roots of the Liberal Democrat group on the City of York Council are also to be found in an earlier Liberal revival, and as in Birmingham the Liberal Democrats were able to go from the secure but limited representation this achieved to take control of the council.

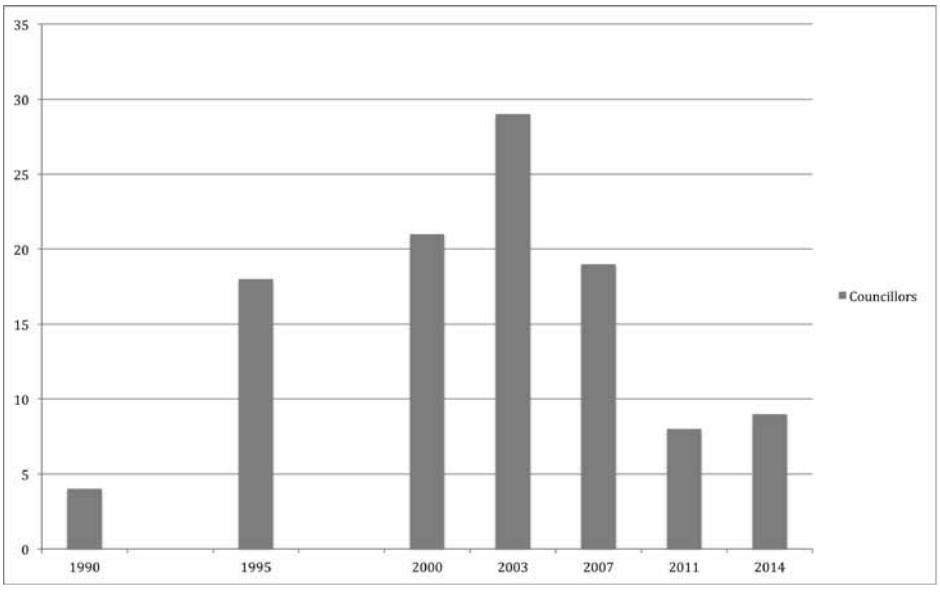
A small but determined Liberal group was established on York City Council from 1973 onwards under the energetic but controversial leadership of Steve Galloway, a Liberal activist in Yorkshire since the 1960s. Galloway was Liberal parliamentary candidate in York in 1974, but when in the 1980s he was denied the opportunity to stand again by the decision to assign York to the Social Democrats, his hostility to the Alliance inhibited its electoral progress in York.

Galloway refused any Liberal cooperation in York general election campaigns, leading the SDP candidate Vince Cable to despair that 'even by the standards of a party with more than its share of bloody-minded individualists, he was (and I understand, remains) in a league of his own.'[25] At local elections this isolation of the Social Democrats restricted them to winning only one council seat at a by-election in 1986. When the York Liberal Democrats were formed (with Galloway as their group leader) they had only six seats, quickly reduced to four by the early troubles of the merged party. In most York wards by the early 1990s the Liberal Democrats had fallen into fourth place behind the Greens.

As Liberal Democrats, however, the group prospered, growing from four seats to eighteen by 1995, and peaking at twenty-nine in 2003 (see Fig. 3). As in Birmingham, there were both external and internal factors involved. Significantly, the former included the creation of the City of York Council in the 1990s, which broadened the authority's territory to include the areas of Harrogate and Ryedale and thereby brought the activist body to what former group leader Andrew Waller calls a 'critical mass.' Deployed effectively around target wards, these supporters could make a telling difference to results. York Conservatives, meanwhile, did not learn this message, and allowed their activists to spread randomly, leaving them with no seats in 2003.

The Conservatives also lost the parliamentary constituency of York

Figure 3: Liberal Democrat councillors on City of York Council 1990–2014

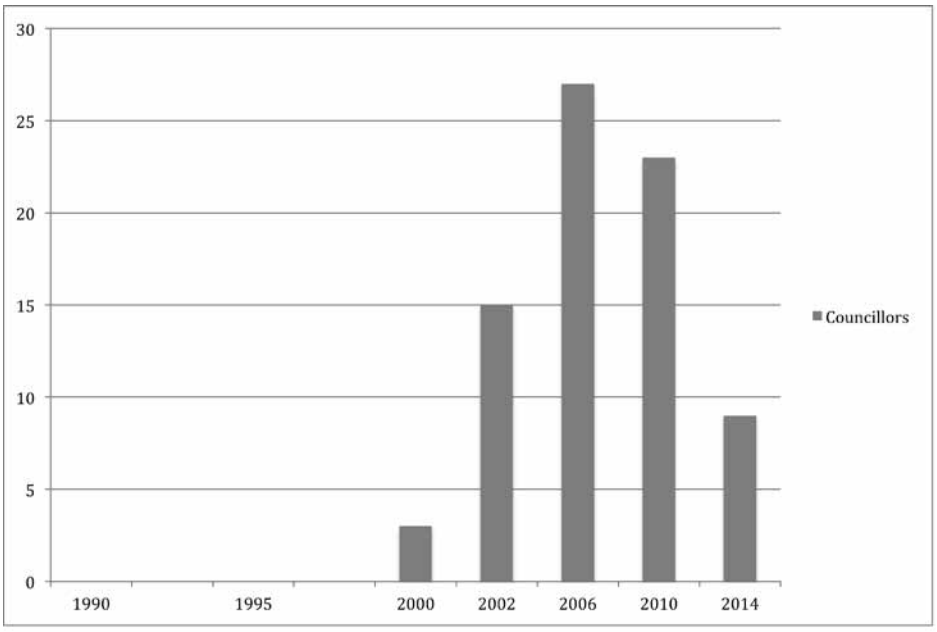


in 1992, and between then and 2010 the local government success of the Liberal Democrats was matched in general elections, at which Andrew Waller was three times the candidate and the party's poll share rose from 10.6 per cent to 25.2 per cent, the latter figures less than 1 per cent behind the Conservatives. Waller attributes the growth in general election votes partly to the training and recruitment of activists at local elections, though the increase in support did not mirror the ward-by-ward pattern as clearly as in Birmingham, and this effect has been reduced by the introduction of 'all in' local elections at four-year intervals.

Responsibility for the more recent decline of the York group's size and influence is placed squarely at the door of the party leadership by Waller, who, along with ten other Liberal Democrat councillors including Galloway, lost their seats in 2011. Waller pointed to 'a very serious change of approach that's needed at the leadership of the party'[26] and claims that local government representatives of the party have been treated as 'road-kill'. Though the raw vote of established Liberal Democrat councillors held up, he claims, the ineffectiveness of the Liberal Democrat leadership in imposing the party's identity positively on the coalition's image led to a rallying of the Labour vote to overhaul him and his colleagues.

As in Birmingham, however, this is only part of the story. The organisational recovery of the Conservatives meant that they gained eight seats and deprived the Liberal Democrats of overall control in 2007. Cable also blames Galloway's divisive leadership for some loss of support in his five years as council leader: whilst significant improvements were made in environmental policy, and the Liberal Democrat council pioneered the 'York Pride' project, Cable claims Galloway 'made mistakes which led to them being swept out.'[27] Whatever the reason, there can be no dispute that, as in Birmingham, the ebbing of the Liberal Democrat tide began before the formation of the coalition. York's 'natural' state is one of no overall control, a balance that was lost in the Liberal Democrats' favour before 2007 and to their disadvantage after that date, as a result of circumstances both within and outside the group's control.

Figure 4: Liberal Democrat councillors on Haringey Council 1990–2014



The Liberal Democrats continued to run York as a minority administration, finding the Conservatives realistic partners compared to Labour, whose councillors are accused by Waller of 'sabotage'. Labour ministers at national level, however, Waller found more helpful than coalition ones after 2010: he found the Liberal Democrat national leadership 'did not care about local government'. In York, a Liberal Democrat group with a strong tradition of independence and radicalism has found itself alienated from the party leadership. This is not an unknown scenario in party history, and blame for it may be placed on either side. Whatever else is true, the coalition environment amplified the scenario's unwelcome features.

Haringey

Liberal Democrat representation in the Borough of Haringey disappeared in 1990 when the party's lone councillor was beaten at the nadir of the merger process. This left the authority a virtual one-party affair, with Labour holding fifty-seven of its fifty-nine seats, running an administration which earned national publicity for the poverty of its standards. It was not until 1998 that three seats were secured by the Liberal Democrats, rising rapidly to fifteen in 2002 and peaking at twenty-seven (only three behind Labour) in 2006 (see Fig. 4). At the previous year's general election Lynne Featherstone, one of the 1998 victors, secured Hornsey and Wood Green, one of the two parliamentary seats in the borough. The Liberal Democrats' first attempt to win the seat only thirteen years earlier had garnered less than one vote in ten.

Mark Pack, who joined the Liberal Democrat campaign team in 1997 after cutting his electioneering teeth in York and at various parliamentary by-election campaigns, attributes the party's success there to three factors, any two of which are in his experience necessary for success: the right demographic base, party organisation, and external factors such as national politics or failure locally by other parties.

Pack argues that, as well as targeting, organisation in Haringey has benefitted from the integration of campaigns at all levels: council, mayoral and London Assembly, parliamentary, and European elections. The largely interlocking cycles of these elections has meant they have become 'building blocks' for continuous campaigning by consistent teams: each ward team in Hornsey and Wood Green shows MP Lynne Featherstone as a member on local campaign literature.

Pack also points to the importance of the atmosphere and culture of campaign teams; of avoiding a 'self-reinforcing circle' of veteran

activists; and of recognising the point at which charismatic personalities – best for ensuring the survival or revival of small and threatened groups – need to step back to create the collegial atmosphere which sponsors growth. Campaigns can also be inhibited by 'lack of experience of knowing what winning an election means.'

Opponents on both sides supplied Haringey Liberal Democrats with a great deal of ammunition: local Conservative tactics are described by Pack as 'inept', leaving them with no seats at all after the last three elections; the ruling Labour group, on the other hand, has gained national notoriety for low standards of service. In 2009, Haringey's performance was placed by OFSTED in the bottom nine in the country for children's services, and the whole council was listed by the Audit Commission in the worst four nationally, the worst in London.

National image effects were limited until 2014, with Labour's decline (as in York and Birmingham) preceding the party's difficulties in government. Similarly, the peak of Liberal Democrat success was 2006; three councillors were lost in 2010, and two more resigned the party following the formation of the coalition. The 2014 elections, when the party lost over half of its councillors, showed how far this pattern has been extended by the Liberal Democrats' time in national office – especially with a local MP who is a government minister – but, as in Birmingham and York, the tide was already receding from the Liberal Democrat high watermark before 2010.

Conclusions

Several issues worthy of further examination are raised by this survey, including the regional patterns, parliamentary and electoral records of Liberal Democrat councillors. From these introductory observations, however, it is clear, firstly, that local government remains more important for Liberal Democrats than for other parties in sustaining electoral credibility, conveying ideas internally and preparing the next generation of implementers of party policy. The coalition has made each of these processes more difficult, but at the same time even more important for the future. It is likely – and this was confirmed by the experience of the Eastleigh by-election victory in February 2013, based upon decades of success in council elections – that the inevitable challenge to the Liberal Democrats' parliamentary number arising from the experience of coalition in 2015 can be offset to some extent by strength in local government.

Local politics remains at the front line of Liberal Democrat politics: the most vulnerable to attack, the first to suffer losses, and yet the most essential to the heart and to the recovery of the party.

Secondly, Liberal Democrat success in local government often builds on the achievements of Liberal and Social Democrats over decades, but at its height produced results greater in scale than even the Alliance's most prosperous periods. Recent detailed studies of Liberal Democrat activity in local elections show that, contrary to widespread assumption, campaigning and organisation remain key factors,[28] and the survey above suggests that national images of the Liberal Democrats and their opponents are variable in their impact on local election results.

The idea that the coalition has killed the Liberal Democrat representation in local government is far too simplistic: decline in the party's number of councillors began before 2010, as did the weakening of the transfer of local success to parliamentary representation. The analysis by Russell et al. of the 2005 intake of Liberal Democrat MPs shows that 'only Cambridge followed the 1997 stepping stone pattern'[29] and suggests that the party's general decline in local politics began before 2005. Indeed, the Liberal Democrats' peak of success in terms of numbers of councillors and councils lies as far back as 1996.

The rises and falls in Liberal Democrat local government fortunes before and since that date demonstrate the persistency of the party at municipal level: even the loss of three-quarters of Liberal seats fought in the 1977 county council elections (held as the Lib–Lab Pact got underway) did not signal the end of the party; and it was strength in local government which helped all but three Liberal MPs hold their seats in the general election two years later. The Grand Old Duke of York (or Birmingham, Haringey or anywhere else) has been further down the hill and will march up again. Local politics remains at the front line of Liberal Democrat politics: the most vulnerable to attack, the first to suffer losses, and yet the most essential to the heart and to the recovery of the party.

Matt Cole is a Teaching Fellow in the Department of Modern History at the University of Birmingham. *He is grateful to Roger Harmer, Andrew Waller and Mark Egan for interviews, from which quotation not otherwise attributed is taken.*

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The Liberal Party and the First World War

A one-day conference organised by the *Journal of Liberal History* and King's College, London. Saturday 1 November 2014, Room K2.40, Strand Campus of KCL

In this year, 100 years since the coming of war in August 1914, the conflict is remembered chiefly for its impact on the millions of ordinary men, women and children who who were to suffer and die and over the following four years. Lives were altered forever and society transformed. But the war had political consequences too: empires fell, new nations emerged and British political parties and the party system underwent profound change, a transformation which plunged the Liberal Party into civil war and caused it to plummet from a natural party of government to electoral insignificance within a few short years. This conference will examine some of the key issues and personalities of the period.

Papers already confirmed:

- Lloyd George and Winston Churchill (**Professor Richard Toye**, Exeter University)
- Asquith as war premier and Liberal leader (**Dr Roland Quinault**, Institute of Historical Research)
- The First World War papers of H H Asquith and Lewis Harcourt (**Mike Webb**, Bodleian Library)

Papers are also being sought on:

- Sir Edward Grey and the road to war
- The Liberal Party and the politics of the First World War
- The Liberal Party, the Irish question and the First World War

The day will conclude with a panel discussion on whether or not the war was the destroyer of the Liberal Party (the Trevor Wilson thesis).

Full details of all speakers, guest chairs and papers will appear in the autumn edition of the *Journal of Liberal History*.

The cost of the conference will be £15 (students and unwaged £10) to include morning and afternoon refreshments. *(*Lunch is not provided but there are plenty of cafes and sandwich shops in the vicinity of the Campus.)

To register please send your name and address to **Graham Lippiatt**, 114 Worcester Lane, Four Oaks, Sutton Coldfield, B75 5NJ, *or* gjl29549@aol.com. Payment can be taken on the day.

THE LIBERAL
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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.

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

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]

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 the electorate were unaware 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.

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.

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 ennoblement[18]) 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

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

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.

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 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 prepublicity 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.

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.

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.

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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

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 adopted[32]) 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]

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.

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

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

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.

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 economists[39]) 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.

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

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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. Billinghurst, *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.

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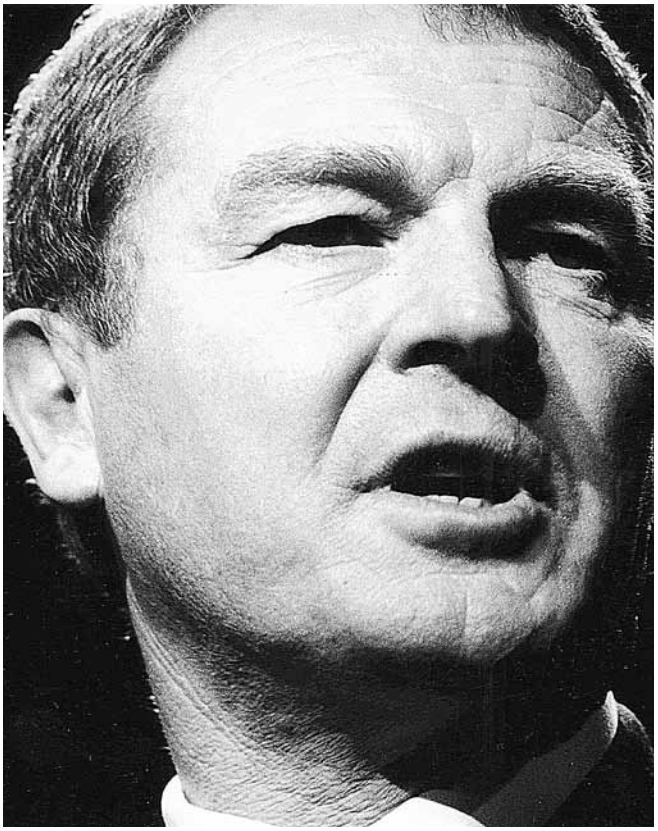

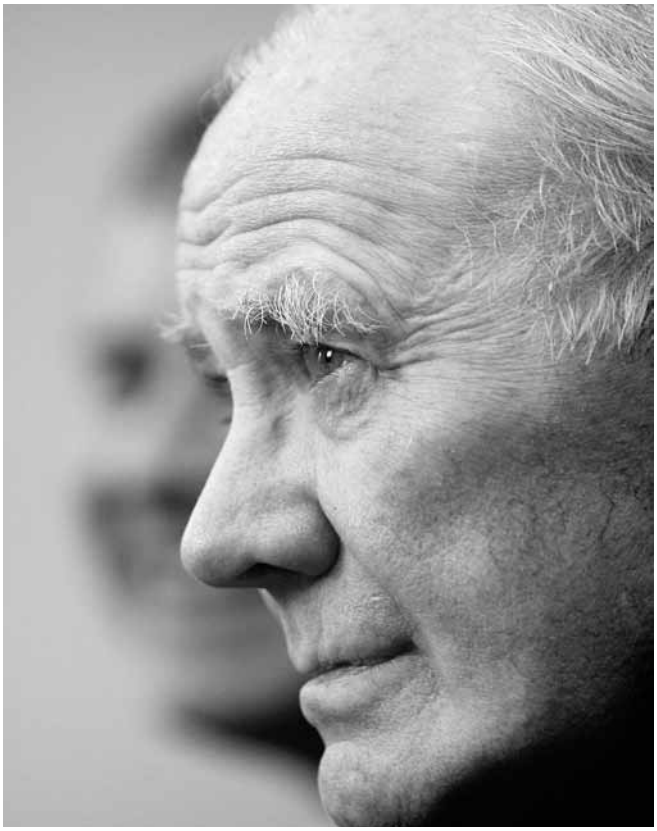

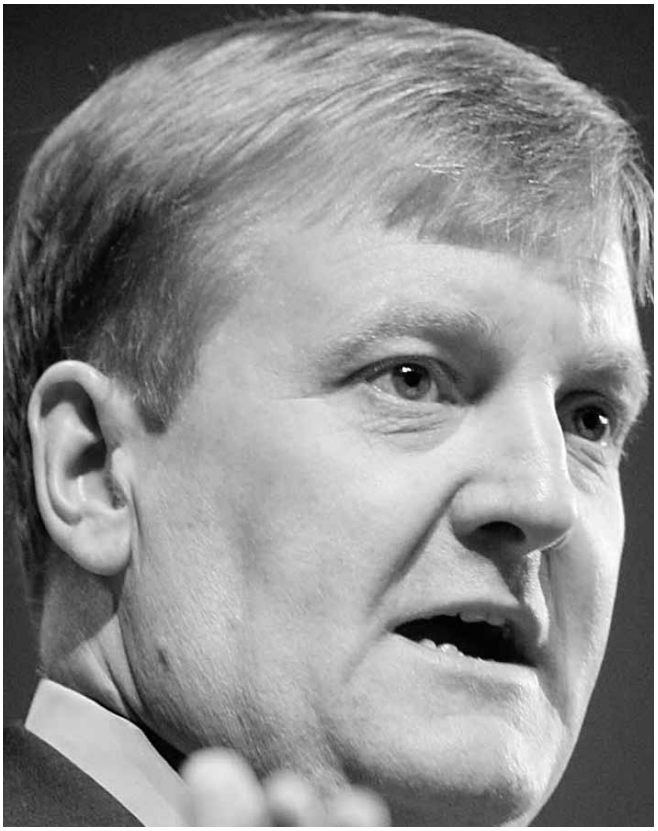

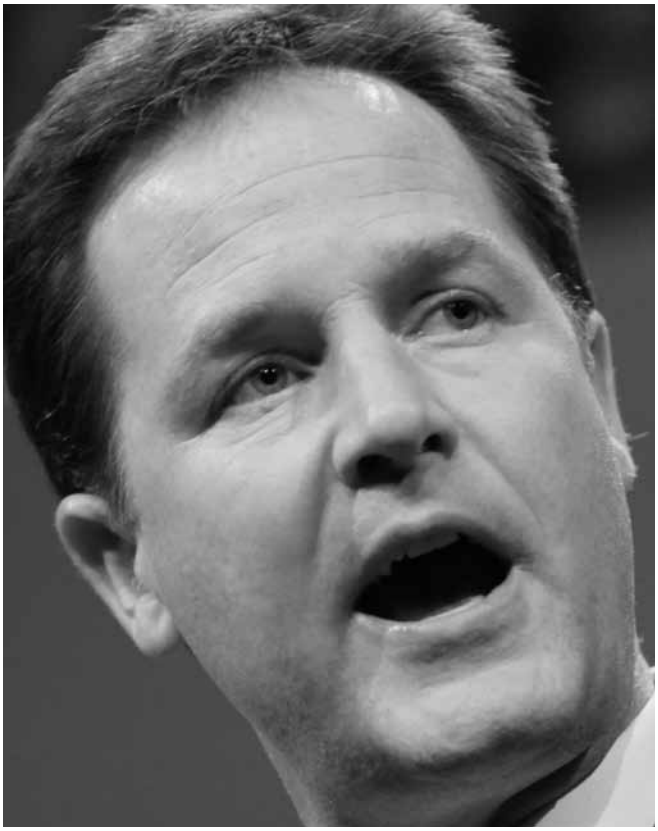

RAT LEADERSHIP

An important factor contributing to the survival and achievements of the Liberal Democrats has been the abilities of the individuals who have led the party. Given the media's tendency to focus on the party leader to the exclusion of their colleagues, the Liberal Democrat leader has always played a significant role in establishing the image of the party in the mind of the electorate. This in turn places a premium on the leader's effectiveness, which is why Charles Kennedy's and Menzies Campbell's perceived shortcomings caused such concern in 2005–06 and 2007. **Duncan Brack** describes the characteristics of the ideal Liberal Democrat leader, and considers how the four men who have so far led the party measure up.

Overall, the Liberal Democrats have been well served by their leaders – particularly during election campaigns, which is when most electors see and hear them; Paddy Ashdown, Charles Kennedy and Nick Clegg all performed creditably in the elections in which they led the party.

So what makes a good Liberal Democrat leader? All leaders inevitably possess a mixture of strengths and weaknesses; equally, all change and develop in response to the new challenges and stresses of their tenure in office. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a series of characteristics and abilities which make an individual well or less well fitted to the job. The leader needs *communication skills*, being able to project the party, the party's position and his own competence as a party leader and potential Prime Minister. This ability is reinforced if the leader has something to say – a *distinctive position or image* for the party. A related characteristic is his ability to *develop a strategy* for the party: what does the leader want to do with his leadership, whether in opposition or in government? The leader also needs to *manage his own party*, including his parliamentary colleagues and the party in the country. Finally, the leader's *personal abilities* – including their energy, stamina and self-belief – underpin everything else.

This article considers how the four men who have so far occupied the Liberal Democrat leadership measure up against these characteristics and have proved effective in advancing the position and aims of the party. In addition to this qualitative assessment, a quantitative element can be added through examining the leaders' political records, in terms of votes won, MPs, MEPs and councillors elected, party membership and their own personal opinion poll ratings, demonstrating the leaders' electoral achievements and the extent to which they left the party in a better or worse state than they found it; see Table 1.

Communications skills

The leader's communication skills cover a variety of characteristics, including media-friendliness and the ability to communicate well in different settings, such as conference speeches, press conferences, interviews and meetings with party members. Particularly in the early years of the party, when the leader was almost the only Liberal Democrat likely to receive any media attention, his ability to communicate the party's message was crucial to its survival. All the four party leaders have possessed some skills as a communicator – it would be difficult to be elected to Parliament and then to the party leadership without them – but their styles have varied widely.

It was clear even before his election to Parliament that Paddy Ashdown was a naturally gifted speaker; in 1981, after his first speech to the Liberal Assembly, opposing the deployment of US cruise missiles in the UK, he gained a standing ovation. He worked hard on his delivery and style, receiving assistance from, among others, Max Atkinson, author of the classic study of political speechmaking, *Our Masters' Voices*.[1] Although his conference speeches could occasionally suffer from being over-rehearsed, at his best he was a powerful and inspiring speaker, with a compelling voice and distinctive turn of phrase. He was probably even better at talks with small groups of party members or ordinary citizens, taking his jacket off and turning his chair round in an easy, familiar way. He dealt effectively with the media and although at times could tend to sound sanctimonious (something of an occupational hazard for politicians from third parties, used to criticising both government and opposition), he came over well to the public, and frequently featured

in opinion polls as the most popular party leader.

Charles Kennedy was also a naturally gifted speaker, though with a very different style to Ashdown's – low-key, humorous, often self-deprecating. He honed his skills at Glasgow University, where he won the *Observer* Mace for debating. While studying for a PhD in the US, he taught public speaking and carried out research in speech communication, political rhetoric and British politics. After election to the Commons, he soon acquired a reputation as a gifted communicator, both on the conference platform and TV, reaching not just the usual political audience but a wider public with appearances on programmes such as 'Wogan' and 'Have I Got News for You'. He came over well in the 2001 election, his image as an ordinary man, someone people could enjoy a drink with in the bar, contrasting positively with his opponents, the professional politicians Tony Blair and William Hague.

He steadily came to rely, however, too heavily on his native talent and too little on detailed preparation. The low point was the launch of the election manifesto in April 2005, where he proved incapable of explaining the details of the party's policy on local income tax. He was able to shrug this off as a result of the birth of his son three days before, but in reality he was under-prepared and hungover. Although his performance improved later in the campaign, the party probably suffered from the fact that voters did not see him as a potential Prime Minister in what was a closer election than 2001.

Like Kennedy, Menzies Campbell acquired a fine debating reputation at Glasgow University, and honed his skills further as a Scottish advocate. He proved an eloquent debater in the House of Commons and steadily built a reputation as a respected commentator on foreign affairs and an effective critic of government policy. This did not serve, however, as a suitable apprenticeship for his leadership. Aged 64 when elected leader, he looked and acted older, with an old-fashioned turn of phrase and style of dress; his age was cruelly mocked in newspaper cartoons. He had too much respect for intellectual argument to be comfortable with simple soundbites, and took some time to settle into the political theatre of Prime Minister's Questions. Although all this had improved substantially by the time he stepped down, it was the initial poor image that stuck in the public's mind.

The leader needs communication skills, being able to project the party, the party's position and his own competence as a party leader and potential Prime Minister.

Nick Clegg has had less of a political apprenticeship than any of the other Liberal Democrat leaders – five years as an MEP and just two and a half as an MP before being elected leader – but has been a decent communicator, lacking the inspirational qualities of Ashdown but proving much steadier than Kennedy and much more attuned to the political cut-and-thrust than Campbell. After his election he proved an effective speaker at party conferences, and increasingly displayed an ability to grab the media limelight. He also set out to promote the party outside parliament, holding regular 'town hall meetings', where members of the public could question him on any topic they chose, a practice he took up again after the formation of the coalition in 2010 and extended to a weekly radio phone-in on LBC.

Clegg's high point was the first television leadership debate during the 2010 election campaign, where he performed strongly in putting over the message that real change was needed and that only the Liberal Democrats, with no record of failure in government, could deliver. 'I agree with Nick' became a widespread slogan after Gordon Brown used it several times in the debate, and 'Cleggmania' became a phenomenon. He could not, however, sustain this record in the second and, especially, the third, debate, and his performance in the radio and TV debates against Nigel Farage in the run-up to the European election in 2014 was much less impressive – though he gained respect, at least within the party, for his decision to take on the UKIP leader over the question of EU membership.

Distinctive positioning

Communications skills are of limited value if the leader has nothing particular to say. A constant problem for the Liberal Democrats has been to be noticed; as Paddy Ashdown is supposed to have said, 'I'd sell my grandmother for a bit of definition'. Given the media's tendency to focus primarily on the Labour and Conservative parties, and journalists' preference for reducing everything to a two-way choice, the Liberal Democrats suffer from an indistinct image; voters are often unclear what the party stands for.

The more that the leader can establish a Liberal Democrat position that is both memorable and different from those of the other parties, then, the more effective he will be in projecting the party as a whole. This includes the ability to spot a distinctive Liberal Democrat position in an existing debate, but even better is to be able to create an entirely new and distinctive policy position which the party can call its own. Or, it may revolve around a more general positioning of the party, associating it with a set of attitudes or general trends, or relationships to either or both of the other two main parties.

Ashdown himself succeeded in finding positions for his party which were highly liberal, principled and distinctive – though his first attempt at finding a definition for the new merged party, the adoption of the name 'Democrats' in 1988, was disastrous and was reversed a year later. His championing of the right of Hong Kong citizens to be given British passports in advance of the colony's incorporation into China, after the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, was distinctly more successful in raising the profile of the party. Later positions included support for the Maastricht Treaty of European Union in Parliament (including voting with John Major's government after it lost its majority following internal rebellions) and pressing for western action on Bosnia and Kosovo.

In domestic policy, Ashdown steered the party towards a more market-oriented economic policy than the Liberal-SDP Alliance had possessed (including the proposal for independence for the Bank of England, implemented by Labour after the 1997 election), a strong environmental platform and a pledge to invest in public services, including, most memorably, a penny on income tax for education. By 1993, the party was coming top in opinion polls asking which party was the best on environmental issues; it also scored relatively

Table 1: Leadership performance								
	Ashdown (1988–99)		*Kennedy (1999–2006)*		*Campbell (2006–07)*		*Clegg (2007–)*	
Personal ratings (net score satisfied minus dissatisfied and date)[a]								
When elected	–4	Aug 1988	+11	Aug 1999	+5	Mar 2006	–3	Jan 2008
Highest during leadership	+58	May 1997	+42	June 2001	+6	May 2006	+53	Oct 2010
Lowest during leadership	–24	July 1989	+8	June 2004	–13	May 2007	–45	Oct 2012
When stood down / latest	+39	July 1999	+20	Aug 2005[b]	–11	Sept 2007	–42	July 2014
Range (highest – lowest)		82		34		19		98
Party poll ratings (per cent and date)[c]								
When elected	8	July 1988	17	Aug 1999	19	Mar 2006	14	Dec 2007
Highest during leadership	28	July 1993	26	Dec 2004, May 2005	25	Apr 2006	32	Apr 2010
Lowest during leadership	4	June – Aug, Nov 1989	11	Oct 99, July 00, Jan, May 01	11	Oct 2007	7	Feb 2013
When stood down / latest	17	Aug 1999	15	Jan 2006	11	Oct 2007	8	July 2014
Westminster election performance: MPs and vote								
MPs when elected		19		46		63[d]		63
MPs when stood down / latest		46		62		63		56[e]
Highest party vote in election (per cent and date)	17.8	1992	22.0	2005		n/a	23.0	2010
Lowest party vote in election (per cent and date)	16.8	1997	18.3	2001		n/a		n/a
European election performance: MEPs and vote								
MEPs when elected		0		10		12		12
MEPs when stood down / latest		10		12		12		1
Highest party vote in election (per cent and date)	16.7	1994	14.9	2004		n/a	13.7	2009
Lowest party vote in election (per cent and date)	6.4	1989		n/a		n/a	6.6	2014
Local election performance: councillors and vote[f, g]								
Councillors when elected		3,640		4,485		4,743		4,420
Councillors when stood down / latest		4,485		4,743		4,420		2,257
Highest party vote in election (per cent and date)	27	1994	27	2003, 2004	25	2006	25	2009
Lowest party vote in election (per cent and date)	17	1990	25	2002	24	2007	11	2014
Party membership[h, i]								
Membership when elected		80,104		82,827		72,064		64,728
Membership when stood down / latest		82,827		72,064		64,728		43,451
Change (per cent)		+3.4		–13.0		–10.2		–32.9

a Ipsos-MORI series on 'satisfaction with party leaders'; ibid.

b Ipsos-MORI did not ask the question after August 2005 during Kennedy's leadership.

c Taken from the Ipsos-MORI series, available at: http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchspecialisms/socialresearch/specareas/politics/trends.aspx

d Willie Rennie was elected in the Dunfermline & West Fife by-election during the 2006 leadership election.

e 57 MPs were elected in 2010, but Mike Hancock was suspended from the party in January 2014.

f Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, Elections Centre, Plymouth University. For voting figures, years in which local elections coincided with general elections are excluded.

g The total number of councillors has been falling since the mid 1990s, as unitary authorities have replaced district councils in some areas; from 1994 to 2013, the total number of councillors fell by about 15 per cent.

h Stephen Tall, 'Lib Dem party membership: the occasional ups and mostly downs since 1988' (Lib Dem Voice, 3 August 2014); leadership election results (including numbers of ballot papers issued) at http://www.crosenstiel.webspace.virginmedia.com/ldelections/leaders.htm. 'Latest' figures are end 2013.

i Membership of all the three largest UK political parties has declined fairly continuously since the 1950s. From 1988 to 2011, Conservative membership fell by about 85 per cent, and Labour membership by about 30 per cent; set against this, the 46 per cent fall in Liberal Democrat membership from 1988 to 2013 does not look so bad. Source: House of Commons Library Standard Note, *Membership of UK political parties* (December 2012).

well on education, though remaining in third place.[2] Both the election manifestos produced under Ashdown's leadership were well regarded by the media. 'The Liberal Democrat essay far out-distances its competitors with a fizz of ideas and an absence of fudge,' stated *The Guardian* in 1992.[3] In 1997 *The Independent* called the party's manifesto the most challenging of the three, saying that politics without the Liberal Democrats would be 'intolerable'; Peter Riddell in *The Times* enjoyed its 'refreshing candour' and admired Ashdown's willingness to leap where Tony Blair feared to tread.[4]

In this respect, as in many others, Charles Kennedy was a complete contrast. Laid back to the point of inertia, he seldom pushed any particular position, leaving the running to be made by others in the party. The book he published in 2000, *The Future of Politics*, although designed to answer the question 'What makes this Kennedy fellow tick? … Why is he a Liberal Democrat?'[5] revealed only, as his biographer put it, 'a startling lack of original thinking on policy or a strand of political thought that was identifiably his own'.[6] The question was still going begging in June 2005, when Kennedy failed to give any convincing answer to Steve Webb MP's question after his delivery of a paper on the party's future prospects: 'I would just like to know: what motivates you? What gets you up in the morning?'[7]

The major exception to this, of course, is Iraq, where Kennedy ended up in the fortunate position of opposing an unpopular war backed by both the government and its main opposition, and with a united party behind him. In reality, no Liberal Democrat leader (apart, possibly, from Ashdown, who supported Blair's actions, but only in private) would have been likely to do anything different: in September 2002, the party conference voted overwhelmingly to support military action only as a last resort and under a clear UN mandate, and in February 2003 the party's Federal Executive called unanimously for Liberal Democrat participation in the major anti-war march in London. Held back by the concerns of the foreign affairs spokesman Menzies Campbell (who feared association with anti-American and far left groups), Kennedy left it until the very last moment to decide to join in, taking the decision without consulting Campbell, or anyone else, following a *Guardian* lunch at which journalists criticised his prevarication. In fact, although Kennedy rarely showed much initiative, he generally displayed good judgement in reacting to events. Over the Romsey by-election in May 2000 (where he took on the Conservatives over their policy on immigration and on the right of self-defence, after Norfolk farmer Tony Martin had shot dead a burglar), gradual withdrawal from the Joint Consultative Committee set up by Ashdown with the Labour government, and his refusal to participate in the Butler Inquiry into the intelligence on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, he instinctively adopted positions that kept the party happy while differentiating it in the eyes of the public.

Menzies Campbell's leadership was too brief to give him much of a chance to develop any distinctive positioning of his own. He inherited an agenda of policy reform, including significant changes in taxation policy and a new approach to the British nuclear deterrent, but fought for these changes in a way that Kennedy never would have, including in particular his intervention in the debate on Trident at the spring 2007 party conference, which clearly swung the vote. However, he was too innately cautious for the leader of the third party. On a number of occasions, he took his time reaching decisions, only to find that the ground had shifted under his feet, often because of leaks to the media, before he could announce them (his measured response to Gordon Brown's mischievous attempt to recruit Liberal Democrats into his cabinet in 2007 ended up looking like duplicity and weakness). His preference for consultation before he reached decisions – in itself an admirable trait – sometimes stopped him making the snap decision that might have served better.

Nick Clegg made early attempts to carve out distinctive positions for the party, over, for example, equal rights of residence for Gurkhas, or his call for the resignation of the Speaker, Michael Martin, over the failure to police MPs' expense claims. Clegg's image is, however, overwhelmingly defined by the party's decision to enter into coalition with the Conservatives in 2010. This had led most observers to conclude that this was his strategy from beginning, and indeed, he did make early attempts to steer the party to the right, announcing after the leadership election his support for free schools and a widening of the use of private health care to meet NHS targets, and beginning to talk about using savings in public expenditure to cut taxes rather than see increased spending elsewhere. The 2010 manifesto, however, with its top four priorities of the pupil premium, constitutional reform, job creation through green growth and investment in infrastructure, and an increase in the income tax threshold, paid for by closing tax loopholes and green taxation, did not represent a notably right-wing agenda, and the reasons for joining a coalition with the Conservatives instead of Labour were so strong that it is inconceivable that any alternative leader would have done anything different – which is why only a handful of activists voted against the coalition at the party's special conference in May 2010.[8]

Communications skills are of limited value if the leader has nothing particular to say. A constant problem for the Liberal Democrats has been to be noticed; as Paddy Ashdown is supposed to have said, 'I'd sell my grandmother for a bit of definition'.

Clegg's handling of party positioning within the coalition has not been without its problems. At the beginning he chose – not unreasonably – to stress the virtues of coalition as an effective form of government, but went too far in giving the impression that the coalition was better than a Liberal Democrat government would have been. As the introduction to the full coalition programme claimed: 'We have found that a combination of our parties' best ideas and attitudes has produced a programme for government that is more radical and comprehensive than our individual manifestos',[9] and at the Liberal Democrat conference in September 2010, Clegg argued that the coalition was 'more than the sum of our parts'.[10] In practice this simply undermined the party's image as anything more than Tory sidekicks.

The crushing electoral defeats in the 2011 local, Scottish and Welsh elections, and the failure of the alternative vote referendum, forced a reappraisal. As Clegg put it a week later, 'the current government is a coalition of necessity … In the next phase of the coalition, both partners will be able to be clearer in their

identities ... You will see a strong liberal identity in a strong coalition government. You might even call it muscular liberalism.'[11] Yet three years later, after even worse results in the 2014 local and European elections, he had to do much the same, defending the decision to enter coalition while highlighting policy differences with his coalition partners: 'I want people to know that we have our own distinct vision, based on our own distinct values – a liberal belief in opportunities; a liberal faith in people's talents and ambitions'.[12]

The major problem faced by Clegg is that whatever he says, a portion of the electorate now does not believe him – a legacy primarily of the way in which the party campaigned in 2010 on a promise to phase out university tuition fees, and then signed up to a policy of increasing them once in government. Clegg has only himself to blame for this: he (and the party's economic spokesman, Vince Cable) never believed in the policy and never attempted to advance it in the coalition negotiations, despite the damage that they should have realised this would inflict in the light of the party's election campaign, which included all its MPs signing pledges to vote against any increase in tuition fees, and one of his own election broadcasts focusing entirely on the 'broken promises' of other parties. It may be that his perceived poor performance in the 2014 debates with Nigel Farage can be at least partly attributed to the fact that some in the electorate are now no longer prepared to listen to his message whatever it is. As one of his ministers despairingly put it in 2014, 'is there anything he can say on any subject that doesn't just make things worse?'[13]

Party strategy

The ability to develop a strategy for the party is am important leadership characteristic: what does the leader want to do with his leadership? This may focus on the development of distinctive positions, as discussed above, but it is – at least potentially – more than that. The strategy can be internal, revolving around reforms of the party's organisation or campaigning approach; or it can be external, concerned with relationships, potential or actual, with other parties; or both. It should be noted, though, that a leader can prove himself effective without having any particular strategy. The reality of life for a third party in British politics is that its performance depends often – perhaps mostly – on external factors over which it has little or no control: the performance of the government and the main opposition, and key developments such as wars or economic recessions. As the journalist and party employee David Walter described it, 'the party's position has been that of a surfer, waiting patiently for the right wave to rise and then using all its skills to stay upright and to travel as far and as fast as possible'.[14]

The ability to develop a strategy for the party is am important leadership characteristic: what does the leader want to do with his leadership?

These constraints never, however, prevented Paddy Ashdown from developing a strategy – or, indeed, several. He had mapped out his own three-phase plan on becoming leader:

> The first was survival from a point of near extinction; the second was to build a political force with the strength, policy and positions to matter again in British politics; and the third was to get on to the field and play in what I believed would become a very fluid period of politics.[15]

Strategic planning of this sort was absolutely typical of Ashdown, one of the characteristics almost everyone who worked with him remembers – he always had a plan, and a position paper, and when he achieved one objective he was already looking ahead to the next. And in fact, within the constraints he faced, he was remarkably successful. His party survived its first difficult years, despite the self-inflicted wounds it had inherited from the break-up of the Alliance and the merger negotiations, its internal weaknesses of finance and membership, the challenges it faced for third-party status from the Owenite SDP and the Greens, and its lack of a distinct image. He took the party organisation seriously, chairing its Federal Policy Committee and giving a clear lead on key policies, working with councillors and campaigners and restoring morale and a sense of purpose. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the party may not have survived its early years at all without Ashdown, or at least would have taken much longer to recover.

In the second phase of his leadership, 1992–97, he successfully rode the rising tide of support for centre-left sentiment and the rejection of the Conservative government that not only swept Labour into power in 1997 but delivered the highest number of seats for a third party for seventy years. Under a less skilled leader, the Liberal Democrats could easily have been squeezed out by Blair's New Labour. The abandonment of 'equidistance' between the Conservatives and Labour that Ashdown championed from 1992 onwards can thus be seen as an – ultimately successful – attempt to become part of the movement for change rather a casualty of it.

In contrast, the third phase of the Ashdown leadership, 1997–99, was a failure, as Ashdown himself freely admits. Following up his proposal, in 1992, to 'work with others to assemble the ideas around which a non-socialist alternative to the Conservatives can be constructed',[16] he edged steadily closer to the Labour leader Tony Blair after his election in 1994; this led in turn to agreement on a joint agenda for constitutional reform (the Cook–Maclennan agreement), covert electoral cooperation with Labour in the 1997 election, secret talks over a joint electoral platform and a coalition government, and the eventual creation of a consultative Joint Cabinet Committee between the two parties after the election. Although several aspects of the Cook-Maclennan agenda were implemented, the big prize, proportional representation for Westminster, was never even close – either because Blair never meant it, and was simply stringing Ashdown and his party along, or because he did mean it but was unable to force it through his own party.

Ashdown's approach increasingly alarmed his own MPs and party activists, particularly after the 1997 election, when they could see no point in trying to align themselves with a Labour government with a massive majority. As Tony Greaves has observed, 'Liberal Democrats loved their leader but, insofar as they sensed his strategy, most wanted none of it. The "what if" question must be

how much more could have been achieved if all that time at the top and personal energy had been spent on something other than "The Project".'[17] But was there a realistic alternative? Like the Liberal leaders Jo Grimond and David Steel before him, Ashdown was driven inexorably by the logic of the Liberal Democrats' position as a third party. However well the party performed in elections it never seemed feasible that it would leap straight to majority government from third position, or even replace one of the two bigger parties as the main opposition. Sooner or later the party would hold the balance of power, and in the political circumstances of the 1990s it was inconceivable that the Liberal Democrats could have reached an arrangement with anyone other than the Labour Party. Indeed, Ashdown was not particularly aiming for a hung parliament, in which, he thought, any attempt to bring in PR would be seen as weakness on the part of the bigger coalition partner; he wanted to introduce it from a position of strength, with both parties of the left genuinely behind it. His problem was that most of the Labour Party was never committed to PR at all, and saw no point in making any concessions to Ashdown's party once they commanded a 179-seat majority in the House of Commons (though he did achieve it for the European elections and the new Scottish and Welsh parliaments). But Ashdown was always going to try; he did not possess the temperament to sit quietly on the sidelines, snatching what chances he could to advance incrementally. And in the final analysis, if Ashdown had delivered on PR, the third phase of his leadership would have been seen as a triumphant success. It was a calculated strategy, but it failed.

Charles Kennedy possessed an entirely different approach to party strategy: he didn't have one. As noted above, this is not always a major defect. Unlike Ashdown, he inherited a party organisation in reasonably good shape, and, as noted above, he proved astute at judging political opportunities and reacting to events. He had a good election campaign in 2001, with a net gain of six seats even though most observers expected losses. However, his leadership style became steadily less well suited to the higher profile role the party began to play after its opposition to the Iraq War boosted its standing in the approach to the 2005 election, widely expected to be considerably closer than the 2001 contest. His lack of a coherent agenda became increasingly obvious and his (previously largely hidden) alcoholism began to cause more problems, including a series of missed speeches and a disastrous opening to the 2005 election campaign. The feeling, in the party and outside, that the Liberal Democrats had failed to realise a historic opportunity in the 2005 election helped to trigger increasing concern, which manifested itself in a notably unhappy party conference in September 2005 and a widespread perception of drift and lack of direction – all contributing significantly to Kennedy's forced resignation in January 2006. His basic problem – that he had no agenda for his leadership, no obvious reason to be leader and no idea of the direction he wanted the party to go in – perhaps leads to the conclusion that even if Liberal Democrat leaders have little real control over the success of their party's strategy, they do at least need to be seen to have one.

It should be noted, though, that a leader can prove himself effective without having any particular strategy. The reality of life for a third party in British politics is that its performance depends often – perhaps mostly – on external factors over which it has little or no control.

Menzies Campbell's immediate tasks were to stabilise the party, after the disruption of the previous six months, to professionalise its organisation and to give it direction. To a considerable extent he achieved all three. Like Ashdown, he took the party organisation seriously, chairing meetings effectively and imposing a sense of purpose. In terms of policy, he largely adopted the reform agenda begun after the 2005 election but, as noted above, fought for it and pushed it through. After Gordon Brown's arrival as Prime Minister in June 2007 raised the prospect of a general election in the autumn, a manifesto was finalised after the September conference, and the party organisation was in good shape to fight an election in October. Unfortunately for Campbell, none of this counted for much in the outside world, where he failed to build an image as an effective and charismatic leader. It was not his strategy but his image that let him down; and Brown's postponement of the election from autumn 2007 sealed his fate.

To start with, Nick Clegg's strategy was similar to Campbell's: to stabilise the party after a forced leadership election. He achieved this and presided over a period of gradual recovery in the opinion polls, reassuring the party that it would have no need to face a third leadership election. As discussed above, it is not clear whether Clegg came into office with a clear plan and determination to move the party to the right, or whether it simply seemed a sensible response at the time to the disintegration of New Labour and the attempt by the Conservative leader David Cameron to attract Liberal Democrat supporters. After the party's decision to enter into coalition with the Conservatives in 2010, most commentators found it easier to present it as the former, conspiracy stories about takeovers of the party by a small right-wing clique making a better story. It is also plausible, however, that Clegg was simply reacting to circumstances, in a way that his predecessors had always done. Having said that, it is also the case that Clegg was the first Liberal Democrat leader not to have been active in politics under Thatcher's and Major's Conservative governments; his instincts always appeared to be more hostile to Labour and economic-liberal than were Ashdown's, Kennedy's or Campbell's. This was reinforced by the economic-liberal tendencies of the majority of the Liberal Democrat Shadow Cabinet, in contrast to the wider parliamentary party and the party membership as a whole.

As noted above, Clegg's strategy in coalition has veered from concentrating on the virtues of coalition as a form of effective government to differentiating his party more clearly from the Conservatives. Yet while the first phase of this approach may have been successful, with one study of the coalition's first eighteen months concluding that it 'set a model for harmonious and unified government',[18] the second phase has been much less so, with a succession of awful local election results, and the party's opinion poll rating stuck generally below 10 per cent. It was always clear that entry into coalition – with any other party – would alienate a proportion of the party's voters, but the party always hoped that it would win others to

replace them, including those who perhaps might have supported them in 2010 but had not because they believed the party could never form a government. In reality, there is very little sign of this, and the party's actions in coalition could almost have been designed to alienate its core bases of support. As one Liberal Democrat minister put it as early as 2011: 'Unless we can get some of the fluffy bunny voters back, we are done for. I'm not sure there are enough centre ground voters. The Lib Dem base has been public sector workers, students and intellectuals. We have contrived to fuck them all off.'[19] This is perhaps the most serious criticism that can be levelled at Clegg's strategy for the party: that while he was right to enter coalition, his and his colleagues' actions since have been conducted without enough thought to the party's ability to survive.

A key part of Clegg's strategy will be to face the 2015 election with a strong list of Liberal Democrat achievements in government – the first third-party leader to be able to do so since 1945. There is a real record which the party will point to, particularly in the areas of income tax, green energy, child care and the legalisation of same-sex marriage. Equally, there are many Tory measures which the Liberal Democrats have prevented, including several dropped from the Conservative manifesto in the coalition agreement. To set against this, of course, there are clear failures, particularly in Clegg's own area of ministerial responsibility, constitutional reform – notably the defeat of the alternative vote proposal and the dropping of plans for reform of the House of Lords (though the adoption of fixed-term parliaments will have lasting consequences).

Will this, however, prove to be enough? There is a credible argument that the Liberal Democrats did not get enough out of the coalition negotiations in the first place. The party likes to point to the fact that a greater proportion of its manifesto pledges than of the Conservatives' made it into the coalition agreement, but since the Tory manifesto was twice as long as the Liberal Democrat one, the coalition agreement was still Tory-dominated. This is particularly true in the crucial area of economic policy, where the Liberal Democrats signed up almost entirely to the Conservative agenda for reducing public expenditure, despite their manifesto warning of the perils of cutting too fast. This came as a surprise to the Conservative negotiating team; George Osborne, the Shadow Chancellor, is reported to have said: 'This should be the happiest day of our lives, because it's all our policy that's being agreed'.[20] (Clegg's justification was that the coalition needed, above anything else, credibility in the financial markets, given the growing sovereign debt crisis in Greece and other European countries.) It can also be argued that the party underplayed its hand in the distribution of ministries, leaving them without control of any of the major spending departments such as health or education. Constitutional reform and climate change are important issues for the party but are less salient to the general public. This only serves to demonstrate, one academic argued, 'what happens when vegetarians negotiate with carnivores'.[21] In an opinion poll in May 2011, 74 per cent believed that the Liberal Democrats had little or no influence over government decisions.[22]

The party's achievements will be important to some groups of voters, but overwhelmingly the coalition partners will be judged in terms of their economic record; and, as an analysis of the record of coalition governments in other countries suggests, the electoral benefits of economic growth are normally felt by the party of the Prime Minister rather than by any other parties within their coalition.[23] More fundamentally, how the British electorate will respond to a period of coalition is not clear: commonplace in other developed democracies, it is still rare in the UK, and the evidence suggests that what would elsewhere be viewed as parties cooperating in the national interest is more likely to be interpreted in the UK as the Liberal Democrats in general, and Nick Clegg in particular, breaking the promises they made in 2010. In reality, this will force the party back into a strategy with which it has long been familiar: fight the election like a series of by-elections, focusing on local issues and the strength of the local candidate, while ignoring, as much as possible, the grim national picture.

Independently-minded and inherently suspicious of authority, the Liberal Democrats are not an easy party to lead.

Party management

The leader needs to manage his own party. Independently-minded and inherently suspicious of authority, the Liberal Democrats are not an easy party to lead; as Paddy Ashdown put it in June 1999:

> … our beloved Lib Dems, who are, bless them, inveterately sceptical of authority, often exasperating to the point of dementia, as difficult to lead where they don't want to go as a mule, and as curmudgeonly about success as one of those football supporters who regards his team's promotion to the premier league as insufficient because they haven't also won the FA cup![24]

The leader has much responsibility, but not always a commensurate amount of authority. Nevertheless, he can do much to earn – or to lose – the respect and affection of his party members, and the lack of either makes it more difficult for him to get his own way. However, the party has never been factionalised in a way in which other parties often are; there has never been a group hostile to everything any of the four leaders have tried to do, and the party membership has consistently proved loyal to the leaders it elects. The successive overthrows of Charles Kennedy and Menzies Campbell were implemented by Liberal Democrat MPs, not by members in the country – underlining the importance of managing the parliamentary parties. The situation has become more complicated since 2010, with three different groups – cabinet ministers, all Liberal Democrat ministers, and backbenchers (including some sacked former ministers) needing to be managed – along, of course, with the parliamentary party in the House of Lords, the party in the country (including its structure of committees, English regional and autonomous Scottish and Welsh parties), and the leader's own office and advisers.

Paddy Ashdown was a party manager par excellence. After some initial mistakes, his efforts to rebuild the party after its disastrous

early period, his down-to-earth manner and easy rapport with party activists and his evident charisma generated not merely respect but love; as the *Economist* put it in 1991, 'ordinary party members will take things from him for which they would have lynched David Owen'.[25] He managed the party structure well, involving himself fully in its committees and key organisations. Yet it is also true, as Tony Greaves pointed out, that his strategy of doing deals with Labour – 'The Project' – steadily alienated first his parliamentary party and then the wider party membership. This was not a case, however, of a leader losing touch with his party; Ashdown argued that he knew exactly what he was doing:

> I quite deliberately went round building up my popularity in the party, both by delivering results and also by being very consensual, conscious of the fact that when I started to play on the field in stage 3, I was really going to have to [use up this political capital and] … make myself unpopular with the party.[26]

After his resignation, Ashdown remained immensely popular with Liberal Democrats; the announcement, at the September 2013 conference, of his appointment as chair of the 2015 general election campaign was greeted with delight.

Charles Kennedy displayed a very different style of party management: laid-back and relaxed, this formed a considerable part of his attraction after the last, divisive, years of the Ashdown leadership. He was already well-known within the party, and well-liked, partly because of his lone stand, amongst the SDP's MPs, against David Owen's opposition to merger in 1987, partly because of his amiable and approachable nature, partly because of his popular media profile. In the end, however, simply being likeable was not enough; he needed to at least try to give a lead to the party, but, as his former speech-writer Richard Grayson commented in 2005, he was 'perhaps more chairman than leader'. Even in that role he was not notably successful. Like Ashdown, he chose to take over the chairmanship of the Federal Policy Committee, a post which has to be filled by an MP, but not necessarily the leader. Unlike Ashdown, however, his impact on the Committee, and on the party's policy-making processes, was almost zero.

He failed most starkly in managing his MPs. Initially his more collegiate style of leadership was welcome after Ashdown's lead from the front, but it gradually turned into a leadership vacuum. He was often very talented at analysing a situation (suggesting that he might have been a success at the career he almost followed, journalism) but seldom put forward a clear direction for his MPs to react for or against, although he was capable of it on some occasions, for example over Iraq. Never close friends with most of his MPs, he seldom mixed socially with them and steadily grew more and more isolated – reinforced by the behaviour of his office, which, necessarily, devoted more and more of its efforts to keeping him out of sight rather than keeping him in touch. Despite all this, his parliamentary party displayed an incredible degree of loyalty, those of them that knew about his alcoholism repeatedly covering up for him, sometimes over a period of years. Right up until the last few months, most of them never wanted him to go, just to be better. In the end it was Kennedy that destroyed his own support by failing to show any signs that he understood his lack of leadership and was capable of dealing with it.

Menzies Campbell inspired respect rather than the affection generated by Ashdown and Kennedy; he was less well-known in the party in the country, and always more of an aloof figure at party conference. Nevertheless, he had a solid reputation as a long-term activist and candidate in the Scottish party, and a respected foreign affairs spokesman and deputy leader under Kennedy. But as with Kennedy, he failed mainly in managing his parliamentary party, where he lacked solid support. Although the vast majority of the party's MPs had voted for him in the leadership election, there was no real inner circle committed to the Campbell leadership; as an obvious caretaker leader never likely to do more than one election, most of them were looking ahead to his successor. He alienated many Liberal Democrat peers by supporting the idea of a referendum on British membership of the EU, a response to the growing pressure from the Conservatives and UKIP for a referendum on the potential European constitution; many Liberal Democrat peers had experienced the European question as a defining issue of their time in politics in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and tended to be a good deal more pro-EU than their counterparts in the Commons. The party's slide in the opinion polls throughout 2007 led to number of MPs and peers starting to try to destabilise his leadership, briefing the press against him and hoping to trigger a new leadership election – which ultimately succeeded.

And he needs to love his party and all it stands for; as Ashdown put it, 'It is, incidentally, not necessary for parties to love their leaders – to respect them is usually enough. But it is vital for leaders to love their parties – otherwise why would we put up with it?'

Nick Clegg proved himself a relatively astute party manager up until entry into coalition in 2010. Relatively unknown within the party on his election, he steadily came to command respect for his energetic efforts to raise the party profile, both in parliament and the country, culminating in his sterling performance in the 2010 election. Although his leadership election gave no hint of his preference for a more right-wing slant to party policy (see above), he was able to edge the party in that direction without too much trouble. He paid less attention personally to the party organisation than did Ashdown and Campbell, chairing the Federal Policy Committee only briefly (and not particularly successfully), though the major review of the party structure he commissioned in 2007–08 (the 'Bones report', after its author) led to some organisational reforms, mainly in the party headquarters.[27]

Although all wings of the party supported entry into coalition, it was Clegg's handling of the tuition fees question in government which severely damaged his reputation, among party members as much as the wider public. Over the first half of the Parliament, his approval rating amongst party members fell from +68 in July 2010 to –2 in September 2012.[28] It is notable, however, that right up until the May 2014 elections, there was no systematic attempt to force him out; and the 'Lib Dems 4 Change' campaign started afterwards failed to gain much momentum, with another Lib Dem Voice poll in May 2014 showing opposition to resignation

by 54 per cent to 39 per cent – partly because there was no obvious alternative leadership candidate and partly because many party members recognised that the problems facing the party were wider than just Clegg's leadership. In fact, the main impact of the coalition on the party has been a significant fall in its membership, down by 35 per cent from 2010 to December 2012, when it stood at 42,501 (though it has since seen a slight increase (see Table 1); since most of those leaving can reasonably be assumed to be hostile to Clegg's leadership, this has in practice helped to secure his position.

Personal abilities

Leading the Liberal Democrats is a stressful and at times thankless job. As well as the normal pressures of politics, there is the strain of carrying the responsibility of being the main – sometimes almost the only – public face of the party, together with the knowledge that the media is watching every step and probing every secret. It therefore helps if the leader is healthy and possesses energy and stamina. He also needs to believe in his own basic abilities and competence. And he needs to love his party and all it stands for; as Ashdown put it, 'It is, incidentally, not necessary for parties to love their leaders – to respect them is usually enough. But it is vital for leaders to love their parties – otherwise why would we put up with it?'[29]

As his diaries reveal, even Paddy Ashdown sometimes buckled under the strains of leadership. 'I am plagued by the nightmare that the party that started with Gladstone will end with Ashdown' he recorded on European election day in 1989, and after the results were announced three days later, 'to bed about 3.00. I couldn't sleep a wink. We are in a very black position indeed.'[30] Nevertheless, in public he displayed an apparently inexhaustible supply of energy, helped by his obvious physical fitness, and hyperactivity. He thought – and worried – about everything, ringing up party spokesmen, for example, to get them to respond to an obscure proposal in a local party's conference resolution. He was fascinated by ideas, and published a series of books and pamphlets, including *Citizen's Britain* in 1989, and *Beyond Westminster* in 1994;[31] his conference speeches often challenged party orthodoxies, particularly in the early years. He was – almost always – tremendously self-confident, sometimes too much so; as his adviser Richard Holme warned in January 1997 about his approaches to Tony Blair: 'You must not get carried away with the film script you have written in your head – two strong people standing up and shaping history.'[32] Arguably, this self-confidence led him to put too much trust in Blair and to believe too strongly in the prospects for 'The Project' – but, as argued above, it was worth the attempt.

It seems to be an iron law of politics – or at least of Liberal Democrat politics – that parties elect leaders as different as possible from their predecessors.

Charles Kennedy's main problem was that he never appeared to believe in his own abilities as leader. Possibly this was a result of only infrequently having to fight for his goals; after he was selected as SDP candidate for Ross, Cromarty & Skye in 1983, his political career followed almost effortlessly. His candidacy for the leadership in 1999 can be seen as simply following the line of least resistance, which was to do what everyone expected him to and put his name forward. This background, coupled with an over-reliance on his natural talent at the expense of preparation, left him with too few reserves of self-confidence and self-discipline to fall back on under the strains of leadership. He had seemed to be able to overcome his shyness at school and university by donning a different persona, as an actor or as a debater, but he could not cope with the requirement, as leader, to wear a public persona all the time. Under pressure, when he had to perform – for example in election campaigns – he could often recover much of his native ability and talent, but away from pressure, in the day-to-day work of Parliament and the month-to-month job of managing the party, he too often simply lapsed into inertia. All of this was of course exacerbated by alcohol, which he turned to increasingly, perhaps out of recognition of his own under-performance. Whether he would have proved a fine leader if it wasn't for his problems with alcohol (as expressed in the title of his biography, *Charles Kennedy: A Tragic Flaw*) or whether he was a poor leader drunk or sober (as has been argued by this author[33]) is unresolvable.

As argued above, although Menzies Campbell's leadership helped to stabilise the party after Kennedy's resignation, his own image then undermined it. As one commentator put it, 'he has been wounded by polls suggesting that voters still preferred Kennedy drunk to Campbell sober ... He likes to think of himself as a statesman. He needs to remember that a leader also has to be a salesman.'[34] He was a decent, honourable and thoughtful man, driven by a sense of duty and responsibility underpinned by an instinctive, slightly old-fashioned liberalism, rather than by any clear ideological or policy agenda – but these qualities proved to be not enough for leading a third party lacking a clear national message in an increasingly media-intensive age.

Whatever criticisms can be levelled at Nick Clegg, one has to admire his toughness. The abuse he suffered over tuition fees was far worse than that faced by any Liberal Democrat leader, or by most politicians in any circumstances. Student demonstrations before the Parliamentary vote in December 2010, well-supported and occasionally violent, were targeted particularly at Clegg and the Liberal Democrats; he was burnt in effigy and had excrement pushed through his letterbox in his constituency home. (His young sons once asked him: 'Papa, why do the students hate you so much?'[35]) Despite the additional strains of representing the party in coalition, and acting as one member of the 'quad' which takes the key decisions, he retains, at least in public, a very high level of self-confidence, sharing this characteristic with Ashdown. This is almost certainty a prerequisite of effective leadership – but it also has its drawbacks, as in the tuition fees episode, when Clegg failed to appreciate the opposition his position would generate, because he had convinced himself of its rightness.

One interesting aspect of party leadership is whether the leader is an insider or an outsider. Kennedy and Campbell were the former, with a long background in Liberal, SDP and Liberal Democrat politics (starting at university) before becoming leader. Ashdown and

Clegg were the latter, coming into politics, and the Liberal Democrats, late and with no particular background before being elected to the Commons or the European Parliament. Insiders are more likely to understand and respect the party; outsiders are more likely to discount the party's response and perhaps care less about its survival – but also, perhaps, more likely to provide the innovation and new thinking that third parties need to prosper.

Conclusion

It seems to be an iron law of politics – or at least of Liberal Democrat politics – that parties elect leaders as different as possible from their predecessors. All the four men who led the Liberal Democrats over its first twenty-five years have displayed qualities that have served their party well; all have possessed weaknesses that helped to undermine their leadership; all have possessed skills that were suited to some periods of leadership and not to others; and all have been very different from one another.

Paddy Ashdown rescued his party from near-collapse and established it firmly as an effective and coherent third force. Although he failed in his main aim – to deliver proportional representation for Westminster – the deals he reached with Labour helped to change the country's constitution for good. As can be seen from Table 1, he left the party in much better shape than he found it, in terms of MPs, MEPs and councillors, and its standing in the polls; he also remains the leader achieving the highest personal popularity rating.

Charles Kennedy initially gave the party the quiet life it craved after Ashdown's last years, and had a successful first few years, but ultimately failed (whether because of alcohol or because of his own innate weaknesses) to fulfil effectively the high-profile role increasingly needed in the party leader. Nevertheless, he led the party to its strongest ever representation in the House of Commons, the European Parliament and local authorities; the question that hangs over his leadership is whether he could have achieved more.

Menzies Campbell helped to stabilise and reorganise the party, and, had an election in 2007 resulted in a hung parliament, could have occupied a coalition ministerial post with distinction; but, like Kennedy, his own qualities did not equip him for playing the role of the Liberal Democrat leader in the twenty-first century. His leadership saw a steady fall in the party's poll ratings and a slight drop in its council strength.

Nick Clegg is still the big unknown: his place in history, as the first Liberal in British government for more than sixty years, is secure, but what shape he will leave the party in after the 2015 election is still to be determined. He led the party to its highest ever vote in 2010, but the polling and electoral record since entering coalition has been grim; although to an extent this would have happened anyway, some of his decisions, particularly over tuition fees, have made it worse.

Whether the next leader will take over a secure position in a continuing, or new, coalition government, or will, like Ashdown, be faced with the task of rebuilding a party from near-collapse, remains to be seen.

All the four men who led the Liberal Democrats over its first twenty-five years have displayed qualities that have served their party well; all have possessed weaknesses that helped to undermine their leadership; all have possessed skills that were suited to some periods of leadership and not to others; and all have been very different from one another.

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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'.

Looking back, in 2013, on the post-1992 period, Ashdown 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'.

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 Mandleson, 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

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

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. 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 Dimbleby 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 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

– 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.

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'.

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 Kruschev 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.

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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 to use 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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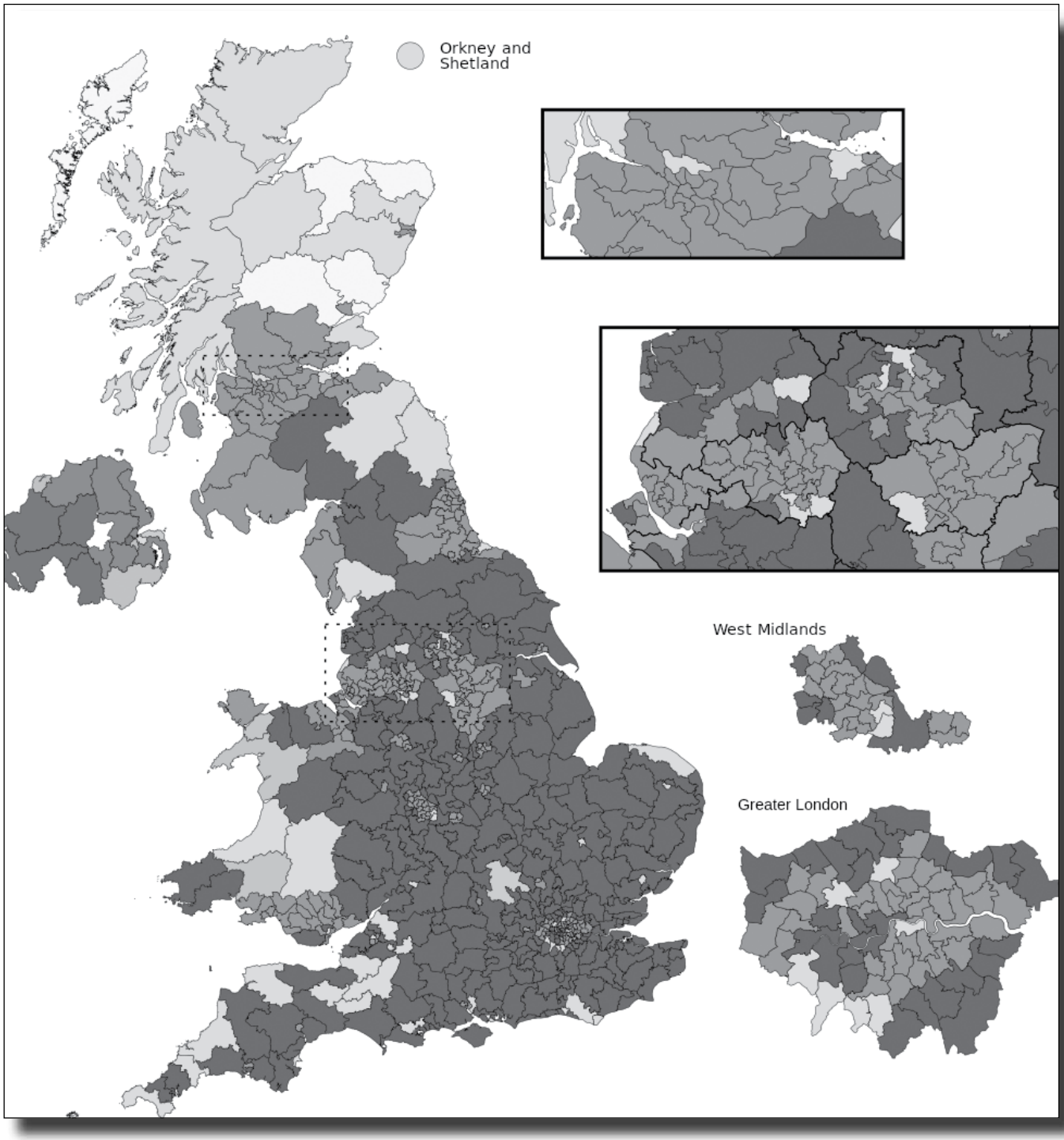


LIBERAL DEMOCRATS? CTORAL SUPPORT

Over the years it has been surprisingly difficult to get to grips with the question of who votes for the Liberal Democrats. On the one hand the party has been disadvantaged by an electoral system that tends to make it a sideshow in too many constituencies. On the other the party has benefited from some spectacular by-election victories and its record of keeping those seats has been remarkably good up to now. In social terms it is hard to see the Liberal Democrats as a class-based party, but the common view of the party as a recipient of random votes from all classes cannot be upheld. **Andrew Russell** examines who votes for the Liberal Democrats.

Left: the UK's political map after the 2010 election.

Geographically the party inherited from the Alliance an even national share of the vote but prospered only after it was able to efficiently concentrate campaign resources on heartland and expansion areas at the turn of the century. The Liberal Democrats have always had popular leaders at the time of general elections – in fact Paddy Ashdown, Charles Kennedy and Nick Clegg were all the most popular (or at least the least unpopular) of all three party leaders at certain points of the campaigns of 1992, 2005 and 2010. Moreover, the party has developed policies that have been popular with the electorate, yet at times popular leadership and popular policies have been insufficient to persuade large numbers of the electorate to vote for the party. At the centre of the question of who votes for the Liberal Democrats and how has the profile of the party's electorate changed since 1988 is the struggle for credibility. More than their competitor parties, the Liberal Democrats have been forced to fight for every vote in every ward in every constituency because their starting point has been – and remains – weak.

In charting the dynamics of Liberal Democrat support since the formation of the party we will sketch some of the bases of electoral support for the party. In order to do this we will analyse results from the period of the Liberal–SDP Alliance and even from the old Liberal Party, since the Grimond revival and community politics are both important in explaining how Liberalism retained a foothold in the electoral landscape of Britain and both provided a foundation for party advance.

Traditionally Liberal voting has been thought of as relatively indistinct in social terms. The Liberals, Alliance and Liberal Democrats all made a virtue of being fairly classless in their approach to politics, so it is not surprising that third-party voting is often thought in this way. As the third party in a two-party system, the security of the Liberal Democrat vote is not assured and unlike the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales the Liberal Democrats cannot rely on an extreme concentration of support to protect the heartland vote geographically. The party has often benefitted from protest voting which is by its nature volatile and the Liberal Democrats have found it difficult to appeal to a large section of society even when they apparently share some of the party's core values.

We will approach this analysis by looking at the social and political basis of the Liberal Democrat vote. On the way we will look at the social profile of Liberal Democrat voting in terms of social class, education and geography. Politically we will look at the nature of electoral campaigning, the party's ideological position in relation to other parties and the difficulties of firstly bridging the credibility gap caused by being the third force in British politics and then of being the minor party in a national coalition.

The dynamics of the Liberal Democrat vote

We will begin by attempting to map out the electorate that the

party inherited and the change in the party's electoral fortunes since the 1987 general election.

The first thing to say about the Liberal Democrats and the party's key electoral support is how little progress has been made since the last election of the Alliance in 1987. In that election the Alliance received 23 per cent of the popular vote, in 2010 the Liberal Democrats 24 per cent. Of course the major difference in the party's electoral performance in the intervening quarter of a century has been its ability to concentrate support in winnable seats. So while the Alliance received over 7 million votes – 23 per cent of the popular vote – the Liberal party and SDP won a grand total of 22 seats. The 2010 general election returned fifty-seven Liberal Democrats (and even that was retreat from the sixty-two seats from 2005) from 6.8 million votes.

The social profile of the Liberal Democrat vote

Class and Liberal Democrat voting

One of the commonly assumed features of the Liberal Democrat vote is its classless nature. In truth the party – and its predecessors, the Alliance and the Liberal Party – recruited disproportionately from the better-off sections of the electorate. Even in 1987 more than a quarter of the third-party vote was drawn from the ABC1 classes compared to less than a fifth from the more plentiful DE categories.

Nevertheless the decades of class and partisan dealignment created opportunities for the third party to claim new voters. The fragmenting of the council estates and the trade unions meant that the semi-automatic link that many voters had to the Labour party was disrupted, and the expansion of the affluent working class meant that many socially mobile voters were up for grabs.

Since the 1980s, social change in Britain might be said to have played into the party's electoral fortunes, since the decoupling of class attachments to the Conservative and Labour parties has coincided with the expansion of an affluent middle class.

In the 1990s it became clear that the profile of the typical Liberal Democrat voter was someone who looked like a Conservative in social status but was closer to Labour attitudinally,[1] but these individuals were not in plentiful supply. Hence, as Russell and Fieldhouse note, the party must look to issue-based mobilisation. However, although appeal to voters' beliefs and policy preferences means their votes are likely to be more volatile than the party would want, there are certain societal groups where liberal values might flourish.

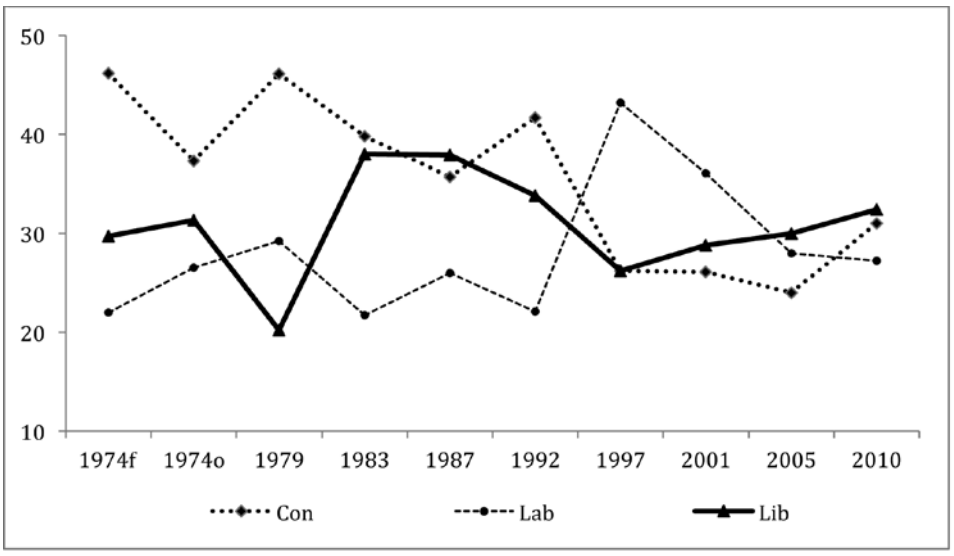
Education and Liberal Democrat voting

The traditional view of Liberal voting as coming from no single section of the electorate has long been recognised as misplaced. As Curtice points out: 'Support for the party is not classless, but is distinctly stronger amongst the educated middle class than in the less well educated classes.'[2] Given this, the expansion of university education since the 1990s and parallel embourgeoisement of British society might have enabled further gentrification of the Liberal Democrat vote. If the expansion of higher education has altered the class boundaries for a large slice of the British electorate, this might have provided an inbuilt advantage for the party that was already disproportionately popular with degree holders.

In 2005 and 2010 the Liberal Democrats were actually the party of choice for those voters with a university degree (Figure 1). By 2010 nearly one-third of all voters with a university degree chose the Liberal Democrats, making them the party for graduates. Although this represents an achievement for the party, a longer view reveals the real story – that since the 1980s graduates have turned away from the Conservatives. In fact, amongst voters with a university degree, the Liberal Democrats still fared worse in 2010 than the predecessor Alliance did in 1987. Whereas 38 per cent of voters with a degree voted either Liberal or SDP in the 1987 general election compared to 36 per cent for the Conservatives and 26 per cent for Labour, only 32 per cent of degree holders voted Liberal Democrat in 2010. In truth, the real story of graduate voting is the vacillating fortunes of both Conservative and Labour parties among this group (as the profile of the group has dramatically transformed itself) rather than a positive endorsement of the third party.

Nevertheless the party did benefit from the extension of access to higher education. In many ways this is not surprising, since the link between education and liberalism is well established.[3] It is also possible that the party appeals to those liberal-minded middle classes traditionally disinclined to vote Labour because of their class background, or simply that the Liberal Democrats tend to be the credible opposition to the Conservatives in so many seats where those with higher education choose to live.

Figure 1: Vote choice of degree holders in Britain, 1974–2010



Source: British Election Study series, cross-sectional data.

Figure 1 demonstrates the voting pattern of degree holders and shows that the third party has performed well within this group ever since the Liberals managed to field a candidate in most constituencies in February 1974. Although the Alliance was marginally the party of choice for degree holders by 1987, by 2001 the Liberal Democrats were comfortably out-polling the Conservatives within this group (who themselves were beginning to represent a sizeable section of society). Comparing degree and non-degree holders shows that the Liberal Democrats gained between 10 and 15 per cent more votes from those with a university qualification.

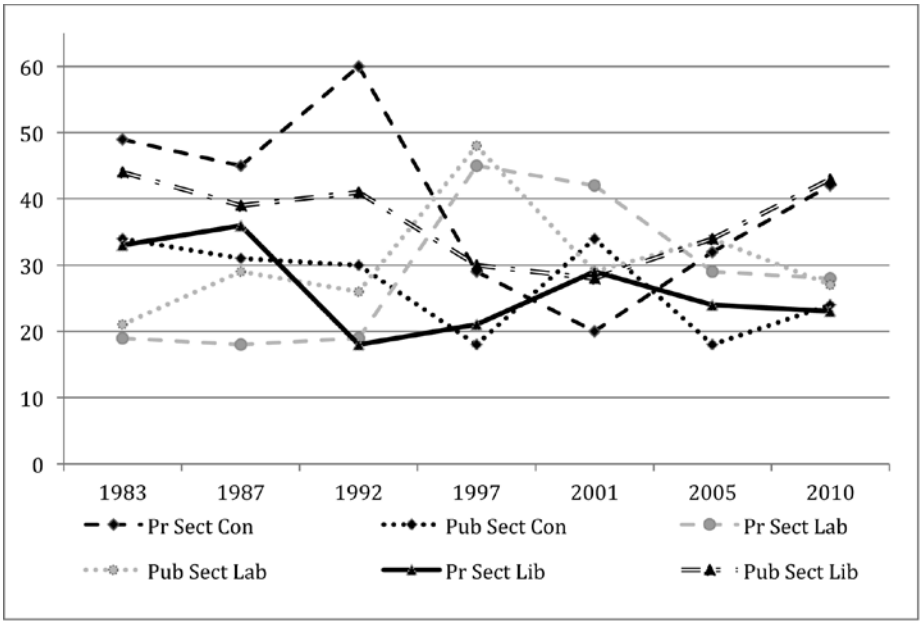
Linking education to employment sector also sees the emergence of interesting patterns (Figure 2). The Liberals have traditionally recruited particularly well among university graduates with public sector jobs. In fact, between 1983 and 1992 the party won the largest share of the vote amongst this section of the electorate. By 2005 and 2010 the Liberal Democrats had a distinct advantage among public sector graduates despite falling behind both Conservatives and Labour among graduates with private sector jobs. Russell and Fieldhouse report that this profile of voters that the Liberal Democrats could appeal to and places where the party might thrive was well known to party activists, who often talked of targeting university lecturers and teachers and seats characterised by health service employment and community voluntarism.[4]

Of course, one of the dangers for the Liberal Democrats of the 2010 coalition could therefore be that the post-crash government strategy has directly marginalised those in the public sector. Since the 2010 election the Liberal Democrats have had to try to engage with a new narrative of public thrift and responsible expenditure while trying to maintain their advantage among professionals employed in the very sector hit hardest by public spending cuts.

If the third party has always enjoyed a relative advantage among graduates, in the twenty-first century the party developed policies designed to appeal to undergraduates as well. The pursuit of the 'student-plus' audience was so successful that by 2005 the Liberal Democrats had won parliamentary seats in Cambridge, Oxford, Bristol, Ceredigion, Leeds and Manchester (although no further wins took place in student seats in 2010 despite the no tuition fees pledge, and Oxford West and Abingdon was lost to the Conservatives). In 2010 the Liberal Democrats averaged 31 per cent of the vote in those parliamentary constituencies where full-time students amounted to more than 10 per cent of the electorate. Of course the real problem here is that, despite the expansion of higher education, there are so few seats where the student vote is particularly influential on the electoral outcome: only 43 of the current configuration of 650 constituencies have student populations of over 10 per cent. Furthermore, many students may also be registered in their family home constituency or be disinclined to vote in any case, so although the party enjoyed a relative advantage in student seats, it does not seem sufficient to engineer many victories in itself.

Of course, since 2010 the relative advantage that the Liberal Democrats had among graduates may have been decimated due to the undoubted damage done to the party's reputation by the raising of tuition fees by the coalition government. A Populus poll in February 2014[5] reported that while those with a university degree or higher degree represented 46 per cent of prospective Liberal Democrat voters, fewer than 10 per cent of graduates were actually choosing the Liberal Democrats.[6] We should be wary, naturally, of comparing poll evidence with actual votes, but there is nevertheless a stark warning here to the party. Since entering the coalition in 2010, the Liberal Democrats have remained a party of the university educated, but the university educated have not remained Liberal Democrats.

Figure 2: Vote of degree holders by employment sector, 1983–2010 (per cent)



Source: British Election Study surveys 1983–2010

Religion and Liberal voting

The link between Liberal voting and Nonconformist religious observance in Britain is well established.[7] The party's traditional heartlands were often associated with Methodism and non-unionised agriculture labour and the link with Nonconformist communities and Liberal Democrat voting has had an enduring legacy at the aggregate level if not at the individual level.

The link between Nonconformist religious denominations and Liberal voting was clearly demonstrated by Russell and Fieldhouse.[8] In both the 1987 and 1997 general elections the third party performed significantly better amongst Nonconformist than Anglican (or Church of Scotland) voters, who seemed more likely to opt for the Conservatives. In Roman Catholic

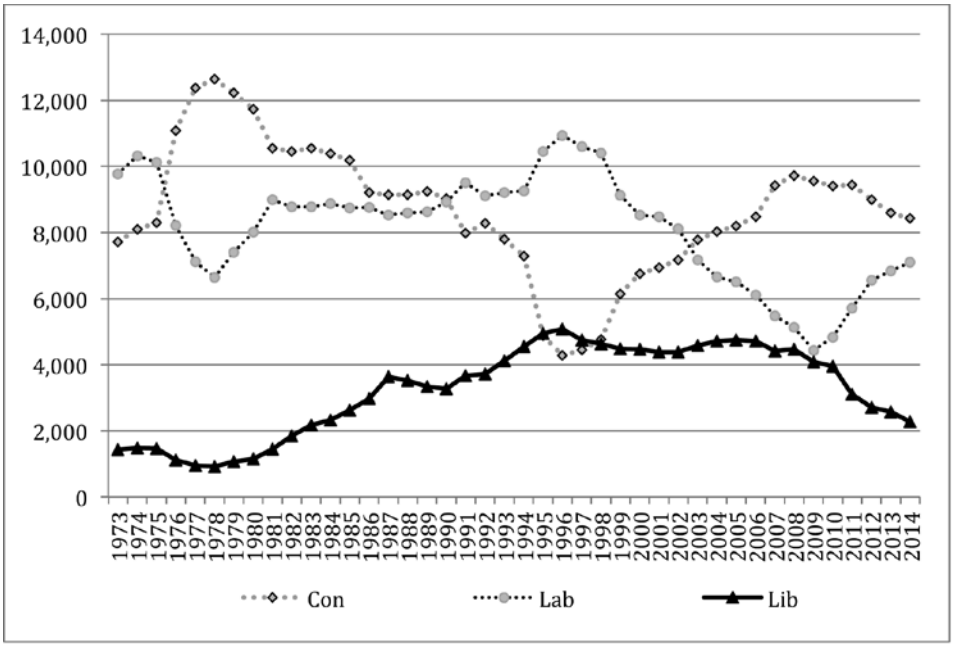
communities there was a clear and strong bias towards Labour (although this was often also highly dependent on class profile).

In more recent times the pertinence of Christian denominational differences to British voting behaviour has clearly receded, so that in the twenty-first century there is little merit in the party trying to build an electoral strategy based on Nonconformist voters. Indeed so few citizens seem to identify themselves as Nonconformists that it would be surprising if the denominational distinctions in the Christian church had an independent effect on voting patterns. Nevertheless the major legacy of the Liberal Nonconformist vote seems to be that the Liberal Democrats established themselves as a credible party in those places where Nonconformists used to live – and as a result the Liberal Democrat vote might be more durable in those areas than one might otherwise expect.

As the influence of a traditional confessional cleavage has diminished, it might be that Britain's more contemporary religious differences find expression in the electoral battleground. Labour has clearly been associated with ethnic minority voting since the 1950s and 1960s (although, once more, this may have been primarily an expression of social class and exclusion rather than religiosity). However, the events after 11 September 2001 made it seem possible that the Liberal Democrats could appeal to a new and significant section of the UK electorate – Muslim voters,

The Liberal Democrats' unequivocal opposition to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 enabled the party to exploit disenchantment with Labour amongst Muslim communities – a traditional electoral stronghold for Labour. In 2005, the Liberal Democrat vote share in those seats with a Muslim electorate of more than 10 per cent had improved on average by 9 per cent on 2001.[9] Even then, coming from such a poor starting position this upturn in Liberal Democrat voting only delivered two Westminster seats (Brent East and Rochdale). Furthermore, in many ways the 2005 general election was a high-water mark for the Liberal Democrat targeting of Muslim voters. By 2010 the Liberal Democrats were finding it even harder to access the Muslim vote (partly due to the decreased salience of opposition to the war, and possibly in part because of the lack of natural fit between liberal values and the conservative religious values embodied in many Muslim communities). At the 2010 general election, in the thirty-nine parliamentary constituencies where Muslim voters amounted to more than 10 per cent of the electorate, the Liberal Democrats averaged nearly 21 per cent of the vote – a fall of nearly three-quarters of a per cent overall – as the shift towards the Liberal Democrats from Labour among Muslim voters seemed to slow down or reverse.[10]

Figure 3: Total number of local councillors, 1973–2010 (GB)



Source: House of Commons, 'Local Elections 2014', Research Paper 14/33 (2014)

The geographic profile of Liberal Democrat voting

Probably the greatest achievement of the Liberal Democrats in the last twenty-five years has been to gain parliamentary representation in every region of Britain (although the only East Midlands seat, Chesterfield, was lost in 2010). The party has done this by concentrating its vote in winnable seats, usually by converting local election success into a wider framework and seeing success spill over into parliamentary seats. The contagion theory of Liberal Democrat success is a seductive one,[11] but it should not obscure the sheer hard work that the party had to put into its campaigning efforts.[12]

Having started by noting the similarities between the contemporary Liberal Democrats and the Alliance, it should be stated that in terms of electoral geography the party is very different from the Alliance, which had a habit of coming second in all regions and winning none. This enabled the tremendous advances at Westminster in 1997 where a deterioration of the popular vote nevertheless saw a doubling of Liberal Democrat MPs, and beyond. Indeed the Liberal Democrats managed to improve both their vote share and parliamentary representation in 2001 and 2005

However, most of the Liberal Democrat parliamentary success came from strong electoral performances in local contests and the brutal truth is that this has decayed at an alarming rate. Liberal Democrat local election performance is worse now than at any time since the 1970s. In terms of the councillor base (which was, after all, the activist base of the party) the Liberal Democrats are reduced to just over 2,000 councillors – the worst showing by the third party in Britain since 1983 (Figure 3). It is not too big an exaggeration to say that the party is in danger of losing all the progress made since the 1970s, as in

four short years since the formation of the coalition, the bulwark of the party's local vote has been severely compromised.

There are, however, two important caveats here. Firstly, the Liberal Democrat vote share in the local elections of 2011–13 was marginally better than the national polls might have indicated, with the party gaining 14–15 per cent of the popular vote in all contests. This improvement is marginal but nevertheless should provide some succour to the party strategists. The same was true of the 2014 local elections in England, although in the European Parliament elections the Liberal Democrat vote share fell to below 7 per cent. Secondly, Liberal Democrat electoral performance continues to be best where the party has sitting MPs. It was certainly the case in 2010 that the Liberal Democrats had a much greater chance of retaining the Westminster constituency if the incumbent MP re-stood. In 2010, the party selected ten new candidates to stand in seats where they were the incumbent party. Not only did they lose six of these seats to the Conservatives (Harrogate and Knaresborough, Winchester, York Outer, Truro and Falmouth, Cornwall South East, Hereford and Herefordshire South), but their average vote share declined by 4.69 per cent on 2005. The only Liberal Democrat successes were in Cambridge, Chippenham, Edinburgh West, and St Austell and Newquay. Those candidates who were neither new nor first-time incumbents saw their vote share fall by 1.25 per cent, with five incumbents losing their seats. Across all Liberal-Democrat-held seats, party performance only marginally declined in 2010, with an average vote share of 45.51 per cent in these constituencies.

Looking at the data from the elections since 2010, it does seem, firstly, that the Liberal Democrat vote holds up slightly better than the national polls might predict and, secondly, that this is especially true in places where the party has a sitting MP. However the incumbency bonus to the party is far less than the party faithful commonly imagine; and it is worth reiterating that, despite the incumbency bonus, the party is managing electoral decline rather than promising success. In fact, the drop in Liberal Democrat vote share in such places is around ten percentage points rather than twelve points everywhere else. Although incumbency has been a factor in explaining Liberal Democrat election results, it can only provide a small crumb of comfort to the party.

The number of people who identify as Liberal Democrat has not transformed in the twenty-five years since the party's inception.

The political profile of Liberal Democrat voting

Turning finally to the political aspect of Liberal Democrat support, we should first acknowledge an essential truth about the Liberal Democrats over the past quarter of a century: that, as the third party in a system designed to sustain only two, they have too often been defined only in relation to the main two parties. The Liberal Democrats' struggle for identity and credibility has too readily been seen as an effort to tack themselves to, or manoeuvre themselves away from one of the other parties. This is not surprising for a party that struggles to make a national impact and which had clearly decided by the turn of the century that its best chance of achieving and maintaining breakthrough at Westminster was by establishing the Liberal Democrats as a viable party locally – usually as the effective opposition to an incumbent from the Conservatives or Labour. Three-way marginal constituencies remain extremely rare, and the Liberal Democrats created a series of local narratives about the party's credibility via local election presence and occasional by-election success. In other words, the Liberal Democrats became credible through establishing a status as one of the two main parties in a series of two-party systems.

It might have been reasonable to assume that the establishment of the coalition government of 2010 and the wide-ranging involvement of the Liberal Democrats in all aspects of that coalition would solve the traditional problem of credibility for the party. After all, what better signifier of credibility could there be than the presence of the party in peacetime government for the first time since the National Government?

There was of course a risk attached to entering coalition. Electorally those voters who came to the Liberal Democrats as a tactical choice may never forgive the party for propping up the party they really identified against. Given the irresistible force of the electoral mathematics in Westminster after the 2010 general election, the Liberal Democrats may have had no real choice, but entering coalition with the Conservatives was always a gamble. If this was the hope, it seems that the gamble has not paid off, not least because the fragility of the Liberal Democrat core vote has been exposed.

Identification

The number of people who identify as Liberal Democrat has not transformed in the twenty-five years since the party's inception. Indeed analysis of the 1987 general election reveals that the Alliance could count on 16 per cent of all British voters to class themselves as party identifiers (for either party, naturally). In both 2005 and 2010 the Liberal Democrats' core of support (their partisans) amounted to only 11 per cent of the electorate.[13] This is important, since it reveals that so much of the Liberal Democrat vote (even when the party are doing well) is loaned to rather than owned by the party. As such, it is more vulnerable to erosion from both sides than any party would hope. Electoral appeal predicated on attracting switchers from the other parties is problematic while too large a proportion of voters seem to share the view, encapsulated by John Curtice's famous phrase, that the Liberal Democrats are more of a one-night stand than long-term relationship material.

Credible, electable, alternative?

One of the key aspects of Paddy Ashdown's speech at Chard in 1992 was that he set a fierce test by which we can judge the subsequent electoral performance of the Liberal Democrats. Immediately after the 1992 general election, Ashdown claimed that the Liberal Democrats must rise to the challenge of at least being a part of 'a credible, electable alternative government to the Tories'.[14] This was a key moment for the party since it paved the way for the abandonment of equidistance from the Conservative and Labour parties. Writing now, this might seem little more than a necessary and viable electoral tactic, or a reaction to the unpopularity

of the Conservative brand, but the context is important.

The 1992 general election had seen the Liberal Democrats underperform electorally. There was a widespread notion that the party had missed winnable targets because they had insufficiently differentiated themselves from the incumbent party – and in the vast majority of cases this was the Conservatives. In seats like Sheffield Hallam and Littleborough and Saddleworth the Liberal Democrat challenge to sitting Conservatives had faltered since the party could not adequately convince Labour supporters to transfer their votes to the Liberal Democrats in order to defeat the Tories. Academics had written of Ashdown's mistake in misjudging the public mood.[15] The Chard speech and the subsequent abandonment of equidistance paved the way for the party to become part of the anti-Conservative opposition or, in Ashdown's own phrase, a credible, electable alternative.

It should further be emphasised that the realignment signalled by Chard occurred before the ERM crisis, and before John Major's back-to-basics rallying call and the subsequent discrediting of a sleaze-ridden Conservative government. Ending equidistance may now seem like the inevitable consequence of 1990s British politics, but at the time there was little inevitable about it. Indeed, it prefigured a period of intense collaboration between Labour and the Liberal Democrats and the promise (or threat) of still more, as the two party leaders seemed intent on dragging their parties even closer towards each other.

Since the Labour and Liberal Democrat leadership have drifted apart with the disintegration of the 'Project' between Blair and Ashdown, the Liberal Democrats have had some spectacular but sporadic electoral success. Tellingly this success typically resulted from relentless and efficient targeting of resources on winnable seats rather than on spreading support over a wider canvass.

Importantly, every Liberal Democrat vote, every ward held and every Westminster seat won has been fought over a number of contests and years. This strategy requires a labour-intensive party machinery in order to campaign assiduously. The Liberal Democrats have, however, not made much progress in twenty-five years in fundamentally changing the basis of British electoral politics.

Given the asymmetrical approach to electoral strategy, the decision to enter coalition with the Conservatives after 2010 would inevitably harm the party's potential voting base.

In truth the Liberal Democrat heartland is still a niche in British politics as the key electoral cleavages remain class-based. For instance, although the influence of social class upon the preferences of an individual has seemingly diminished since the 1960s, the aggregate class characteristics of an area have become an even better predictor of voting behaviour in each constituency.[16] Furthermore the predominant determinant of British electoral politics remains the left–right axis rather than the liberal–authoritarian one. This means that party has to compete on territory that it finds harder to own than the other parties do.

In left–right terms, the party inherited a set of voters from the Alliance that was slightly left of centre. Alliance voters in 1987 identified themselves as typically to the right of Labour, but significantly closer to them than to the Conservatives. The Chard Speech, the abandonment of equidistance, the adoption of clear tax-and-spend policies (and in particular the hypothecated taxation that targeted spending on education) all facilitated the closer relationship between Liberal Democrat and Labour voters that followed. Indeed in the early years of New Labour, when that party's apparent obsession with 'prudence' led them to accept the spending proposals of the outgoing Conservative regime, it was the Liberal Democrats who began to seem the most left wing of all parties on certain issues. Public perception of the Liberal Democrats reflected this, and the party began to compete, in some seats at least, for the credible anti-Conservative vote. In addition, the Liberal Democrats were able, crucially, to open up a second front and to compete with Labour in some areas based on dissatisfaction with Labour's record in government.

This is central to understanding the appeal of the Liberal Democrats in the twenty-first century. The party were able to follow their familiar strategy for Conservative sympathisers – a moderate appeal to those worried that the one-nation party had been hijacked by Eurosceptic neo-liberals – and the Liberal Democrats' stance against the Iraq War, in favour of hypothecated taxation, and against ID cards was popular with many voters. On the other hand, their approach to Labour identifiers was qualitatively different and sat uncomfortably with the rest of their electoral strategy. Criticism of New Labour's foreign policy and approach to civil liberties seemed to strike a nerve less with moderate Labour supporters than with the relatively diehard left. In simple terms, the party was no longer acting as, nor could be perceived as, a party of the centre. Pursuit of one of these electoral flanks (Conservative moderates) would sooner rather than later come into conflict with the pursuit of the other (Labour stalwarts), and as the party grew the cracks began to show. This meant that at the heart of the Liberal Democrat electoral strategy was an asymmetry that simply could not be sustained.

Given the asymmetrical approach to electoral strategy, the decision to enter coalition with the Conservatives after 2010 would inevitably harm the party's potential voting base. In policy terms, the Liberal Democrats had signalled a discernible move back towards the centre between 2005 and 2010 with the election of Nick Clegg to the leadership and the advance, to a certain extent, of the economic liberals over the social wing of the party.

The political perception of the Liberal Democrats by the public can be gauged by the second preferences of voters in general elections. This is a regular question in the British Election Study series and allows us to analyse and locate the public placement of the party. Despite the fact that most Alliance voters in 1987 placed themselves to the left of centre, a small majority of them preferred the Conservatives to Labour as their second choice of political party. Of course this might signify little more than the relative unpopularity of Labour in the 1980s and the antipathy of those that deserted Labour to join the SDP in the first place. Between 1987 and 1997 the public discerned a move left in the Liberal Democrats, which was mirrored in the perceptions of Liberal Democrat voters themselves. For the first

time the general electorate and the party's own voters tended to place the party as closer to Labour than to the Conservatives. This was confirmed by the Chard speech and subsequently the 'Project'.

By 1997, when the non-equidistant Liberal Democrats stood in stark contrast to the toxic Tory brand, only 22 per cent of Liberal Democrat voters favoured the Conservatives as their second preference; 64 per cent chose Labour. By 2010, despite the general downturn in Labour popularity nationally, Liberal Democrat voters were still markedly more likely to favour Labour as their second preference to the Conservatives (40 per cent to 24 per cent).

The politics of second choice

In a similar vein, over the course of the past quarter of a century the Liberal Democrats had become more palatable to Labour supporters than to Conservative voters. This is important, in that it provides a good guide for the latent support needed to convert tactical voters in strategically important constituencies. By 2010 the Liberal Democrats were the second choice of two-thirds of Labour voters and 54 per cent of Conservatives.[17] Of course, this effectively meant that many more voters were going to be antagonised by the coalition agreement with the Conservatives than the party would have wanted and made a deal with the Conservatives harder for the party to sell to its own voters than any deal with Labour would have been. It also explains why disenchantment with the Liberal Democrats in government has translated directly to Labour support for the most part (although there is a significant boost to UKIP also). This transfer to Labour means that, at the time of writing, a party with distinct disadvantages in terms of the public perception of both leadership and economic competence still leads in the opinion polls.

Finally it is instructive to reiterate a fundamental point about the vulnerability of the electoral fortunes of the third party in British politics. Writing before the foundation of the Liberal Democrats, Ivor Crewe recognised the 'softness' of the Liberal vote, based as it was on relatively small and relatively weak partisan identification. In simple terms, the Liberal Democrat vote is still much more fragile than that of the main two parties. Whereas nine-tenths of all Conservative and Labour supporters identify themselves as supporters of the party they voted for in 2010, only just over one-half of Liberal Democrat voters did the same.

Nor is the basis of Liberal Democrat support any more stable than it was at the party's launch. The Liberal Democrat vote still contains a large element of protest voting, which means that any electoral success for the Liberal Democrats has been built upon the most fragile of foundations. In Crewe's terms, the traditional Liberal challenges of recruitment and retention of voters remain difficult for the contemporary party. At the last general election, 64 per cent of Liberal Democrat voters were new to the party (versus only 40 per cent of Conservative and 27 per cent of Labour voters), which demonstrates both the success of the electoral project and its inherent weakness. Votes which are lent to a political party – for whatever reason (strategic voting, a symbol of protest, or a personal reward for an incumbent or local candidate) – can just as easily be withdrawn, and being in coalition with the Conservatives runs the risk of losing two of these three sources. Anti-Conservative tactical voters will be less inclined to vote for a party that put the Tories in power, and anti-politics protest voters are likely to be swept away as soon as the protest party becomes a party of government.

Conclusion

In summary, then, the contemporary Liberal Democrats find themselves in a very similar position to when the party was founded. It can rely on the votes of a small and indistinct social community and is vulnerable to surges in the popularity of parties on either side of the spectrum (or even outside the spectrum if anti-party sentiment can be harnessed by another party of protest). Unlike the Alliance, the Liberal Democrats are a party with some geographic strongholds, particularly where the party can call on the benefits of prolonged incumbency, but by and large the party's prospects for expansion were fairly evenly spread. It is likely that a defensive campaign in 2015 would see the Liberal Democrats concentrate on a heartland vote strategy, since these are the areas where the vote has collapsed least since 2010. Local election results would suggest that the party will find it hard even to be viable in places previously identified as expansion territories (local Liberal Democrat representation has been wiped out in Greater Manchester and Liverpool for instance).

The Liberal Democrats find themselves in a very similar position to when the party was founded. It can rely on the votes of a small and indistinct social community and is vulnerable to surges in the popularity of parties on either side of the spectrum (or even outside the spectrum if anti-party sentiment can be harnessed by another party of protest).

Systematic and prolonged electoral progress has occurred over the first quarter of a century of the party – in terms of representation if not in terms of the popular vote – and an asymmetric approach to campaign strategy was remarkably successful up to a point. However the limits of the asymmetry became apparent in the early twenty-first century. Entering into coalition with the Conservatives gave the Liberal Democrat the chance to finally bridge their credibility gap – but the price of the coalition has been to undermine much of the progress made since the birth of the party.

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1 A. Russell and E. Fieldhouse, *Neither Left Nor Right? The Liberal Democrats and the Electorate* (Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 117–23.

2 J. Curtice, 'Who Votes for the Centre Now?' in D. MacIver (ed.) *The Liberal Democrats* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), p. 20.

3 For a full discussion of how formal education is positively associated with progressive attitudes to redistribution and social liberalism, see M. Forslund, 'Patterns of Delinquency Involvement: An Empirical Typology', *Western Association of Sociologists and Anthropologists Conference* (Alberta, 1980), or E. Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research* (Wadsworth, 1995).

4 Russell and Fieldhouse, *Neither Left Nor Right?*, p. 93.

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LIBERAL DEMOCRA
THE SCOTTI

In 1997, the Labour government, fulfilling the promises of the Cook-Maclennan Agreement reached between Labour and the Liberal Democrats before the election, finally created the longed-for Scottish Parliament. The first eight years of the Parliament, after elections in 1999 and 2003, saw coalition governments formed between the Liberal Democrats and Labour. **Caron Lindsay** examines the record of the coalitions, and the Liberal Democrat impact on them, and concludes that there are lessons from the first eight years in Scotland which might yet help restore the fortunes of the party at UK level.

ATS IN COALITION: SH RECORD

In 1979, Scotland had voted by 51.6 per cent to 48.4 per cent for a Scottish Assembly; however, despite the majority within the votes cast, the yes vote failed to meet the required threshold of 40 per cent of the total electorate. Eighteen years of Conservative rule then further intensified Scotland's desire for devolution. The 1997 referendum showed a three to one ratio in favour of a parliament, and two to one in favour of tax-raising powers. The Scotland Act of 1998 gave a parliament and Scottish executive control over most domestic matters and the never-used power to vary income tax by three pence.

Elections took place on 6 May 1999: Labour won fifty-six seats, SNP thirty-five, Conservatives eighteen, Liberal Democrats seventeen, and others three. Together, Liberal Democrats and Labour had a majority.

Both parties knew that the new Scottish Executive would have a great deal to prove. On the one hand, there was a great sense of optimism. The carefully built consensus among politicians and civil society on devolution was realised. There was talk of a better way of doing politics, where people could engage more with parliament and government. Sceptics, however, doubted that coalition could work. For years the prevailing narrative, spread by those in power with no appetite to share it, had been that proportional representation would lead to instability. Fears of a bland government which did nothing radical abounded. Would Scotland's first devolved government confound sceptics and be radical enough for optimists?

Left: Scottish Parliament in session.

On 14 May 1999, Donald Dewar and Jim Wallace announced a Labour/Liberal Democrat Partnership Agreement. The parties governed together for eight years, through three Labour and two Liberal Democrat leaders, implementing landmark reforms. For Liberal Democrats, it was the first chance to govern in eighty years. How would inexperienced new ministers adapt to government and maintain the party's identity as the junior partner in coalition? This article aims to discuss the formation of the coalition, assess its impact on Scotland, the UK and the Scottish Liberal Democrats, look at how it governed as well as what it did, and draw some comparisons with the current UK coalition.

Constitutional convention

When Conservatives and Liberal Democrats sat down to negotiate after the 2010 general election, they were unfamiliar with each other. David Laws says in his account that he and William Hague had never previously met.[1] This was not the case in Scotland: the parties had been involved in tough negotiations in the Scottish Constitutional Convention which had established the blueprint for the Scottish Parliament.

For instinctively centralising Labour, giving away power is difficult. Tony Blair was always sceptical about creating the Scottish Parliament. In his autobiography, he said:

> I was never a passionate devolutionist. It is a dangerous game to play. You can never be sure where nationalist sentiment ends and separatist sentiment begins. I supported the UK, distrusted nationalism as a concept and looked at the history books and worried whether we could get it through.

The Scottish Constitutional Convention in its 1995 blueprint, *Scotland's Parliament, Scotland's Right,* set out that the parliament should contain 129 MSPs: seventy-three from constituencies and fifty-six elected from a top-up list. That figure was a compromise. The Scottish Labour party were willing to agree to 145 MSPs in total, but that would have set it against Westminster Labour who wanted just 108. Liberal Democrats had helped broker the eventual deal. As a result, by the time of the Holyrood election, Labour should have known that Liberal Democrats were tough but reasonable negotiators.

Coalition negotiation 1999

Labour as the largest party made a foolish assumption. They expected the Liberal Democrats to be so excited at the prospect of government that they would simply join Labour in implementing its policies. A two-page letter, inviting Liberal Democrats to join their

government, was immediately dismissed by Jim Wallace.

It was not just Labour who had to learn to take Liberal Democrats seriously. During the negotiations, a senior civil servant was asked to leave the room because of a perception that they felt they were there to serve the largest party. David Laws talked about these experiences in 2010 in the wake of the Westminster deal:

> David Laws was asked whether he would wish to see the involvement of the Civil Service in any future coalition negotiations. His feeling was, based on the evidence of Civil Service involvement in Scottish negotiations, that this may act as a hindrance to proceedings. In this instance his view was that the Civil Service had shown a preference towards the stronger party, and that their presence stifled more frank and open discussion.[2]

Laws discussed the negotiation process at a Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting in 2009, outlining his seven rules for coalition negotiations which are recounted in full by Mark Pack. They are:

1 There is huge pressure from the media and others which requires a deal to be struck quickly if at all.
2 About 20 per cent of colleagues will be happy with any sort of coalition, 30 per cent will oppose any sort of coalition and the rest will decide on the details of the proposal.
3 Any coalition has to address issues of policy substance.
4 You have to be tough and prepared to walk away to get a good deal.
5 But you can agree to postpone tackling some large complicated issues if more time is genuinely needed to work out a compromise – and if there is always the threat that the coalition will end if it is not reached.
6 You need to get commitments in writing about the administrative details of how coalition government will work.
7 Vigorous internal party debate over the proposed terms is vital for any deal to stick.[3]

A joint meeting of Lib Dem MSPs and the Executive and Policy Committees gave a green light to the deal, but little effort was made to get the wider party on board, leading to resentment. This was changed for the 2003 elections, with much wider consultation taking place, involving local party and regional office bearers.

When the deal was announced[4] on 14 May 1999, topmost in commentators' minds was the question of what would happen on the controversial issue of tuition fees. This issue dominated the election: Labour wanted to charge for university tuition; Liberal Democrats were implacably opposed. If anyone had wanted any wiggle room, David Steel removed it during the last week of the campaign, saying that if you voted Liberal Democrat on Thursday, tuition fees would be dead by Friday.

Maintaining free higher education was the Liberal Democrats' top priority, and Labour were not in a mood for negotiation. The Liberal Democrats held their ground, and insisted on implementing Laws' fifth rule, as illustrated by the following excerpt from the Partnership Agreement:

> We are agreed that the controversial issue of tuition fees is too important and too complex to be decided in the short period of time between the elections of 6 May and the formation of this Partnership Government. The Universities and other Higher Education bodies have emphasised to us the need to proceed through careful and thorough examination of all of the options. The Liberal Democrats stood on a manifesto commitment to abolish tuition fees. The Liberal Democrats have maintained their position on it. The partnership agreement does not mean abandonment of that position.

The staging post in the agreement was that the parliament would be asked to set up a review that would report by the year's end.

Liberal Democrat approval of the deal seemed alienly inclusive to Labour but too exclusive to Liberal Democrat grassroots. A joint meeting of Lib Dem MSPs and the Executive and Policy Committees gave a green light to the deal, but little effort was made to get the wider party on board, leading to resentment. This was changed for the 2003 elections, with much wider consultation taking place, involving local party and regional office bearers. There are lessons to be learned from this for future Westminster negotiations. While the 2010 Coalition Agreement was accepted by a Liberal Democrat Special Conference with little opposition, it was very much a take it or leave it affair. More widespread consultation prior to the agreement being finalised is needed: votes of the Parliamentary Party and the Federal Executive are not enough.

Achievements in the first term

In May 1999, Scottish Liberal Democrats produced a document outlining forty-eight pledges in the Partnership Agreement – 'one a month for four years'. Labour were, however, better at selling their wins and the Liberal Democrats were roundly criticised in the media and within the party for making too many compromises.

By the 2001 Westminster election the forty-eight pledges became 185 measures that had been either implemented or were on the way to being so. Jim Wallace wrote:

> You only have to compare the actions of the Liberal Democrat/Labour partnership government in Scotland to those of the majority Labour government in London to see the difference:
> – Tuition fees – gone in Scotland, still there in England
> – Free personal care for the elderly – coming soon in Scotland, no sign of action in London
> – A fair deal for teachers England's teachers are demanding a deal like those of their Scottish counterparts
> – Freedom of information – the UK government's proposals are a shadow of our Scottish plans.[5]

The first term saw some forty-eight pieces of legislation passed by the parliament – and there were some complaints that parliamentary committees were being overworked. Here are some of the highlights:

Free personal care

This is an example of Liberal Democrats exerting their influence within government to enact a radical reform. The Liberal Democrat manifesto committed us only to:

> Promote an early dialogue with all interested parties throughout the UK to establish a common

> way forward in achieving the recommendations contained in the Royal Commission on Long Term Care.[6]

That Royal Commission, chaired by Stewart Sutherland, had radically recommended that:

> The costs of care for those individuals who need it should be split between living costs, housing costs and personal care. Personal care should be available after an assessment, according to need and paid for from general taxation: the rest should be subject to a co-payment according to means.[7]

The Westminster government rejected the Commission's recommendations on affordability. Scottish Labour thought similarly. This did not stop Liberal Democrats, in particular Mike Rumbles and Margaret Smith, pushing the executive to implement free personal care. Labour's Henry McLeish, who became First Minister on Dewar's death, favoured the policy and the landmark legislation was passed in 2002.

Higher education
The outcome of the tuition fees dilemma, reached in January 2000, was a deal which guaranteed no front-end fees but introduced a graduate endowment of £2000, to help those from a poorer background attend university.[8]

This was not well received, presaging the rage eleven years later in England. Liberal Democrats took a hammering: MSPs were abused in the street and thirty pieces of 'silver' were delivered to their headquarters. The SNP minority government with Liberal Democrat support eventually abolished the endowment in 2008.

Jim Wallace's personal achievements
Jim Wallace became Minister for Justice and introduced seventeen pieces of legislation which had a significant impact on individuals and communities, earning him wide respect amongst the justice community. These include:

- Enabling civil marriages to take place outside a registry office.
- Significantly stronger Freedom of Information legislation than south of the border allowing a straightforward right of access to information, fewer grounds for exemption and quicker time frames.
- Radical land reform which gave walkers the right to roam and enabled community buy-outs of land put up for sale, such as on Gigha, where it rejuvenated the island.
- Abolition of personal cross examination by rape accused of victim in court f previous sexual history of victim being admissible evidence.
- Reforming criminal justice giving more power to victims and restricting corporal punishment of children.
- Simplifying arrangements regarding personal debt.

This contrasts with Nick Clegg's situation in the current Westminster coalition. His attempts at reforming the House of Lords and party funding were blocked by both Labour and the Conservatives through little fault of his own.

Nursery for three and four year olds
We now take for granted that our three and four year olds go to nursery for two and a half hours a day, giving them the best possible start. Liberal Democrats are now extending places for two year olds in England.

Housing and homelessness
A radical target of ending homelessness by 2012, modification of the right to buy, and more rights for social tenants went some way to dealing with the shortage of affordable housing, although it would be wrong to say that it has resolved the issues.

Foot and mouth
The measure of a government is tested when it faces a crisis. In 2001, foot and mouth disease spread into Scotland. In England, the consequences had been catastrophic. Prompt and efficient action ensured that the outbreak was contained. The executive was able to prove itself as a competent administration and the reputation of Ross Finnie as enhanced.

Section 28
The repeal of Section 28, or Section 2A as it is more correctly known in Scotland, was much easier than in England but was still traumatic. Liberal Democrats maintained pressure for the repeal, as Labour support wobbled, particularly from central-belt MSPs who received robust representations from the Catholic Church. The Keep the Clause campaign run by millionaire Stagecoach owner Brian Souter sent a postal ballot paper to every house and claimed massive opposition to the measure.

In 2003, Scottish Liberal Democrats – for the first time in living memory – went into a national election asking for 'four more years' and ran proudly on their record.

Four more years
In 2003, Scottish Liberal Democrats – for the first time in living memory – went into a national election asking for 'four more years' and ran proudly on their record. The election strengthened their hand: the seventeen Lib Dem seats were retained, whereas Labour lost six seats and the SNP lost eight seats. This paved the way for an extra fourteen Green, Socialist and Independent MSPs. They could have been a powerful force within the parliament had they worked together constructively. It was an opportunity lost for more diverse politics.

Labour approached the 2003 coalition negotiations in a spirit of simply continuing the government of the past four years. Liberal Democrats wanted a whole new deal and were prepared to be robust to get it. After press stories suggested that the Liberal Democrats had 'ripped up their manifesto', Jim Wallace put his foot down. He told Labour he would not negotiate until they stopped briefing. I wonder what would have happened if there had been a similar rebuke to William Hague's public comments about an AV referendum in 2010.

The big Liberal Democrat win, arguably the most major of the eight years, was the introduction of proportional representation by the Single Transferable Vote for local government. Prior to the 2007 election, Labour did not have to try in many areas under first past the post. In 2003, seventy-one Labour councillors were elected in Glasgow. Between them, the opposition parties mustered eight. Although Labour continues to have a majority there, they now have a significant opposition. In addition, many other fiefdoms have gone. The Electoral Reform Society, in its study of the first elections held under the new system said:

> Councils across Scotland are now much more representative of the views of their voters. No longer are there councils where parties have majorities that cannot be justified by electoral support; where parties with significant support have no, or few, seats; or where the largest parties in terms of seats are not those with most votes.[9]

Liberal Democrats also won on the health promotion agenda. While Labour's emphasis was on building more hospitals, Liberal Democrats wanted free eye and dental checks and won. Other financial priorities included historic investment in further education colleges by both Jim Wallace and Nicol Stephen, which the Nationalists have been paring back ever since. In contrast, Liberal Democrats in the UK coalition have made significant cuts in this area.

Justice

Despite Jim Wallace's move to Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, significant concessions were won from Labour on anti-social behaviour. Plans to jail parents of persistently offending children were watered down considerably. Labour had also wanted a paradoxical centralised community justice system. Liberal Democrats prevented the retention of DNA of anyone arrested and the introduction of an ID card to access to devolved services.

Process of government

The Partnership Agreement in 1999 explicitly set out how the government would work, particularly when it related to an issue not covered in the Partnership Agreement. This section on the Role of the Deputy First Minister was interesting:

> The parties agree that, subject to the approval of the Parliament, the Leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats should be nominated to hold the office of Deputy First Minister in the Partnership Executive.
>
> It is essential that the Deputy First Minister is kept fully informed across the range of Executive business so that he can engage in any issue where he considers that appropriate. The procedures to be established for handling business within the Executive will require officials to copy all relevant material to the offices of the leaders of both parties in the Executive. The Deputy First Minister will have appropriate official, political and specialist support to enable him to discharge his role effectively.

The 2003 equivalent[10] cleared up an omission – specifying that the First Minister should also be copied in on everything – and went into more detail about issues not covered by the Partnership Agreement, so that events such as the Iraq war did not destabilise the coalition.

Despite that agreement, there was, according to one former minister, a need for vigilance. If issues arose, Labour would instinctively revert to their policy to find a solution and had to be pulled back.

Labour ministers would go along to Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Party meetings. The minutes of the meeting of 29 January 2002 show that Labour Health Minister Malcolm Chisholm would be invited to the next meeting to discuss a dispute between care home owners and local councils. The minutes of 4 March 2003 indicate that Liberal Democrat MSP Robert Brown withdrew an amendment on the Homelessness Bill after Labour Minister Des McNulty had come to the meeting. Last year Brown, asked for this article if that type of interaction helped intra-coalition relations and maintained discipline, wrote:

> Being in Coalition gave you an inside track to Ministers who needed your support both in Committee and in the Chamber. There was therefore a lot of interchange on the detail of Bills. We lodged amendments, sometimes serious, sometimes probing, to get Ministers to give explanations, make concessions, say things on the Record, etc. The Party spokesman would make recommendations to the Group for discussion and usually a satisfactory resolution was obtained[11]

These efforts at intra-coalition harmony helped to ensure discipline. There were very few rebellions over the years and only once did a minister resign on a policy issue: Tavish Scott over fisheries policy.

These efforts at intra-coalition harmony helped to ensure discipline. There were very few rebellions over the years and only once did a minister resign on a policy issue.

Jim Wallace told *Holyrood* magazine in 2011 about the lengths the coalition partners could go to in order to find an acceptable compromise:

> Discussions between coalition partners can be very robust and that's important because you have to be able to do that and carry on the business of government and sometimes it can be very funny. I remember on my very last night as deputy FM when we had had a cabinet meeting earlier that day and the planning [of the] white paper had to be finalised and there was one paragraph that was very difficult, I think about third party right of appeal, and Jack [McConnell] and I resorted to a thesaurus to find a word that we thought could square the circle and would mean we both had a different word and yes, we saw the funny side at the time. I can think of many occasions when Jack and I could easily have reached agreement on some policy issue but we had to go through a negotiation because we had to be sure we could bring our respective parties along with us, so you had to rehearse any of their views or objections and given the nature of the Lib Dems, we had a very large number of consultations![12]

Jim Wallace as acting First Minister First Minister Donald Dewar's hospitalisation for heart surgery thrust Jim Wallace into the media spotlight as acting First Minister for three months. His performances at First Minister's Questions against the SNP's Alex Salmond saw him being depicted in a newspaper cartoon as a Roman gladiator with his foot on Salmond's chest. In *Neither Left nor Right? The Liberal Democrats and the Electorate*, Andrew Russell quotes one Liberal Democrat insider as saying:

> I think a lot of people in the Labour Party just could not see how the government of Scotland could continue with Wallace in charge, but in fact Jim has done a very good job and has got a very good press out of it and I think that has to some extent solidified

> the relationship between at least the Lib Dem and Labour members of the Executive.13

Jim had to act twice more as First Minister, on Dewar's sudden death in October 2000 and a year later when Henry McLeish resigned over expenses mistakes. Jim deserves great credit for managing transitions to new First Ministers. It is worth considering whether such an arrangement could possibly take place at Westminster. Would Nick Clegg be able to command a majority of the House of Commons in similar circumstances?

Wallace's and Dewar's personal friendship was vital both in establishing the executive and in its ongoing work. Henry McLeish and Jack McConnell were less well disposed towards Liberal Democrats, but Jim was able to establish effective working relationships with both of them. It was the Liberal Democrats who provided the stability, particularly in the early days of the coalition.

In 2007, the coalition ended and the SNP formed a minority government. Their well-funded 'It's Time' campaign compared well with Labour and the Liberal Democrats. The latter had been too busy governing to develop a narrative that would resonate with the electorate. The Liberal Democrats only lost one seat, but there were two major barriers to forming a further coalition with the SNP. Firstly, the parties did not have enough seats between them to make a majority. Secondly, Liberal Democrats had insisted that they would never agree to an independence referendum, which quickly proved a deal breaker.

Comparison with Westminster

The discipline in Scotland is not repeated at Westminster, with frequent rebellions by both Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs. It is accepted that some people will not support particular measures and ministers push ahead regardless. In Scotland there was much more emphasis on getting everyone on the same page before legislation was agreed, which had the effect of keeping the individual party groups together.

There is a predisposition to trade at Westminster, a 'Tories can have x if we can have y' approach, most notably on constituency boundaries and House of Lords reform. In Scotland, Jim Wallace would not agree anything until there was whole group sign off. Compromise was sought on every issue.

There is a predisposition to trade at Westminster, a 'Tories can have x if we can have y' approach, most notably on constituency boundaries and House of Lords reform. In Scotland, Jim Wallace would not agree anything until there was whole group sign off. Compromise was sought on every issue.

In Scotland, the Liberal Democrats governed at a time of economic prosperity. A generous budget and plenty Barnett Formula consequentials to spend as we wished meant that there was enough cash to satisfy both parties' policy agendas. Lib Dem ministers at UK level were not so lucky. Taking office after the banking collapse, under threat of a sovereign debt crisis, in the worst economic circumstances in eighty years, is significantly more challenging. Despite that, Liberal Democrats have ensured tax cuts for those on low and middle incomes, free school meals and extra money for disadvantaged children in school.

A major difference is that, because of PR, the Scottish people get the parliament they asked for. If that had happened at Westminster, there would be 140 Liberal Democrats – which would have strengthened the Lib Dem hand in negotiations. It is to Lib Dem ministers' credit that they have managed to fulfil so many key pledges from that position.

There is still much that Westminster MPs can learn from those who have been through it in Scotland. Jim Wallace's experience could be better used.

Conclusion

The Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition proved three major things. Firstly, that two parties could work together at national level. The two parties had a respectful and disciplined approach and showed that coalition could succeed in providing stable government. Secondly, the coalition succeeded in enacting substantial, radical and lasting reform. And, finally, it proved that different systems could be in place in different parts of the UK and the sky would not fall in. Free personal care, free university tuition, free eye and dental checks, robust freedom of information legislation are all examples of enduring reforms which take a different approach than in England and Wales.

When the Liberal Democrats were formed a quarter of a century ago, I cannot imagine that many people predicted that eleven out of our first twenty-five years would be spent in government at a national level. There are lessons from the first eight years in Scotland which might yet help restore the fortunes of the party at UK level.

Caron Lindsay joined the SDP on her sixteenth birthday in 1983. Since then she has held various offices at local and national level. She is currently Treasurer of the Scottish Liberal Democrats and a member of the Federal Executive. She is also co-editor of Liberal Democrat Voice.

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THE WELSH LIBERAL DEMOCRAT C

The Cook-Maclennan Agreement reached between Labour and the Liberal Democrats before the 1997 election included a commitment to establish directly elected parliaments in Wales and Scotland. After a closely-fight referendum campaign in 1997, the Welsh Assembly came into being in 1999. Unlike in Scotland, the Labour Party in Wales was hostile to a coalition, and initially tried to govern alone – only to enter coalition with the Welsh Liberal Democrats from 2000 to 2003. **Russell Deacon** tells the story, and reflects on the experience of working with the Labour Party.

TO LABOUR

OALITION EXPERIENCE 2000–2003

Prior to the Welsh Lab–Lib coalition in 2001, the Welsh Liberal Democrats – like the Liberal Democrats across the UK – had little experience of government. Welsh Lords Geraint Howells and Emlyn Hooson had been closely involved with the 1970s Westminster Lib–Lab pact but that had ended over two decades before and both politicians were now of advancing years in the Lords and quite distant from the day-to-day politics of Wales.

Of the six newly elected Liberal Democrat Assembly Members (AMs), none had parliamentary experience, although five had local council experience[1] (Kirsty Williams being the exception with no previous elected experience outside of the party). Michael German had the most experience, being a former deputy leader of Cardiff City Council in a Lab–Lib coalition in the 1980s.

On 27 May 1999 Queen Elizabeth II officially opened the Welsh Assembly. In the run up to the Assembly elections, the Welsh Liberal Democrats had talked publicly about gaining ten seats out of sixty; privately they believed would get eight; they ended up with six. The electorate did not, in fact, give a majority to any one party, let alone the Welsh Liberal Democrats,[2] leaving the Assembly in a position of no overall control. The numbers were twenty-eight Labour AMs, seventeen Plaid Cymru AMs, nine Conservative AMs and six Welsh Liberal Democrat AMs – with Labour just three AMs short of a majority. To an astute observer of British politics, it would have seemed obvious that a coalition would therefore be the inevitable result. This was what had happened in the Scottish Parliament, in most local councils and also at Westminster in the past and would happen again in the future. It was expected to be the case in 1999 by both national party leaders, Tony Blair and Paddy Ashdown.[3]

Left: the Welsh Assembly in session

The reality in Wales was that Labour did not want a coalition, even though it did not have a majority of Assembly seats. The concept of a coalition government was quite alien to its nature because, unlike in Scotland, the Labour Party had held the majority of Welsh parliamentary seats since 1922. In the 1997 general election they had secured 85 per cent of the Welsh representation; the Welsh Liberal Democrats, in contrast, had secured a mere 5 per cent. Although Labour had only gained 47 per cent of the seats at the 1999 Welsh Assembly elections, this sense of dominating Welsh politics remained strong within the Labour Party. As proof of this, Labour's First Secretary at the Assembly, Alun Michael, had chosen his Assembly Cabinet as soon as the election results were known. So despite Ashdown's anger over what he saw as Blair's squandering of the chance to 'play out the project on another stage',[4] the Welsh Assembly Executive did not contain any Liberal Democrats. Thus, for the time being, the Welsh Liberal Democrats were able to settle into opposition without the rigours of ministerial office and government responsibility.

The road to forming a Lab–Lib coalition

For reasons of both geography and population, the Welsh political world is much smaller than that of England. Most people, however, have no idea quite how small the Welsh political world can be on occasions. This is an important point when it comes to understanding Welsh elections and coalitions. Prior to the Assembly elections both Michael German and Jenny Randerson were linked closely to the Cardiff Central constituency, as both had gained their political experience within that constituency as Cardiff City councillors. They had both been group leaders on the city council and both had worked closely with future Labour members of the Assembly Cabinet whilst on the council (Rhodri Morgan, Alun Michael and Sue Essex). German, Randerson and Peter Black had also worked closely with Andrew Davies (the Assembly's Labour Business Manager) during the 'Yes for Wales' referendum campaign. As a result, the senior Liberal Democrat AMs had extensive experience of working not simply with Labour but also with the very individuals who were now sitting in the Welsh Assembly Cabinet.

After a short while, the Welsh Liberal Democrats settled down in the Assembly and began to assert themselves within the Welsh party, moving its centre of gravity away from the mid-Wales Liberal parliamentary dominance of the previous half a century, towards other parts of Wales. This power shift did not take place without some resistance from the mid-Wales MPs, and communication between the Assembly Members and the Welsh Lib Dem MPs and Lords was, for a while, quite strained with neither side consulting the other about their plans or strategies.[5] Whilst these internal squabbles were taking place, upon the horizon arose the increasingly important issue known simply as 'Objective 1', which would come to dominate Welsh politics and lead to an eventual coalition.

The background to 'Objective 1'

In 1999 the West Wales and the Valleys region qualified for Objective 1 European Funding as its GDP was less that 75 per cent of the EU average. Some £1.2 billion was made available to be drawn from EU structural funds, however around a further £860 million needed to be contributed from British public finances in order to secure this funding. The consequence was that the First Minister Alun Michael was unable to guarantee that Wales would get this funding because the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, would not commit the New Labour government to any new spending.[6]

The process of going into coalition

The Welsh Liberal Democrats had set out the mechanisms for going into coalition at their party's autumn AGM in 1998 in Builth Wells, Powys.[7] The mechanism was then referred to after that as the 'Builth Motion'. This required any possible future cooperation with other parties to be recognised as a formal partnership or coalition.

Prior to the Assembly elections, there had been two meetings between Welsh Labour leader Alun Michael and Michael German to discuss 'what if?' scenarios. A Labour majority was assumed at this point, but Alun Michael had declared that, in the event of 'no overall control', he would bring everyone on board equally. After the Assembly election, Michael was keen to secure Welsh Liberal Democrat support in the event of a vote of no confidence in him. He did not, however, wish to concede a formal coalition, with real influence for the Liberal Democrats within the Assembly government; and the Lib Dems had little enthusiasm for a partnership on lesser grounds. Alun Michael himself was consequently seen as a major obstacle to the formation of a Lib–Lab coalition and to the future of the Assembly itself, not only by Liberal Democrats but also by many of his own Labour Assembly Members.

It was here that German was able to convince conference representatives that the Liberal Democrats had got such a good deal in the coalition arrangements, getting some 114 of their policies implemented, that when the conference day arrived, members felt unable to resist the coalition and voted for it overwhelmingly.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats, like the other opposition parties, were not prepared to accept Alun Michael's assertion that they could trust the Chancellor to deliver the extra funding required in the Comprehensive Spending Review in the summer of 2000. Thus, when an opportunity came for a vote of no confidence in Alun Michael, the party joined the other opposition parties in supporting this vote. Michael was able to resign shortly before the vote was carried out against him, therefore avoiding having to do so afterwards. Prior to this event he had already lost the confidence of his own AMs who declined to renominate him if he resigned, which meant that his old political rival Rhodri Morgan now became the new First Minister and the coalition arrangements were back on the table. The Welsh Assembly Business Manager and Swansea West AM, Andrew Davies, had already privately met Michael German on behalf of the majority of Labour AMs to seek an assurance from him that the Liberal Democrats would not back Alun Michael in a coalition arrangement. This Davies–German meeting helped ensure that the Welsh Liberal Democrats would no longer back Michael, whatever compromises he offered.[8]

With the removal of Michael secured, the Welsh Liberal Democrat leadership expected things to proceed more quickly, but it would be a while before Morgan pushed for a coalition. Having initially rejected Morgan as a Welsh Labour Party leader, Tony Blair was now keen to see Morgan remain in power. In order to stabilise the situation, the half a billion pounds of 'matched funding' needed for Objective 1 were now made available. The Welsh Liberal Democrats had felt they achieved their first victory. They then joined the Labour Party in further secret talks and shortly afterwards produced a draft partnership agreement. It was not until a week before the announcement of this Partnership Agreement that German and Morgan eventually sat in the same room to thrash out the finer points of the deal. The whole process had been so secretive that the two parties felt that they could have walked away at any stage without recriminations.[9] Reviewing the coalitions in Wales and Scotland in 2004, the academic Ben Seyd felt that the Welsh coalition arrangement had worked out better for both Labour and Liberal Democrats in Wales because it had been worked out over a much longer period than in Scotland.[10] Part of the result of this was that the coalition agreement between the parties in Wales was more than twice the length of that in Scotland despite the fact that Wales had no primary law making powers at this time.

Before the Welsh Liberal Democrats could officially go into coalition they still needed to have a special conference and vote to endorse the coalition. This was duly done in Builth Wells on 14 October 2000. It was here that German was able to convince conference representatives that the Liberal Democrats had got such a good deal in the coalition arrangements, getting some 114 of their policies implemented,[11] that when the conference day arrived, members felt unable to resist the coalition and voted for it overwhelmingly. By comparing the Welsh Liberal Democrat Assembly manifesto with the Partnership Agreement, it is easy to see why the special Liberal Democrat conference so comprehensively endorsed the coalition deal.[12] So much of the Lib Dem manifesto had been incorporated that it was, arguably, a Welsh Liberal Democrat programme of government for the next three years rather than a Labour one. The lack of any substantial Labour policies, due in part to interference in the Welsh manifesto from London, allowed Welsh Labour AMs to give the first Welsh government more of the taste of

Welsh distinctiveness they had desired when they had campaigned for the Welsh Assembly in the referendum two years before. This was reflected in the title of the partnership document signed by both leaders: *Putting Wales First: A Partnership for the People of Wales*.

In order to iron out areas of policy where the two parties were not in agreement, a number of commissions were established. These were:

The Rees Commission on student fees. The Welsh Liberal Democrats were against fees, Welsh Labour for them. Unable to ditch tuition fees because the Assembly lacked primary powers, another way had to be found around this issue.[13] The result was the introduction of funding to enable Welsh students to avoid paying tuition fees.[14]

The Sunderland Commission on local government,
which reported back in July 2002 and recommended STV for Welsh council elections. The report was quietly dropped after Labour became the sole party of government at the Welsh Assembly, in May 2003.

The Richard Commission,
which examined the future role and function of the Welsh Assembly. The Welsh Liberal Democrats wished to see it recommend a primary law-making and tax-raising legislature. When the Commission reported back in April 2004, it recommended that by the year 2011 or sooner if possible, the Assembly:[15]

1 should have its delegated powers enhanced;
2 should be given primary law-making powers;
3 should have its membership increased from sixty to eighty and all members should be elected by STV;
4 should be reconstituted with a separate legislature and executive.

The Welsh Labour Party later rejected the third point totally, accepted the fourth, ignored the first and allowed the second only after a further referendum in 2011. This was a major disappointment for the pro-devolution Welsh Liberal Democrats. In hindsight it was also a tactical mistake not to ensure that the Commission's recommendations were accepted in full before then end of the coalition in May 2003. Nevertheless we should note that there has been some success in persuading the government in Westminster to continue to evolve Welsh devolution through primary law-making and tax-raising powers. The increase in the number of Welsh Assembly Members and the change in the voting system to STV has not been pursued at Westminster. These would benefit the Welsh Liberal Democrats most but have never seemed to appear on the current Westminster coalition's agenda.

The coalition government's success and failure

Out of direct power for six decades, the Welsh Liberals had made virtually no impact on government policy in Wales until they were part of the coalition government. Getting their 1999 Assembly manifesto implemented virtually in full therefore remains the Welsh Liberal Democrats' greatest post-war policy triumph and their only substantial political legacy as a state party. Their role in the 2010 Westminster coalition was, in contrast, limited to just one junior minister at the Wales Office, Baroness Randerson, whose appointment was only made in 2013 some three years after the UK coalition government was formed.

The Welsh coalition had a number of benefits for the Welsh Liberal Democrats, the most important of which was the breaking of the myth that they would never be in a position of power and therefore could promise any policy because they would never have to implement it. The party was able to boost its credibility within Welsh civil and political society, as their previous minor role now became a central one. However, as we noted earlier, it was actual policy implementation that the Welsh Liberal Democrats felt to be their central achievement. Martin Shipton, the *Western Mail's* chief political reporter, noted at the time some of what the Welsh Liberal Democrats felt to be the policy successes of coalition:

> Mr German … is adamant that the six-strong Lib Dem group can legitimately claim credit for the majority of the Assembly Government's most trumpeted successes. Reintroducing student grants, making them available for students in further as well as higher education, freezing prescription charges and free prescriptions for the under-25s, free eye tests, class sizes under 26, widening the entitlement to eye tests, free access to national museums, class sizes coming down below 30 for all primary pupils: all of these are claimed by Mr German as specifically Liberal Democrat achievements. To those in the Labour Party who accuse him of exaggerating his party's influence, Mr German asserts that none of the changes listed above appeared in Labour's manifesto.[16]

A comparative study of the Scottish and Welsh coalitions of this period … concluded that 'the proportion of purely LD initiatives (… not mentioned in the Labour manifesto) in the Partnership Agreement, was even greater than Scotland.

Professor Martin Laffin also undertook a comparative study of the Scottish and Welsh coalitions of this period and concluded that the proportion of purely LD initiatives (… not mentioned in the Labour manifesto) in the Partnership Agreement, was even greater than Scotland.[17] Adding to Shipton's earlier list Laffin noted there were a number of other significant policy achievements on the part of the coalition, which were:[18]

- a commitment to an inquiry into student hardship and funding;
- free dental checks for over 55s and under-25s;
- free school milk for infants;
- three weeks' free personal care for the elderly;
- an experimental Welsh Baccalaureate;
- a new farming support package.

Importantly, these policies were in the Welsh Liberal Democrats' manifesto but none of these were in Labour's Welsh manifesto. In order to help ensure that the policies were delivered the Welsh Liberal Democrats had regular Cabinet awaydays to review policy implementation.[19] They were also aware that they had to make sure that the electorate knew who was responsible for each policy in the coalition government. Therefore before the First Minister's second Annual Report in October 2002, Mike German, much to Labour's annoyance, was able to claim that six of the eight leading achievements of the Assembly government that year had come directly from the Liberal Democrat manifesto.[20] As none of the policies listed were in the Labour manifesto,

it is unlikely that they would have been achieved by Labour alone within the Assembly. The issue of no tuition fees, later adopted as a central plank of Welsh Labour's 'clear red water' with Westminster, would certainly not have been dealt with as it was, as both the Welsh and UK Labour Parties had accepted this as policy. Labour's short manifesto for this first Assembly had consisted mainly of commitments to invest more in public services and develop new strategies on everything from tourism to the economy, but included no real tangible steps towards achieving this beyond merging some of the public bodies into bigger ones.[21]

Perhaps the biggest internal disappointment during the Welsh Lib–Lab coalition of 2000–2003 concerned the personal problems suffered by the party's leader Michael German. In January 2001 the European anti-fraud organisation began investigating financial problems within the European Unit of the Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC). Michael German had been head of the unit for most of the 1990s. The WJEC was run and operated by the Welsh local authorities, the majority of which were Labour-controlled and bitterly opposed to the Lib–Lab coalition. The Labour Party membership had not been consulted over the coalition and most, as we noted earlier, saw this as a case of the 'Liberal tail wagging the Labour dog'. Whether or not the WJEC was politically motivated in its investigations, by May 2001 they had called in the police to examine Michael German's expenses whilst he had worked there. The police investigation eventually concluded that there was 'insufficient evidence to proceed further'.[22] The time taken to reach this decision, however, was enough to keep German out of the Cabinet between July 2001 and June 2002.

In his place Jenny Randerson became Deputy First Minister – and the first female Liberal ever to hold a government post in the UK. In the process this made her the most powerful female Liberal Democrat at a government level, arguably until this day. A decade later she was also to become the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Wales in the Westminster coalition government, making her the only post-war Welsh Liberal to serve in two different coalition governments. At the time, however, Randerson was left with the burdens of office. This left her open to criticism – the *Western Mail's* chief political correspondent referring to her as 'a harassed councillor out of depth'.[23] This comment aside, the situation did place a lot of pressure on just one person to fulfil the Welsh party's coalition ambitions.

Another major negative about the coalition was the naivety of Liberal Democrats over the coalition's various commission reports. The Lib Dems saw these reports as instruments for delivering sweeping changes; whereas Labour saw them merely as reviews, which they could and would choose to ignore.[24] Academics reflecting on the Liberal Democrats in coalition in Wales, such as Alan Trench, would later also see this as the party's major failing.[25]

The final major negative was that they agreed to a number of policies, such as the reorganisation of Local Health Boards, which they had not been fully committed to but delivered as part of the coalition agreement. When these policies were later seen as mistakes, and the party was in opposition once more, the Lib Dems were constrained from criticising them because they had been part of the government that had implemented them.

Reflections on working with the Labour Party

The concept of a coalition at a national level was new to both Labour and the Welsh Liberal Democrats. Whilst the Welsh Liberal Democrats had realised for a long while that they would never form a majority government in their own right, the same was not true of the Labour Party in Wales. However their experience of previously working together in local government did help both Labour and Liberal Democrat AMs bond more quickly. Having been the majority Welsh party at Westminster since 1922, however, Labour did not expect to share power and there was widespread resentment in the grassroots and amongst many Labour AMs and MPs at having the 'Liberal tale wag the Labour dog'.[26] In turn the Welsh Liberal Democrats later reflected sourly on the failure to change the electoral system for the Welsh Assembly and local government to STV and on Labour's subsequent tinkering with the AMS system to stop candidates standing both in constituencies and on the regional list. This latter was something that they were only able to reverse through the Westminster coalition government almost a decade later.

Having been the majority Welsh party at Westminster since 1922, however, Labour did not expect to share power and there was widespread resentment in the grassroots and amongst many Labour AMs and MPs at having the 'Liberal tale wag the Labour dog'.

While it is true that there were not the widespread anonymous press briefings about splits within the coalition that later occurred when Labour went in coalition with Plaid Cymru, neither side looked back on the experience with undiluted pleasure. In fact, such was the reluctance of the two parties to engage again that when the opportunity arose for another coalition, after the 2007 Welsh Assembly election, the Welsh Liberal Democrats rejected a second coalition with Labour in favour of a 'rainbow' coalition with the Conservatives and Plaid Cymru. In turn, Labour preferred to go directly into coalition with Plaid Cymru and leave the Liberal Democrats on the opposition benches.

Between 2000 and 2003 the ideological differences between the parties helped ensure that both parties could remain distinct to the electorate. The Welsh Labour Party always regarded itself as socialist, and the Welsh Liberal Democrats, in contrast, saw themselves as centrists. With decades of hostility in the council chambers of south and north Wales added into the mix, the combination helped ensure that the two parties remained quite distinct. The fact that the Welsh coalition government lasted for less than one four-year term also helped ensure that the two parties kept their distinctiveness.

Unlike the Westminster elections, the date of the Welsh Assembly elections for 2003 was known four years in advance. The problem for the Welsh party was that they did not know whether they would be punished or rewarded for being in coalition with the Labour Party. In the run up to the Iraq War, however, the Welsh election was significantly overshadowed by international rather than domestic issues. The coalition in Wales – and the role of the Lib Dems – therefore made little

impact on the electorate one way or another, and the party stayed stuck on six Assembly Members, and would remain so until 2011. This was partially due to the fact that Wales has a very weak national media, which meant that many in the electorate were unaware of the very fact that there was a coalition government in Wales. For them the focus was still on Westminster, which was the domain of Tony Blair's New Labour government. Then – as now – the Welsh Assembly elections played second fiddle to Westminster, with the main Welsh parties being punished or rewarded by what happened there rather than in Cardiff Bay. In 2003, after the election dust had settled Labour had exactly half of the seats: thirty. Despite Rhodri Morgan indicating before the election that he needed a majority of two AMs to govern, he did not call the Welsh Liberal Democrats back into a coalition. Just as his predecessor Alun Michael had done and his successor Carwyn Jones would later do, he preferred to govern without the Liberal Democrats and as a minority executive.

After the coalition had ended the Welsh Liberal Democrat AMs at its heart were to have varied fortunes. Mike Bates AM left the Assembly in 2011; Eleanor Burnham lost her seat in the same election, having failed to re-secure her position at the top of the North Wales regional list. Peter Black AM remained in the Welsh Assembly and Kirsty Williams became the new Welsh leader in 2008. German and Randerson were both to have further careers at Westminster in the Lords, each having failed to get into the House of Commons when they had contested Cardiff Central unsuccessfully against Labour between 1983 and 1997. Neither played a central role in the Westminster coalition despite both having gained valuable ministerial experience, although Randerson would later be called on to play a junior ministerial role. For some reason the Welsh experience of coalition was not seen by the Federal leadership as being of much value in a Westminster coalition.

The Welsh experience of a Lab–Lib coalition may be entirely different from what is now occurring at the national Westminster level. There were certainly no damaging internal rows between the parties. There are, however, a few final observations that may be worth recording.

Whilst the Labour members of the Welsh government worked well with the Welsh Liberal Democrats, outside the Assembly hostilities remained constant. There was no coming together of the parties' grassroots – quite the opposite. In the 2004 Welsh council elections the Welsh Liberal Democrats made sweeping gains against Labour and took control of a number of councils including the Welsh capital, Cardiff. There was therefore no desire to remind voters that the two had been in power together only the year before.

Some decisions made in the coalition government had not been truly supported by the Welsh Liberal Democrats and were to prove to be costly disasters such as the reorganisation of the health authorities. In the 2003–7 Welsh Assembly the party could not criticise these failures but the other opposition parties were able to do so.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats were able to get vote-winning policies through which appealed to both the public and its own membership on areas such as free entry into museums and on tuition fees. They were not, however, any good at putting into effect policies that would have benefitted them directly in the long term such as STV for Welsh local government or the Welsh Assembly elections or increasing the number of Assembly members. Whereas the policy successes were soon forgotten by the electorate, the change in the electoral system and the increase in elected members would have done much more to increase their fortunes in the coming years by abolishing the bias of the first past the post electoral system.

Whereas the Welsh Liberal Democrats had always seen themselves as the potential power brokers in any Welsh Assembly government, the reality did not match the expectations. Both Welsh Labour and Welsh Liberal Democrats were so alienated by the experience that they shied away from it when the opportunity arose again in 2007 and 2011. In the event, the Welsh Liberal Democrats dithered and Labour preferred to go with their old political enemies Plaid Cymru rather than once more with the Welsh Liberal Democrats. Labour still nursed a sense of the tail wagging the dog, while the Welsh Liberal Democrats wished to avoid being aligned once more with what they regarded as a reactionary party that had betrayed the promises of electoral reform.

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A Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting

GREAT LIBERAL THINKERS: LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

Baroness Liz Barker and MPs Alan Beith, David Laws and John Pugh draw lessons from past Liberal thinkers for the future direction of the Liberal Democrats. Chair: Malcolm Bruce MP; Twitter: #LDHGFringe. Marks the launch of a new History Group booklet on 'Liberal Thinkers', containing concise summaries of the lives and thoughts of the greatest Liberal thinkers, from John Milton to John Rawls, including John Stuart Mill, Tom Paine, L. T. Hobhouse and many more. See next issue for details

Speakers: **Baroness Liz Barker, Alan Beith MP and John Pugh MP.** Chair: **Malcolm Bruce MP.**

7.45pm, Sunday 5 October
Picasso 2 Room, Campanile Hotel, 10 Tunnel Street, Glasgow G3 8HL
(just outside the conference centre, and outside the secure area – no conference passes necessary)

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