

WRITING ABC

Charles Kennedy, former leader of the Liberal Democrats, died suddenly on 1 June 2015. The shocking news was met with an outpouring of grief and sadness that is seldom accorded to politicians. Lord Paddy Ashdown, his predecessor as Liberal Democrat leader, tweeted: 'Charles Kennedy. In a political age not overburdened with gaiety and good sense, he brought us wit, charm, judgment, principle and decency.' **Neil Stockley** sums up Charles Kennedy's career in the SDP and Liberal Democrats through the many tributes and obituaries that appeared in the days following his death.



OUT CHARLES

IN AN AFFECTIONATE piece, Baroness Shirley Williams, a former colleague from the SDP and the Liberal Democrats, called him a 'staggering human being'.¹ *The Independent* lamented the loss of 'a gifted, compassionate politician'.² *The Scotsman* remembered 'a man of high principles blessed with a keen sense of humanity and honour, who served his constituents with dedication'.³ 'With Charles Kennedy's death, a light has gone out in Scottish and British politics,' wrote Alan Cochrane in *The Telegraph*.⁴ *The New Statesman* opined 'that the passing of the former Liberal Democrat leader ... has been greeted with such sadness is a reflection of his qualities: decency, principle, kindness and wit'.⁵

On 10 June, the House of Commons paid tribute to Charles Kennedy. The outgoing leader of the Liberal Democrats, Nick Clegg, remembered 'a much-loved politician' and paid a heartfelt tribute to 'his wit, his warmth, his modesty' and 'honesty, wisdom and humility'.⁶ The former party president, Tim Farron, fought back tears as he mourned 'a very, very special man' and declared, 'I loved him to bits'.⁷

Political opponents were sincere and generous in their praise. The former Conservative Chancellor, Kenneth Clarke, spoke respectfully of a 'remarkably decent, honest, very highly principled' parliamentarian.⁸ The Labour MP Tom Watson hailed Charles as 'a very great man [who] stood up for what he believed in [and] led a party of the centre-left with dignity and compassion'.⁹

Perhaps the most touching tributes came from friends and family.

Alastair Campbell, Downing Street Director of Communications under Tony Blair, wrote a moving paean to a 'lovely man and a talented politician' who 'spoke fluent human'.¹⁰ Writing in *The Telegraph*, his long-time friend and former brother-in-law, James Gurling, recounted with affection Charles's laid-back political style, his love of music and writing, his easy manner and sense of humour, his profound understanding of the Liberal Democrats, his political courage and his deep personal commitment to the causes of Scottish unionism and Europe.¹¹

Charles deserved the accolades, both for his personal qualities and his significant achievements as a politician. Nearly all of the tributes and obituaries noted that under his leadership, the Liberal Democrats achieved their greatest electoral success: 53 seats in 2001 and 62 in 2005. Not since the 1920s had there had there been such large Liberal contingents at Westminster. Moreover, on his watch, the Liberal Democrats started to win seats from Labour; unlike the old Liberal Party, they did not go backwards with a Labour government in power.

The great communicator

There was widespread agreement that the key to Charles's successes was his tremendous gifts as a communicator. The first theme of the obituaries and commentaries was his remarkable ability to project himself through the media, especially television, to connect with all kinds of people.

The Guardian believed that:

For much of his career, from the late 1980s until the middle of the 2000s, his was among the best and most authentic voices of the revived liberal tradition.¹²

The paper's obituary recounted how:

Kennedy, red-haired and round-faced, a cheery and approachable figure, with a soft Highlands accent, will generally be remembered less for his political achievements than for the persona he exhibited in numerous television appearances, which stretched well beyond political programmes. Some envious colleagues marvelled at his easy charm and wry sense of humour, which chimed well with the public increasingly wary of dour, cautious and manipulative soundbite, party-line politicians, though it also earned him the sobriquet 'chatshow Charlie'.

To the public, he scarcely seemed like a politician at all. 'I make no apologies,' he told an interviewer, 'for the fact that I am a paid-up member of the human race.'¹³

The Guardian columnist Martin Kettle described him as:

... one of the very few politicians of the modern era to whom ordinary non-political people instinctively related. People liked him and were right to do so ...

... At his best, Kennedy had the ability to rise above the crowd and speak for his times in easily expressed and easily

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understood language. His ability to cut through the evasions and clichés of modern politics was a quality so many others struggle to emulate, often without success. He also had a great and natural sense of humour, unusual in a very private man such as he. It made him one of the few politicians who could master every form of television interview or appearance without looking awkward.¹⁴

‘On a good day,’ Nick Clegg lamented in a media interview shortly after Charles’s death was announced, ‘he had more political talent in his little finger than the rest of us put together.’¹⁵

Matthew d’Ancona, writing in the *Evening Standard*, explained why Charles Kennedy’s use of humour and his willingness to step outside the more conventional formats was such an important asset to the Liberal Democrats, a third party struggling constantly for public attention:

Though his ‘chatshow Charlie’ persona – most vividly apparent on *Have I Got News for You* – was interpreted by some as evidence of unseemly frivolity, it was no such thing. Kennedy grasped instinctively that communication between the political class and those they represented was breaking down, and that humour and humanity were essential

antidotes to spin and control freakery ... What was initially dismissed as frippery when pioneered by Kennedy is now fawned upon by ‘brand managers’ as ‘authenticity’.¹⁶

Steely courage

Second, there was a broad consensus that Charles combined his skills as a media performer with astute political judgement and what Nick Clegg called ‘a steely courage’¹⁷ when he took the principled decision to oppose Britain’s participation in the second Iraq war. *The Times* contended that:

It was arguably Kennedy’s finest hour. He was the first mainstream party leader to oppose British military action since Hugh Gaitskell resisted the Suez campaign in 1956. He spoke eloquently and resolutely against Blair’s plans in the Commons. He addressed a ‘Stop the War’ rally of a million people in London’s Hyde Park. He complained that Britain was ‘being bulldozed into a war not of our choosing and not – on the basis of the evidence so far – vital to national interests’.

It was a stance that won the Lib Dems many new supporters and one that was seen by them to be vindicated by subsequent events. It also proved to be the high-water mark of Kennedy’s political career.¹⁸

Yet *The Times*, like *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian*, glossed over the tremendous courage that Charles displayed in opposing the Iraq war. As Vince Cable recalled:

He was bombarded with advice from outside and inside the party to support the Blair government; it was said, in particular, that a party leader would never be forgiven by the public for criticising a military intervention in which British service personnel were being killed in action.

But he was unpersuaded and constantly said: ‘the case has not been made’. He went against the conventional wisdom and opposed the war. Those of us present will never forget the debate in parliament when he was denounced – mainly from the Conservative side – for treachery and treason, among the more printable accusations. He showed political courage and good judgement in sticking to a position that was ultimately vindicated.¹⁹

The Economist captured more faithfully than most papers the temper of the times, and the qualities that Kennedy displayed.

He was perspicacious too, and at times bloody tough. His opposition to the 2003 Iraq war, presented in a packed and hostile House of Commons, against catcalling from both Labour and Tory MPs, exhibited all these qualities. His critics called him an opportunist, because the threatened war was, unusually in belligerent Britain, unpopular. Yet, in their hearts, they knew that his opposition to the war was based on principle; it also turns out to have been right.²⁰

There was considerable support within the Liberal Democrats for the position that Charles took. The September 2002 Liberal Democrat conference had voted to support any military intervention only as a last resort and under a clear UN mandate, and only after a debate and vote in Parliament. There were also internal pressures on him to take a stronger position against the war, as shown when the Federal Executive voted unanimously that



Charles Kennedy with Patsy Calton, candidate and later MP for Cheadle, during the 2001 election campaign

the party officially should take part in the February 2003 march.

Writing in *The Telegraph*, Tim Stanley explained why the stance Kennedy took was so bold, and how it delivered political benefits for the Liberal Democrats.

Until 2003, it was convention in British politics that opposition parties back governments over questions of war ... By criticising Iraq, Kennedy put his reputation and his party's reputation on the line. It was not only a moral move but a smart one – for it cemented in the public's mind the impression that the Lib Dems were courageously independent minded.²¹

Other examples were given of the prescience and political courage that Charles Kennedy showed throughout his political career. *The Times*²² and *The Telegraph*²³ recounted how, after the 1987 general election, Kennedy was the first of the SDP's five remaining MPs to break with the party's leader, David Owen, and call for a merger with the Liberals. He then helped to negotiate the terms amid great acrimony and charges of betrayal from fellow Social Democrats.

Nearly every paper asserted that alone amongst Liberal Democrat MPs Charles opposed going into government with the Conservatives in 2010. In fact, at the final Parliamentary Party meeting that approved the decision to go into the coalition, although Kennedy did express doubts, he abstained in the final vote; six other MPs either abstained or were absent. In the Commons, Charles voted against the rise in tuition fees and in private, he was critical of the coalition's welfare reforms.

A social democrat and a liberal

The third theme of the tributes and obituaries, 'what Charles Kennedy stood for', was less informed and less conclusive than the other discussions. *The Economist* typified the views of many in casting him as a left-leaning social democrat who instinctively favoured statist policies.

What Mr Kennedy was for, was sometimes harder to discern. Though he often presented

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himself as a classical liberal – his literary credo, *The Future of Politics*, is a treatise on all sorts of freedoms: from poverty, from government, to innovate, and so forth – he was not obviously one. He had more faith in the state than most liberals and was so predictably to the left of them that it was tempting to wonder why he had not returned to Labour.²⁴

The paper also asserted that:

As leader he positioned the Lib Dems to the left of the Labour government by opposing the introduction of university tuition fees and Britain's involvement in the Iraq war.²⁵

It is quite correct that, as Labour moved towards the 'centre ground' under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, Kennedy took the Liberal Democrats into territory easily perceived as 'left of Labour' by, for example, promising free university tuition and personal social care. In the run-up to the 2005 general election, a defecting left-wing Labour MP, Brian Sedgemore, along with many like-minded people, joined the Liberal Democrats; Philip Collins of *The Times* (a former speechwriter to Tony Blair) was not being too harsh when he suggested that electoral considerations also played their part.²⁶ In 2005, the party performed especially well in university constituencies and areas with large Muslim populations and had hopes of capturing a large section of the grey vote.

But the 'left-wing' and 'populist' labels are too simplistic and fail to do justice to Charles's political beliefs. Vince Cable's observations are worth quoting at length:

It is wrong to portray Charles as a socialist. He had come into parliament as a social democrat and remained one. Like me, he joined the SDP in the early 1980s when Labour was anti-Europe, anti-NATO and was looking back nostalgically to the era of state control and trades union power. For those of us who were attracted to the ideals of social justice, and wanted an alternative both to Thatcher's Conservatism and to what Labour then offered, the SDP then the Lib Dems offered a way forward.

Charles retained a set of beliefs which has enduring value but is no longer fashionable: a strong commitment to progressive taxation and redistribution of income and wealth and a belief that the country deserved good public services and, unapologetically, should be asked to pay for them through taxation.

The other strand in his political philosophy was liberalism. Again this was often unfashionable. I recall that during the 2005 election when the Tories were whispering, very loudly, 'are you thinking what we are thinking?', Charles was quite unequivocal: 'Yes, the immigration of black and brown people has been good for Britain, economically and culturally; and no, hanging and flogging doesn't solve the crime problem.'²⁷

Charles brought together social democracy and liberalism in a way that was instinctive and not a little romantic. *The Guardian* was surely correct when it described him as 'a liberal social democrat who knew what he believed and loved what he knew'.²⁸

It is, therefore, too easily forgotten that other elements of the liberal heritage revived and flourished under Charles's leadership. There were echoes of laissez-faire when the 2001 general election manifesto contained numerous pledges to reduce 'red tape'. The 'ip in the pound for education', an iconic pledge from the 1990s, was dropped from party policy. Charles cannot be accused of being a knee-jerk statist or of being stuck in the past: senior colleagues were given licence to innovate. Chris Huhne led a major review of the Liberal Democrats' approach to public services. There were new attempts to be 'tough' and disciplined on public spending commitments, with mixed results. And, as Vince Cable recalled, *The Orange Book*, which presented many 'economic liberal' viewpoints, was published in 2004, albeit with the most lukewarm of endorsements from the party leader.

Here, then, was one of the paradoxes of Charles Kennedy's leadership: his roots were in the social democrat tradition and he was a communicator rather than a policy wonk, but in the run-up to the 2005

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general election, it was becoming increasingly difficult to link the party's raft of 'market liberal' and 'spending' proposals together into a coherent, plausible programme that could be 'sold' to the electorate. And it is often forgotten that, fairly or not, many Liberal Democrats were disappointed at the results of that election. As *The Guardian* obituary recalled:

[The party] was perceived to have fallen short. The anticipated breakthrough in the Tory marginals did not happen and, far from becoming the main opposition as some activists had hoped, it remained a distant third in the Commons. Kennedy was blamed internally for concentrating on trying to attract Tory voters rather than broadening the party's electoral appeal with more progressive electors disillusioned with Labour, but he was nevertheless re-elected leader shortly after parliament returned.²⁹

Shortly after polling day, Charles himself said that the Liberal Democrats now had to 'find a fashion and narrative'³⁰. But he seemed unsure as to what the narrative should be.

Tragic figure

Discussions of the 2005 general election and its aftermath led into the fourth theme of the commentaries and obituaries: Charles's shortcomings as a leader, his problems with alcohol and how they led to his deposition from the leadership in January 2006. Such was the frame for *The Times*' somewhat brutal obituary. The paper drew mostly unfavourable comparisons between Charles's leadership style and that of his predecessor.

Unlike his disciplined, somewhat autocratic, policy-driven predecessor, Kennedy was laid-back, convivial and consensual ... He consulted his fellow MPs on speeches and spokespersonships. He bantered with journalists at press conferences. He was not a strong leader in the conventional sense, and lacked a compelling political agenda. Some colleagues dubbed him 'inaction man' compared with Ashdown, a former Royal

Marine commando. Others joked 'while Paddy Ashdown gets up at 5am, Mr Kennedy gives the impression of only going to bed at that time'.³¹

The Times went to revive some uncomfortable memories for many Liberal Democrats: Charles attending a formal meeting in 2001 with Yasser Arafat 'clearly the worse for wear'; his absence from Gordon Brown's Commons announcement on whether Britain would join the Euro, and Brown's 2004 budget – allegedly due to a 'stomach bug'; and the party's spring conference that same year when he appeared to be ill when giving the leader's speech. During an early-morning press conference to launch the party's 2005 manifesto, he could not explain the details of the party's policy for a local income tax. This was explained at the time as the result of a sleepless night caused by his new-born son, Donald, but was recognised by close colleagues as a sign of bigger problems.³²

A legacy for liberals

For all his triumphs and tragedies, Charles left an important legacy for the Liberal Democrats, as they try to come to terms with their near-annihilation at the 2015 general election. Even though the early 2000s now seem like a different era, his approach to political strategy and his deepest political convictions could prove indispensable to the party as it tries to rebuild. *The Guardian* leader made some perceptive observations about the choices and the opportunities now facing the Liberal Democrats:

A key decision facing the party's next leader is whether to embrace or reject the legacy of coalition. Mr Kennedy would have been fair in his judgment, but on the rejectionist side. However, he would have seen opportunities too, if the party is clear about its priorities and direction. He would have seen an uncertain Labour party, a frustrated Green movement, a decentralising spirit, a fresh impatience with the electoral system and, above all, a battle for Britain's place in Europe. It is a great loss that Mr Kennedy will play no part in Britain's political

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reshaping. But his reforming social democratic and European instincts will live on if the next Lib Dem leader takes the party on the kind of political journey that his late lamented colleague would have favoured.³³

Philip Collins warned that Charles's brand of politics would be a dead end for the Liberal Democrats.

For all Mr Kennedy's considerable virtues as a man, the political example he gave his party is one it ought not to follow ... [He] sought to mobilise opposition wherever he could locate it. There are votes to be harvested in British politics being against things. The consequence of indulging oppositional sentiment, though, is that you are defined only by what you are against and not at all by what you are for ...

Charles Kennedy did what he did rather brilliantly, with style, wit and warmth and politics would be better for more people of his stamp. But what he did can only take you so far. Mr Kennedy's Liberal Democrats climbed all the way to the summit of the mountain he set out to climb. The trouble with that is that when you reach the top you cannot help but wonder at the point.³⁴

Collins made a valid point. The Liberal Democrats face long-term strategic dilemmas and these will need to be addressed. But Matthew d'Ancona showed a clearer understanding of the party and its challenges when he suggested that the Liberal Democrats should be inspired by Charles Kennedy's passion as they begin their long, hard journey back to credibility.

So what's it to be: Kennedy or Clegg? Campaigning passion or governmental competence? As so often, the dichotomy is false. The future of the Lib-Dems depends upon the convergence of the former's romantic liberalism with the latter's professional politics. Both are needed. UKIP has become the 'none-of-the-above' party of protest – albeit with no stability – and Labour is at risk of drifting into its past

as the voice of left-wing dissent rather than the engine of centre-left government. The Lib-Dems must start almost from scratch.

Thus begins the slow, painful work of reconstruction: community causes, micro-politics, pavement-pounding, incremental renewal.

Crucially, d’Ancona pointed to a potential source of inspiration for the Liberal Democrats in the difficult years ahead.

In the battle to prevent Britain leaving the EU – a battle in which Kennedy had hoped to play a central role – the Lib-Dems have a cause which should energise and revive them, a struggle in which the nation’s very place in the world is at stake.³⁵

This was a telling observation, because very few papers acknowledged what Vince Cable called Charles’ ‘bigger picture: ... a strong, but practical internationalism centred on the European project’. He recalled that from his earliest days in parliament, Charles had spoken up consistently and strongly for full-blooded British commitment to EU membership.³⁶

Nick Clegg told the Commons of his chagrin that Charles had been lost to the European cause:

I suspect many of us will feel his absence most keenly when our country decides in the next year or two whether we belong, or not, in the European Union, because, of all his convictions, his internationalism endured most strongly. He was a proud highlander, a proud Scot and a man who believed in our community of nations within the United Kingdom, but he was also a lifelong believer that our outward-facing character as a country is best secured by remaining at the heart of Europe rather than retreating elsewhere. As the debate becomes dominated, as it no doubt will, by the noise of statistical claim and counter-claim, I will miss the lyrical clarity of Charles’s belief that our future as an open-hearted and generous-spirited country is at stake and must be defended at all costs.³⁷

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It was left to *The Economist* – even though it cast Charles as ‘a peripheral figure’³⁸ by the time he lost his Commons seat – to lay down the gauntlet to Liberal Democrats, and all supporters of Britain’s role in Europe:

Mr Kennedy was an outspoken pro-European in a way that few front-line political figures today are. Even at 55, he was one of the youngest of the remaining politicians with an enthusiasm for Britain’s place in the EU based on idealistic rather than transactional factors. He was due to play a prominent role in the upcoming referendum on the country’s EU membership; his energy, popularity and heartfelt commitment to the cause would have been a big asset to the ‘Yes’ camp. His death makes it all the more pressing that a new generation of pro-Europeans step forward and make the impassioned, wide-ranging case for Britain to remain in the union. A resounding mandate for such a vision at the polls would be a fitting political epitaph for the late laughing Cavalier of Lib Dem politics.³⁹

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- 2 ‘Charles Kennedy 1959–2015: A gifted, compassionate politician’, *Independent*, 2 June 2015.
- 3 ‘Obituary: Charles Kennedy, Scottish politician’, *The Scotsman*, 2 June 2015.
- 4 Alan Cochrane, ‘With Charles Kennedy’s death, a light has gone out in Scottish and British Politics’, *The Telegraph*, 3 June 2015.
- 5 ‘Leader: Remembering Charles Kennedy’, *New Statesman*, 3 June 2015.
- 6 HC Deb, 3 June 2015, c593
- 7 HC Deb, 3 June 2015, c604
- 8 HC Deb, 3 June 2015, c595
- 9 HC Deb, 3 June 2015, c603
- 10 Alastair Campbell, ‘Charles Kennedy – a lovely man, a talented politician, a great friend’, *Guardian*, 2 June 2015.
- 11 James Gurling, ‘The Charles Kennedy I knew’, *The Telegraph*, 5 June 2015.
- 12 ‘Charles Kennedy’s legacy: Lochaber no more’, *The Guardian*, 2 June 2015.

- 13 ‘Charles Kennedy obituary’, *The Guardian*, 2 June 2015.
- 14 Martin Kettle, ‘Charles Kennedy: an authentic politician who rose above the crowd’, *The Guardian*, 2 June 2015.
- 15 ‘Death of a Liberal’, *The Economist*, 6 June 2015.
- 16 Matthew d’Ancona, ‘Kennedy’s legacy will be to remind his party of the real Liberal way’, *The Standard*, 3 June 2015.
- 17 HC Deb, 3 June 2015, c593.
- 18 ‘Charles Kennedy’, *The Times*, 2 June 2015.
- 19 Vince Cable, ‘Charles Kennedy: he was left of Labour, maybe, but always a true liberal’, *The Guardian*, 2 June 2015.
- 20 ‘Death of a Liberal’, *The Economist*, 6 June 2015.
- 21 Tim Stanley, ‘Opposing the Iraq War was Charles Kennedy’s Finest Hour’, *The Telegraph*, 2 June 2015.
- 22 Charles Kennedy, *The Times*, 2 June 2015.
- 23 ‘Charles Kennedy – obituary’, *The Telegraph*, 2 June 2015.
- 24 ‘Death of a Liberal’, *The Economist*, 6 June 2015.
- 25 ‘The laughing Cavalier’, *The Economist* (website), 2 June 2015.
- 26 Philip Collins, ‘Kennedy’s legacy will lead Lib Dems nowhere’, *The Times*, 5 June 2015.
- 27 Vince Cable, ‘Charles Kennedy: he was left of Labour, maybe, but always a true liberal’, *The Guardian*, 2 June 2015.
- 28 Charles Kennedy’s legacy: Lochaber no more’, *The Guardian*, 2 June 2015.
- 29 ‘Charles Kennedy obituary’, *The Guardian*, 2 June 2015.
- 30 Tania Brannigan, ‘Kennedy prepares for the next step’, *The Guardian*, 20 May 2005.
- 31 Charles Kennedy, *The Times*, 2 June 2015.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 ‘Charles Kennedy’s legacy: Lochaber no more’, *The Guardian*, 2 June 2015.
- 34 Philip Collins, ‘Kennedy’s legacy will lead Lib Dems nowhere’, *The Times*, 5 June 2015.
- 35 Matthew d’Ancona, ‘Kennedy’s legacy will be to remind his party of the real Liberal way’, *The Standard*, 3 June 2015.
- 36 Vince Cable, ‘Charles Kennedy: he was left of Labour, maybe, but always a true liberal’, *The Guardian*, 2 June 2015.
- 37 HC Deb, 3 June 2015, c593
- 38 ‘Death of a Liberal’, *The Economist*, 6 June 2015.
- 39 Ibid.