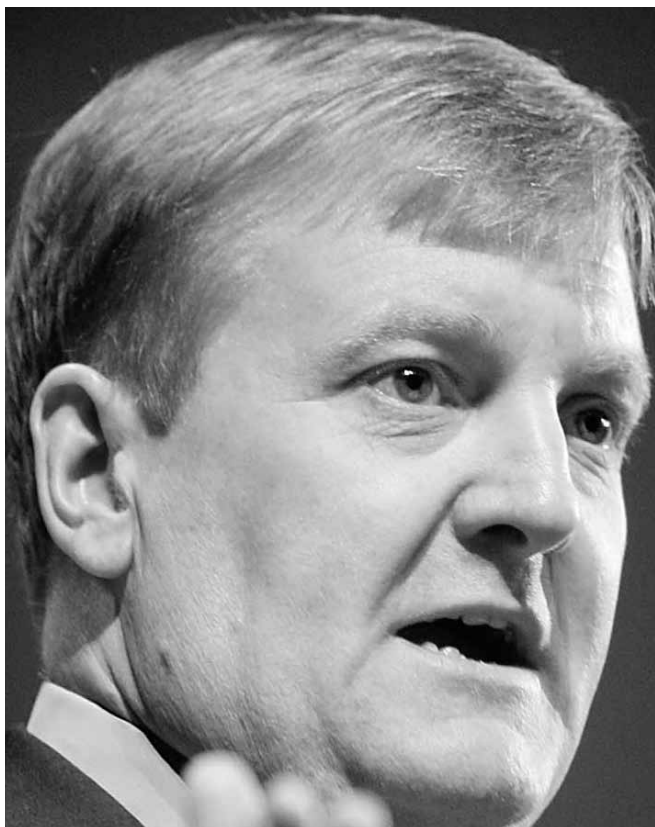
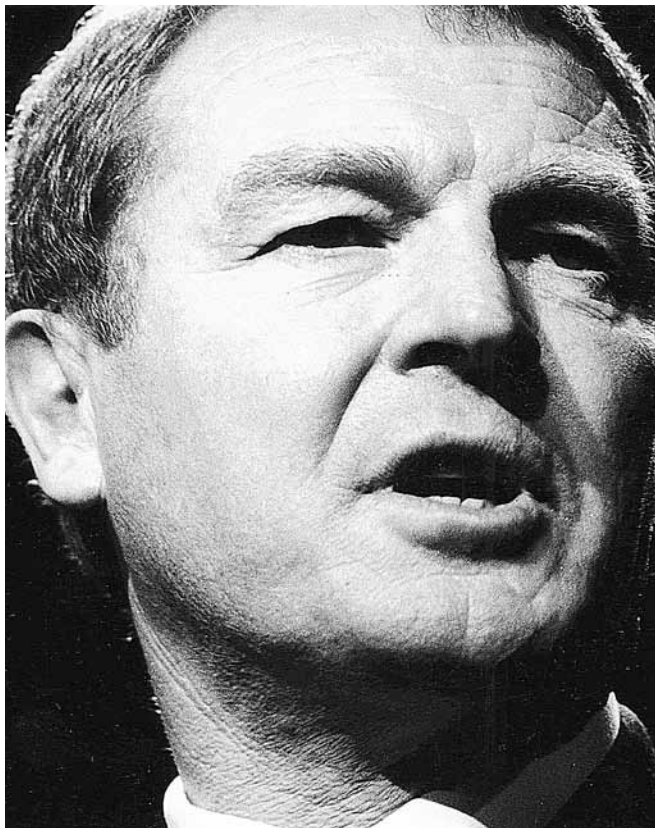


LIBERAL DEMOCRACY



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 speech-making, *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 hung-over. 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.

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

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.

Table 1: Leadership performance								
	Ashdown (1988–99)		Kennedy (1999–2006)		Campbell (2006–07)		Clegg (2007–)	
<i>Personal ratings (net score satisfied minus dissatisfied and date)^a</i>								
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	
<i>Party poll ratings (per cent and date)^c</i>								
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
<i>Westminster election performance: MPs and vote</i>								
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	
<i>European election performance: MEPs and vote</i>								
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
<i>Local election performance: councillors and vote^{f,g}</i>								
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
<i>Party membership^{h,i}</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.virginia.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).

LIBERAL DEMOCRAT LEADERSHIP

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,

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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

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 an 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

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

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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.

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

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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

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

much as possible, the grim national picture.

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

LIBERAL DEMOCRAT LEADERSHIP

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

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?'

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.

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.

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 author³³) 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 certainly 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

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.

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,

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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.

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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’.

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

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

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

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

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