

# DISAPPOINTMENT THE LIBERAL DEMOCRAT

**John Curtice** argues that much of the apparent disappointment with their party's performance at the 2005 general election amongst Liberal Democrats is misplaced. Over the 2001 and 2005 elections the party has, for the first time ever, advanced during a period of Labour government, while in 2005 it concentrated its advance in previously relatively barren Labour territory. If these gains are held they will significantly increase the prospect of a hung parliament at future elections.



Charles Kennedy with new Liberal Democrat MPs after the 2005 election.

**T**he Liberal Democrats' performance in the 2005 general election has been greeted with considerable disappointment. Despite facing an unpopular government and an unconvincing opposition, at 22.7 per cent its share of the vote in Great Britain was still less than the 23.1 per cent secured by the Liberal/SDP Alliance in 1987, let alone the 26.0 per cent it won in 1983. Although its tally of sixty-two seats represents the largest number of Liberal MPs to be elected since 1923, in suffering a net loss of two seats to the Con-

servatives the party did little to convince anyone that it might one day achieve the objective some had set for it of replacing the Tories as the principal opposition to Labour. Meanwhile, by the time of the next election Iraq will have been forgotten and the Conservative Party rejuvenated. Once again it seems that a golden opportunity to break the mould of British politics has slipped through the party's hands.

This, however, is a serious misreading of the Liberal Democrat result. Until now the party's performances in Westminster elections have had a decidedly

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one-sided character. While the party has seemed able to profit from discontent with the Conservatives, it has never demonstrated an ability to feed on discontent with Labour. Whenever Labour was in power Liberal/Liberal Democrat support fell. And wherever Labour was the dominant electoral force the party struggled to win votes. The party's achievement in 2005 was to show that this one-sided character to its appeal is no more.

The 3.9 point increase in the party's share of the vote was certainly notable rather than dramatic. Even so, the past eight years of Labour government have been the first ever period of Labour rule in which the party has advanced rather than fallen back. Over the course of the previous four spells of Labour government the party's share of the vote fell by 11.9 points, 3.8 points, 6.6 points and 5.7 points respectively. Since Mr Blair came to power in 1997 it has advanced by 5.5 points. Indeed its 2005 performance was the first time ever that the party has won over 20 per cent of the vote after a period of Labour rule.

Not only did the party gain votes in an era of Labour government, it also won votes in Labour territory. As Table 1 shows, the biggest advances in Liberal Democrat support occurred in seats Labour was defending. The party did particularly well where

it had already snatched second place to Labour from the Conservatives – and not only simply because it managed to squeeze the Conservative vote somewhat in such seats.

Nowhere was the party's newfound ability to feed on discontent with an incumbent Labour government better demonstrated than in two particular kinds of constituency. The first comprises those constituencies with a substantial Muslim population. Many voters in these seats were unhappy with the government's decision to join in the US-led invasion of Iraq, an invasion the Liberal Democrats opposed. As Table 2 shows, on average the Liberal Democrats advanced by five points more in heavily Muslim seats than the party did in those with no more than a small Muslim population – and did so predominantly at Labour's expense. While some of the anti-war vote was garnered by the anti-war coalition Respect, there seems little doubt that the Liberal Democrats made significant advances amongst former-Labour-voting Muslim voters.

Meanwhile the party also did particularly well in 'university seats', that is constituencies with a relatively large proportion of students. The party typically did three points better in such seats than it did elsewhere, again an exceptional performance secured at Labour's expense. Indeed, such

constituencies accounted for no less than half of the record dozen seats the party captured from Labour. The party's opposition to the introduction of top-up tuition fees seems to have boosted its vote here, though it is also possible that Iraq played particularly strongly amongst the donnish communities that populate many of these constituencies too.

These advances in Labour-held territory have two important implications for the party's future prospects. The first is that it is now significantly less vulnerable to any future swing from Labour to Conservative. Because hitherto the party's best prospects have been so heavily concentrated in Conservative territory, the party stood to suffer significant net losses if there was a swing from Labour to the Conservatives, even if its own vote held steady. Now this is far less the case. After the 2001 election there were just nine constituencies where the party lay within 15 percentage points of the local Labour incumbent; now there are nineteen. As a result, even if the Conservatives were to achieve the uniform 7.5 per cent swing required for them to win an overall majority at the next election on the current boundaries (though these will in fact change before 2009), the Liberal Democrats should still have as many as fifty-five seats so long as their own vote holds up.

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## DISAPPOINTMENT OR BRIDGEHEAD?

In short, the Liberal Democrats not only now have a record number of MPs but the bridgehead they have established at Westminster is, in one important respect at least, less vulnerable to attack. This can but only increase the prospect that future elections will fail to deliver an overall majority, thereby potentially giving the party substantial leverage. After the 2001 election there was an eight-point range of Conservative leads in votes (from one of 3.7 points to one of 11.5 points) that was likely to deliver a hung parliament. Now that range has increased to nearly eleven points (from one point to 11.8 points). Although the forthcoming review of parliamentary boundaries in England and Wales is likely to eliminate some of the bias against the Conservatives implied by these figures (the Conservatives have to be ahead of Labour simply to deny Labour a majority) it is unlikely to reduce significantly the range

of leads that would probably produce a hung parliament.

British elections now have a new character. No longer is it the case that they are only likely to produce one of two outcomes: a Labour majority or a Conservative one. A parliament in which nobody has a majority is a perfectly feasible outcome too. It is certainly a much more likely outcome than the Liberal Democrats replacing either Labour or the Conservatives as one of the two largest parties at Westminster. It would seem curious if between now and the next election the Liberal Democrats were not considering how they might best maximise their leverage should such a circumstance arise.

There were, however, limitations to the Liberal Democrat advance into Labour territory. While the party may have been successful at winning over the Muslim and university Labour vote, it was not evidently particularly successful at winning over Labour's traditional white

working-class vote. On average the increase in the Liberal Democrat vote in the most working-class constituencies was, at 4.3 points, little different from the increase in the most middle-class ones (4.1 points). Equally, survey data published by MORI found that, at five points, the increase in the Liberal Democrat share of the vote in the market researchers' bottom DE social grade was little different from the four-point increase amongst the top AB group. As a result the party continues to perform better amongst middle-class voters than working-class ones. It still remains some way off, too, from capturing a parliamentary seat in either of the party's two big-city, northern, local-government jewels, Liverpool and Newcastle.

But did such progress as the party did make into Labour territory come at a price? Did the party's net losses to the Conservatives indicate that the party's stance that some at least characterised as being to the 'left' of Labour cost it dearly in seats where it was locked in battle with the Conservatives? Did the party lose ground in the south of England in particular because of concern amongst middle-class voters there that they would lose out from its proposal to introduce a local income tax? And do considerations such as these explain why the party lost seats to the Conservatives?

It takes no more than a glance back at Table 1 to cast considerable doubt on these propositions. Where the Liberal Democrats were locked in battle with the Conservatives, they did not perform badly because they particularly lost ground to them. What distinguished these constituencies was not the strength of the Conservative performance but rather that of the Labour one. Where Labour started off in third place to the Conservatives, its vote typically only fell by one or two points – far less than the near six-point loss of support the party was suffering across the country as a whole.

**Table 1: Change in party vote share by tactical situation**

1 <sup>st</sup> /2 <sup>nd</sup> 2001	Change in per cent share of vote since 2001		
	Con	Lab	Lib Dem
Con/Lab	+1.2	-6.1	+3.0
Con/LD	+1.4	-2.8	+0.5
LD/Con	+0.6	-1.1	-0.6
Lab/Con	-0.1	-7.0	+4.7
Lab/LD	-1.3	-7.1	+7.8

**Table 2: Where the Liberal Democrats particularly prospered**

	Change in per cent share of vote since 2001		
	Con	Lab	Lib Dem
Student seat	-0.7	-8.5	+6.7
Other seats	+0.4	-5.4	+3.5
Heavily Muslim	-1.9	-10.6	+8.8
Somewhat Muslim	-0.1	-8.1	+6.1
Other seats	+0.4	-5.2	+3.4

Student seat: more than 10 per cent of adults are students, 2001 Census.

Heavily Muslim: more than 10 per cent adults are Muslim, 2001 Census.

Somewhat Muslim: 5–10 per cent of adults are Muslim.

Glasgow North East (no Conservative or Lib Dem candidate) and Wyre Forest (no Lib Dem candidate) are excluded from this table.

The explanation appears to be relatively straightforward. In many places where Labour had slipped into third place its vote had already been heavily squeezed locally, leaving few votes that could still be captured. Indeed, in the third-place seats where there was still a Labour vote of 20 per cent or more in 2001, Labour's vote did in fact still fall substantially (on average by 4.3 points) while the Liberal Democrat vote increased (up 2.1 points). Elsewhere Labour's vote fell by only just over one point and in these circumstances the Liberal Democrat vote fell away a little too.

There is, however, one complication to this story. There was one part of the country where the Conservatives did stage something of a revival – in the south-eastern corner of England outside inner London. Here the Conservative vote actually rose on average by two points, whereas elsewhere it was mostly actually falling back slightly. But while some of this above-average performance seems to have come at the expense of the Liberal Democrats, much of it seems to have come at Labour's expense. It cannot therefore simply be accounted for by the Liberal Democrats appearing too left-wing for voters in that part of England.

Meanwhile the above-average Conservative performance was just as evident in the more working-class seats in the region as it was in the middle-class ones; so is not easy to blame it on the potential unpopularity of the Council Tax amongst middle-class voters in this part of England. It may have simply been a reaction to the relatively sluggish performance of the economy and of house prices in that part of the country since 2001.

In any event, where this pattern was coupled in a Liberal Democrat/Conservative fight with a lack of Labour vote to squeeze, the consequence was, on average, a small swing from the Liberal Democrats to the Conservatives, and the loss of Newbury and Guildford in particular.



Two important implications follow from this analysis. The Liberal Democrats were able to win over discontented Labour voters in 2005 because in the last parliament they adopted positions on issues such as Iraq and tuition fees where the government's stance had generated considerable discontent amongst some former Labour supporters. Moreover, in achieving this for the first time during the course of a Labour government, the party did not evidently lose votes to the Conservatives as a result. The electoral effectiveness of an opposition party's policy position depends not on whether it is 'right', 'left' or 'centre', but rather on whether it speaks more effectively than other opposition parties to whatever unhappiness voters have with the incumbent government. It was the party's ability to do this that appears to have underpinned its advance in 2005.

Of course working out how to repeat this feat at the next election by identifying what discontents there might be with the Labour government in 2009 or 2010 is very difficult for anybody to predict. But two of the patterns we have uncovered suggest two possible limitations to the party's ability to profit from such discontent. The first is that if, indeed, the Conservatives' relative success in much of

**Charles Kennedy and election poster.**

the south-eastern corner of England reflected disquiet about the economy, does this mean that the Liberal Democrats lack credibility as a party capable of handling the economy? And if the party still finds it relatively difficult to win over working-class voters does it need to reconsider the image that the party conveys to this group?

The second implication of our analysis is that, while the party may have made little progress in replacing the Conservatives as the principal opposition to Labour, they have made significant progress in denying the Conservatives the title of the only opposition to Labour. The Liberal Democrats have demonstrated a new-found ability to win Labour votes and Labour seats, and as a result the parliamentary bridgehead established by the party now looks less vulnerable to any Conservative revival. Meanwhile the Conservatives still face a Herculean task in winning an overall majority at the next election, a task that the forthcoming constituency boundary review will make only a little easier. A hung parliament clearly remains a possible prospect after the next election and is certainly one for which the party needs to be prepared.

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