

**Philip Cowley
and Mark Stuart
analyse Liberal
Democrat voting
in the House of
Commons, 1992–
2003**



FROM LABOUR LOVE-IN TO BONA FIDE PARTY OF OPPOSITION

Charles Kennedy's instruction to his frontbenchers, in September 2003, that they could 'take the gloves off' when dealing with Labour would not have surprised anyone with even a passing knowledge of the way the Lib Dems have been behaving in the House of Commons. For this is merely the latest manifestation of the party's changing behaviour over the past decade; a change which has seen the Lib Dems shift from being almost indistinguishable from Labour in their behaviour to their becoming a *bona fide* party of Opposition.

For much of the last Parliament one of the standard complaints about the Lib Dems – from the Conservatives, the media, and even some Liberal Democrats – was that the party had become a mere adjunct of Labour, ever willing to do the Government's bidding. But the Lib Dems are now more likely to vote with the Conservatives than they ever voted with Labour during the 1997 Parliament. If the complaint used to be that the Lib Dems were Labour clones, then those days are over.

Our most recent research shows that during the last full Parliamentary session (2002–03), the party's MPs voted against

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Labour in 251 of the 352 Commons whipped votes in which they participated. In other words, they opposed the Government in 75 per cent of the votes. They voted with the Government in just 83 votes (25 per cent). This is evidence of a remarkable transformation in their behaviour. By this stage of the last Parliament the Lib Dems had voted with Labour in around half of all votes (48 per cent). They may have been sitting on the Opposition benches but they were, at that time, just as likely to be voting with the Government. Now, however, for every one vote cast with Labour, three are cast against.

At the same time, the party's tendency to vote with the Conservatives has been growing steadily year on year: from 27 per cent in the first session of the 1997 Parliament, to 40 per cent in the second session, 44 per cent in the third, 47 per cent in the fourth, then reaching 54 per cent in the first session of this Parliament, and up to 66 per cent currently. Liberal Democrat MPs are now more than twice as likely to vote with the Conservatives than at the beginning of the 1997 Parliament.

Track the Lib Dems' voting back into the 1992 Parliament – when John Major was in No. 10 – and the change in behaviour

becomes even more marked. Immediately after Paddy Ashdown's abandonment of equidistance, the Lib Dems were (as the figure shows) practically indistinguishable from Labour in their voting. In some years during the early 1990s, they voted with the Conservatives in just one vote in every ten. Following the 1997 election, they became slightly less favourable towards Labour. And since 2001 they have been – for the first time in a decade – regularly more likely to side with the Conservatives than with Labour.

Lib Dems sometimes complain that this is an unfair way of looking at their behaviour. Since the practices and procedures of the Commons make it difficult for them to map out an independent policy position of their own, in most votes they are forced into making a binary choice between Labour and the Conservatives. And just because in one instance they might vote with the Conservatives against the Government, that does not necessarily mean that they agree with the Conservatives. It might be just that on that individual vote they disagree with the Conservatives less than they do with Labour. Or they might be opposing the Government along with the Conservatives – but for very different reasons.

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Nevertheless, given that the party does have to make that binary choice, over a mass of votes we can still draw meaningful inferences from their behaviour. We may prefer to travel by luxury jet, but life's a bitch, and so we're forced to use trains or buses. And if in one year we travelled by train 80 per cent of the time and by bus 20 per cent of the time, but in another year we travelled by bus 70 per cent of the time and by train just 30 per cent of the time, no one would doubt that there had been a change in our behaviour. And that's exactly the magnitude of the change to have come over the Lib Dems in recent years.

The overall voting figures do mask some differences between the different types of votes. The Lib Dems are more supportive of the Government over the principle of any legislation than over its details – although, even here, there has been a noticeable drop in their levels of support. The Lib Dems now back just 40 per cent of Government legislation in principle, as shown by voting with the Government at a bill's second or third reading.

This last session, for example, saw the Lib Dems side with the Government as regards the principle of legislation introducing

regional assemblies, reforming the police service in Northern Ireland, on aspects of local government reform and over the Communications Bill. But the list of issues they opposed is longer. The party voted with the Tories against the Government over measures to bail out the nuclear power industry, over industrial development assistance, over community care legislation, the fire services dispute, the Licensing Bill, the Consolidated Fund Bill and the Finance Bill. And where they really get stuck in is over the fine print: the Lib Dems vote against Labour in four out of every five votes on the detail of Government legislation. But even on those issues where the party backed Labour at second or third reading, they did not offer wholehearted support to the Government. Take Northern Ireland, for example: despite still enthusiastically backing the peace process, the Lib Dems are now more willing than they once were to criticise the detail of Government legislation, including abstaining on the Northern Ireland (Elections and Period of Suspension) Bill and on the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill.

Crucially (as the figure makes clear), although some of this change in behaviour can be

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attributed to Labour entering government, there has still been a clear decline in the party's relationship with Labour since then. And this cooling in relations began *before* Charles Kennedy became the party's leader; it did not result from his becoming leader. Rather, his election as leader – and the changed electoral strategy that has resulted – was as much evidence of the party's changed stance as its cause. And the same goes for his more recent announcements.

The gloves may only now be coming off officially, but the Lib Dems have been jabbing away fiercely at Labour for years. The Lib Dems have now become a *bona fide* party of Opposition. It is all a long way from those late-night faxes with which Paddy Ashdown lovingly used to bombard Tony Blair.

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