

# Report

## The leadership of Charles Kennedy

Evening meeting of the Liberal Democrat History Group, 3 July 2017  
with Greg Hurst and Lord Newby; chair: Baroness Lindsay Northover  
Report by **Neil Stockley**

**C**HARLES KENNEDY, ONE of the best-loved politicians of modern times, led the Liberal Democrats to their greatest electoral triumphs. But his leadership ended ignominiously in January 2006, when he was forced to resign by the party's MPs. After his death, in June 2015, he was mourned deeply by the party he once led. At the History Group's summer meeting, Greg Hurst, a senior journalist for *The Times* and author of *Charles Kennedy: A Tragic Flaw*, and Lord (Dick) Newby, who served as Charles's chief of staff, assessed his achievements as leader, and his weaknesses.

Both speakers agreed that Charles accomplished a great deal. The most significant achievement was that in 2005, under his stewardship, the Liberal Democrats won sixty-two seats and 22 per cent of the vote. It was the best performance by any third party since the 1920s. Both recalled that many commentators – not least within the party – claimed that the Liberal Democrats should have done even better, given the unpopularity of both Tony Blair's Labour government and Michael Howard's Conservative Party. Dick Newby acknowledged this point of view, but also drew some knowing chuckles when he reflected dryly that 'in retrospect, it doesn't seem such a disastrous performance'. We must now compare the party's results under Charles with its dismal showings in 2015 and 2017.

In 2003, he led the party to oppose Britain's participation in the war with Iraq. Hurst recounted that Charles was able to bridge the differences within the Liberal Democrats between its 'pacifists' and those who, for various reasons, were uneasy with opposing a British military action. Newby believed that the way Charles articulated the party's stance made many people feel comfortable about expressing their own opposition to the war, including by joining the march in London of February 2003. And, of course,

his criticisms of the war were subsequently vindicated.

Hurst contended that Charles was the UK's first modern 'anti-politician'. He recalled that many people felt they knew Charles personally, and when he died, they felt a genuine sense of loss. Hurst observed that, in conveying a sense of 'authenticity', Charles was the forerunner for successful 'anti-politicians' from other parties, such as Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage and Jeremy Corbyn. (This legacy was also ironic, Hurst reminded us, because Charles had been a politician for almost all his adult life. His only job before becoming an MP, at the age of 23, was a brief internship at Radio Highland.) As Dick Newby put it, 'people liked Charles, journalists liked him ... by and large, audiences liked him'. He recounted how, during the 2005 general election campaign, a *Question Time* audience applauded Charles as soon as he entered the studio. Newby argued, correctly in my view, that these three achievements were all connected and that the party's strong showing in 2005 was based on Charles's likeable, down-to-earth persona and the position he took on the Iraq War.

Without detracting from these achievements, the meeting considered in more detail Charles's failings and shortcomings as leader. Greg Hurst stressed that he was well-disposed towards Charles but pulled no punches as he shone new light on a familiar criticism of the Kennedy leadership: that he failed to provide a clear direction for Liberal Democrat strategy and policy. For a programmatic party, that aims to break through the two-party duopoly, this is a serious charge. And, in the latter period of his leadership, a feeling pervaded the party that it should have been performing more strongly.

Hurst described Charles as uninterested in policy, much to his colleagues' frustration, and – importantly for a liberal leader – a 'cautious man, not a radical'. He believed that Charles was always

fearful that the party might split over a major policy or strategic issue and that this sense of risk held him back from trying to seize some of the political opportunities that presented themselves to the Liberal Democrats during his time as leader. Once the party's response to the Iraq War started to consume his leadership, Charles had, Hurst said, ruled through a clique of people whom he 'felt comfortable with'.

Hurst charged that although Charles got the big calls right, as on Iraq, he was bad at party management and reluctant to take decisions. Hurst instanced Charles's reshuffles of his party spokespeople ('always a mess') and the way he handled the appointments of new Liberal Democrat peers. Hurst described Charles as an intuitive politician who watched and waited and 'sat on the fence as long as he could' before taking stances. He claimed that the only time Charles led his team from the front was during the Iraq debates.

On each of these points, Dick Newby provided valuable context and insights, without falling into the trap of acting as defence counsel for Charles. He contended, for example, that a 'lack of total application to policy' might explain Charles's reliance on a small clique. Newby recalled that early in his leadership, Charles had tried to consult and involve larger numbers of people over strategic and tactical matters. Over time, however, these arrangements had proved unworkable. Newby argued that, in any case, Charles's eventual move to narrow down his range of confidants and advisers was characteristic of nearly all political leaders.

Newby agreed that Charles was always more interested in process – the retail side of politics – than in the details of policy. He did not arrive at the leadership armed with a personal manifesto for the Liberal Democrats. Even so, as Newby reminded the audience, one of Charles's main political strengths was his ability to 'sniff the wind', to see the political consequences of any event and anticipate how the story would play out. This strength was to prove invaluable, not least during the debates over Iraq. Responding to questions, Newby acknowledged Lord Rennard's suggestion that a complementary strength was the ease with which Charles handled his television appearances and that he had a special gift for articulating 'values' rather than policies. Newby described these values in broad if not

vague terms: 'Europe' and 'social justice', along with an 'ancillary' concern for the environment. People liked Charles, Newby stressed, because he articulated these themes with such sincerity and conviction.

Newby also offered some interesting personal recollections. Yes, Charles was somewhat cautious and may not have appeared especially radical, but he was also very anti-establishment in his outlook. He was never taken in by the cosy meetings with Tony Blair at Number Ten. And, in contrast to most politicians, he was not at all fazed by royalty and 'just hated absolutely anything that involved dressing up'. But Newby also made a telling quip that Charles's caution may have stemmed from a concern that if he tried to boldly lead the party in a clear direction, 'he might lose, and it wouldn't be worth it'.

It was over Charles's effectiveness as a decision-maker that the two speakers differed most clearly. Picking up on Hurst's claim that Charles tended to sit on the fence as long as possible, Dick Newby pointed to important situations in which he took tough, fateful decisions, within tight timeframes. Two of these concerned the Iraq War. Charles came under considerable pressure from within the Liberal Democrats to take an official, leading role in the February 2003 march against the war. The party hierarchy was, however, scathing about any such suggestion. Charles 'thought it through', Newby said, and led thousands of Liberal Democrats to take part in the march, and then addressed the half-million strong crowd in Hyde Park. Newby, correctly, reminded us more than once how much political courage Charles showed – Labour and Conservative MPs savagely heckled his speeches in the Commons debates on Iraq and he was called 'Charlie Chamberlain' – and how he anticipated successfully the difficult questions and challenges that his colleagues would face during the debates.

In February 2004, the prime minister, Tony Blair, phoned Charles to inform him that he would, within a matter of hours, be formally announcing that he was setting up the Review into Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction – the Butler Review, as it came to be known. Blair intended to say that Alan Beith, a senior Liberal Democrat MP, would be a member of the enquiry. Charles objected immediately that the terms of reference were too narrow and 'would not do'. The prime minister went



ahead with his announcement – but without having Beith on the enquiry.

Newby also recalled how Charles 'thrived' during thirty-six hours of parliamentary ping-pong over control orders and that he was 'in his element' as he negotiated with Blair and Howard.

When responding to questions from members of the audience, Hurst cast some doubt on Newby's suggestions. He believed, for instance, that Charles had decided to join the anti-war march because he came under considerable pressure to do during a lunch with *Guardian* leader writers. Similarly, Charles had refused to countenance any Liberal Democrat participation in the Butler Review only because he was backed into a corner by Blair's timing of the announcement.

The speakers were at their most insightful when they assessed the weaknesses in Charles's character that made him a less effective leader than he might have been. In his opening remarks, Greg Hurst charged that Charles was lazy. He suggested that having entered the Commons at such a young age, Charles had never really had to do the 'hard yards' of politics. Later, responding to questions from the audience, Hurst argued that the party leadership had 'fallen into Charles's lap' in 1999 and that, in seeking the position, he was largely responding to the long-standing expectations of many people around him that he would succeed Paddy Ashdown. He did not have to fight especially hard for the job and nor did he demonstrate 'a burning passion' for it.

Dick Newby agreed that Charles was intellectually lazy but went on to suggest that it may in fact have been part of his political strength. Here, he drew a cricketering analogy with David Gower, a left-handed batsman who played with

style and effortless ease and never practiced, with the result that his batting average was not as high as it might have been. 'Swots' like Theresa May, by contrast, lacked imagination and charisma. This argument had its attractions, but became less convincing as the meeting progressed. Later, Newby explained how Charles's brilliance as a debater went back to his student days, when he developed a capacity to perform well with little or no advance preparation. He told some wonderful stories of how he 'busked it' as a party spokesperson for various portfolios in the 1980s and 1990s. But Dick also remembered how Charles was finally 'found out' at the launch of the 2005 Liberal Democrat manifesto when, underprepared (as well as recovering from the birth of his son and a hangover), he was unable to explain how the party's local income tax proposals would work. 'He let the party down really seriously,' Dick acknowledged.

The two speakers came closer still to a compelling explanation of what held Charles back when they agreed that he lacked self-confidence and belief in himself. Here, they offered some poignant anecdotes. Greg Hurst recalled accompanying Charles to a school in his constituency, with the chair of the local party. Charles made a speech to the students, and was brilliant, Hurst said. But afterwards he turned to his party colleague and asked, nervously, 'Did I do OK?' Dick Newby recalled visiting the leader at his constituency home in the Highlands. Charles pointed out the cemetery near his family home, to show where he would be buried one day and then asked, 'Will they forget about me?'

Dick Newby finally pointed out the proverbial elephant in the room when he reminded the audience of one further weakness: Charles was an alcoholic.

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Newby believed that this addiction was the root of his other shortcomings. 'At times, he was incapable of cogent thought, meaning that a certain amount of laziness was inevitable.' It was a serious problem, which Dick and his colleagues spent a great deal of time mitigating. Newby revealed how he and his colleagues became fast experts in explaining to colleagues and the media illnesses that had no visible symptoms and from which it was possible to recover quickly. The effort spent on such activity diverted their time and energy away from more important work. Given the nature of the malady, Dick reflected, it was 'amazing that he could perform so well, so often.' But, over time, 'his drinking caught up with him' and exacerbated Charles's lack of confidence. He recounted how a number of poor public performances by Charles led some Liberal Democrat MPs to complain to Newby and his colleague, Anna Werrin. Many times, they promised to take action, but the situation was not resolved and by the end of 2005, their assurances that a solution was imminent had lost any credibility with the party's parliamentarians. The game was up.

The answers to two intriguing 'what ifs?' underlined both Charles's strengths, and the inherent weaknesses

of his leadership. Duncan Brack asked whether Charles would have lasted as leader had the Iraq War not come along in 2003, given his lack of a 'burning agenda' and reluctance to take decisions. Newby thought that, despite his worsening symptoms of alcoholism, it was 'not inevitable' that he would have departed the leadership before 2005, given his strong performance in the 2001 general election campaign. Dick was sure that he was still 'head and shoulders above everyone else'. Hurst also believed that the party would have given Charles the benefit of the doubt. The Liberal Democrats' net gain of six seats in 2001 had been better than expected, he agreed, and Charles had succeeded in dislocating the Liberal Democrats from Blairism, with remarkably little fuss, thereby ensuring the party regained a more independent identity. This meant he would have been given 'time and space' to develop his leadership. But Hurst acknowledged freely that he did not know how Charles would have used such an opportunity.

Another audience member asked what might have happened had Charles not been deposed in 2006. Greg Hurst replied that he would have gone on to prepare the Liberal Democrats for opposition, rather than for government. With his remarkable ability to see around corners, Hurst argued, he

would have foreseen that Labour would lose its majority in 2010, leaving the Liberal Democrats holding the balance of power. Then, he would not have gone into coalition with the Conservatives, instead opting for a 'confidence and supply' agreement of some sort. Charles would also have been thinking about ensuring the party's position in the following general election, which Nick Clegg did not seem to have considered to any great degree, Hurst argued. This was all plausible, but such a scenario opens up some important and difficult questions. Would Charles have tried to deal with the Conservatives or with Labour, and how would he have justified his choice? What would have been his policy 'red lines' when reaching any agreement? And how would Charles, whose leadership had blossomed in relatively benign economic times have handled the grim politics of austerity?

We will never know the answers to those questions. But it was hard to escape the conclusion that Charles Kennedy was a good, if flawed, man whose legacy was a positive one; and that for all the trauma it caused the party, the ending of his leadership came at just the right time.

*Neil Stockley is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group executive committee.*

A Lloyd George Society evening meeting, supported by LD Friends of Israel

# The Balfour Declaration of November 1917

In a letter dated 2 November 1917, Arthur Balfour, the Foreign Secretary in the Coalition Government of David Lloyd George, announced British government support for a 'national home' for the Jewish people, to be established in Palestine, then still part of the Ottoman Empire. The letter was sent to Lord Walter Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community, to be forwarded to the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland. The text of the declaration was published in the press on 9 November 1917.

To mark that centenary, the Lloyd George Society and the Liberal Democrat Friends of Israel are to hold a meeting to look at why the British government agreed to make this announcement at the time and in the way it did; and to examine the international consequences of the Declaration.

Speakers: Professor T. G. Otte from the University of East Anglia and Professor Colin Shindler of SOAS, London; Chair: Baroness Sarah Ludford (Vice President, LDFI)

Admission is free, all are very welcome.

**7.00 – 8.15pm, Monday 6 November 2017**

David Lloyd George Room, National Liberal Club, 1 Whitehall Place, London, SW1A 2HE