

# Leadership of the Liberal Democrats: From Ashdown to Clegg

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## **Abstract**

This thesis presents an extensive and systematic analysis of Liberal Democrat leadership between 1988 and 2015. Whilst other studies have focussed on leadership of the larger two parties in the United Kingdom this thesis makes an innovative and distinctive contribution in considering why each leader of the Liberal Democrats between 1988 and 2015 won their respective leadership elections; the extent, and drivers, of change that took place under each leader; and the personalisation of leaders in media coverage of general election campaigns. A wide range of interviews with party elites from across the party's history offer an unprecedented and unique insight into the subject. The thesis applies relevant theoretical approaches from related literature for the first time to the Liberal Democrats, whilst making original adaptations as necessary to suit analysis of third parties. Ultimately, the importance of the party leader as a driver of significant change across the public face, approach and organisation and policies is crucial. The extent of coverage in general election campaigns, and the change in how personalised it has become is also clearly defined, which complements the conclusion that it is candidates who are perceived to be the best at securing positive media attention that are ultimately successful in most Liberal Democrat leadership elections.

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## INTRODUCTION

This work presents an extensive and systematic analysis of Liberal Democrat leadership between 1988 and 2015. Uniquely, this work will draw on hours of interviews with party leaders and key figures, alongside applying academic approaches previously applied to address three key research questions: how and why each candidate became the leader of the party in each leadership election, the extent and key drivers of change under each leader, and the role of the party leader in general election campaigns. Set across three chapters, three distinct academic frameworks for analysis are considered, adapted to suit analysis of the party, and then utilised. Furthermore, in adapting the models to make them suitable for application, this work also makes a unique contribution in respect to literature related to the models used.

Through the period covered the party grew from polling far below 10% - some talk of a period where opinion polls found no trace of support for the party – to one of government, with Nick Clegg becoming the first Liberal to serve in a government in decades, before leading the party through its worst election in decades at the 2015 general election. The importance of who becomes the Liberal Democrat leader and why has been under recognised by much existing literature- in some cases they are dismissed entirely as with Francis’ paper (2010). Others, such as Quinn (2012) have devoted chapters in books to the subject but this is often underdeveloped and a peripheral focus to the Labour and Conservative parties, where this is an established body of literature with authors applying approaches to consider their leadership contests. The Liberal Democrats’ journey and period in government supports the need for further study, as does the subsequent volatility in election results and the role of parties beyond Labour and Conservatives. The Liberal Democrat leader does not have a free hand in terms of policy development, but the course of the party’s development since 1988 clearly informs the policies and personalities who were to be involved in the 2010-2015 Coalition government, as well as the party’s position on the electoral spectrum. The Liberal Democrats are a grassroots party, with power being decentralised in many areas, not least through the federalised structure giving greater autonomy to State and Regional parties than in other political parties. This work, however, focuses on the federal party’s leader. It seeks therefore to be neither exhaustive or exhausting in considering every aspect of every local parties’ internal decision making, opportunities exploited, and mistakes made throughout this period. It is a contribution to these analyses specifically in relation to the leader, however. The decision to conclude analysis at the 2015 election is to provide some distance from the subject concerned, whilst still being contemporaneous. The conclusions made in relation to leadership contests as well as the dynamics between the leader and other parts of the party would likely

hold true for the leaderships of Tim Farron and Vince Cable, though they are not considered directly in this work.

There are many examples of analyses of British Politics centred on political parties' leaders, and their role in influencing their respective party's policy, its electoral fortunes and, ultimately, its success or failure. The majority of this literature has, however, related to the main two parties. In regard to the existing literature relating to the Liberal Democrats there have been notable contributions from Cook (2010), Dutton (2004) and Jones (2011). These books have focussed primarily on the party's electoral fortunes and adopt a chronological approach offering a historical insight through various parts of the party's existence. Other works such as Russell and Fieldhouse (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005; Russell and Fieldhouse, 2006) and Evans (Evans and Sanderson-Nash, 2011; Evans, 2007) have focussed on the organisation of the party, and engagement with voters and supporters. Russell and Fieldhouse (2005) offer analysis of the party's organisation and structure; detailed statistical analysis to assess who votes Liberal Democrat, and why; and consider the Liberal Democrats' evolving electoral strategy. Evans and Sanderson-Nash (2011) consider the evolution of the party's structure and approach. This thesis aims to contribute to the literature by considering, adapting and applying established analytical frameworks to the underexamined area of Liberal Democrat leadership. To concentrate the locus of study, three chapters will consider different areas in turn. Firstly, the party's leadership elections – who won, and why? Secondly, change within the party – what has driven change, and to what extent? Thirdly, the leader and general elections – do they matter, and if so, how much and why? To achieve this, alongside extensive reference to relevant existing literature, there will be consideration of contemporaneous newspaper articles, party papers and correspondence and the unique source of a wide range of on the record interviews with some of those most closely involved in the party's development including leaders of the Liberal Democrats, former Cabinet Ministers and front-benchers, advisors and key figures from throughout the party's first 30 years. Without their generosity in time and candour this work would be far weaker, less interesting and – in places – tenuous in its assertions. Interviews play an important role that cannot be matched by other sources of information – the ability to clarify and follow up points as well as an unfiltered, firsthand perspective are invaluable in adding understanding, colour and dimensions to what can otherwise become a list of names and offices. The following three chapters are peppered with information from, and supported by interview material, but this is supplemented by a backbone to each drawn on established academic approaches to take interesting observations and assertions and place them into a cohesive argument in each chapter. The inclusion of interviews with every party leader, with the exception of Charles Kennedy, and many of the candidates for the leadership as well as Chief of Staffs, key party officials and politicians who

have served on the party's frontbench and as Cabinet Ministers adds a depth and nuance to the work that cannot be achieved from secondary sources alone.

The first chapter focuses on leadership elections and draws heavily on an adapted version of Leonard Stark's 'Hierarchy of Party Strategic Goals'. The chapter opens by critically engaging with the existing literature around leadership elections, and theoretical frameworks that have been established to analyse them, and then applies adaptations to allow for analysis of the Liberal Democrats, making a significant original offering to both the theoretical framework being applied, as well as to analysis of the Liberal Democrats. Existing literature has focussed on seeking to explain who becomes leaders of parties that are either a party of government, or the main opposition, often in a two party - or two party dominated- system. This has, however, sometimes failed to properly recognise the particular quirks that apply in a multi-party system, or to parties who are not yet one of the two largest. This chapter seeks to make a contribution to addressing this deficiency. The chapter will set out the original hierarchy proposed by Stark – and its pyramid – and challenge its relevance to the Liberal Democrats' contests. The approach set out by Stark argues that a candidate's success relies on being the strongest in respect to maintaining party unity, offering the most likely chance of victory and forming government, and having policy preferences aligned to the electorate. These criteria each draw on differing aspects of leadership, and are focussed on internal, external and parliamentary spheres. There is an established record of application of this model to other political parties. This chapter makes conclusions and proposes suitable adaptations to the model before applying the revised hierarchy to the leadership contests of 1988, 1999, 2006 and 2007 and establishes the key reasons for each candidates' victory. The necessity to consider the model's applicability lies in the distinct position the Liberal Democrats take in the electoral landscape in contrast to the Labour and Conservative parties, namely the fact that since 1988 the prospect of the party winning a majority government has not been seen as a likely outcome of a general election, and thus considerations on both 'policy' and the terms of a leader's 'victory' are different to that of the two largest parties and as such this work forms a new model to offer explanation of the results studied.

The chapter seeks to make a contribution to what is the - relatively – more limited literature relating to how party leaders are chosen. Notable works that do address this area are Stark (1996), Punnett (1992), Watkins (1998), Heppell ((2007), and (2010)), Denham and O'Hara (2008) and, more recently, Quinn (2012). The main body of literature is, however centred on the leadership selection of the main two parties, with the Liberal Democrats restricted to little more than passing comment, or an overview. There are exceptions with journal contributions relating to the party's leadership elections, or leaders resignations, from Alderman and Carter

(2000), Quinn (2010, 2012), Denham and Dorey (2007), Brack (2007) and McAnulla (2009, 2010). The role of the Liberal Democrats in British politics, and especially the role in Coalition Government, demonstrates the importance of rectifying this. The assertion that Liberal Democrat leadership contests “were uniquely tedious affairs” (Francis, 2010:91) is something that will also be challenged. The chapter will adapt a theoretical model offered by Stark (1996). The model is a simple and clear approach to adopt, but one which has not been extensively utilised- though notably it is in relation to the Liberal Democrats by Quinn (2012) and Denham and Dorey (2007). The clarity of this model allows due consideration to be paid to all aspects of the contests, whilst providing a useful structure to distinguish between these. The ‘pyramid’, which reflects the importance of each criterion in relation to each other, is also a useful analogy to explain the significance of the respective strengths and weaknesses of the candidates namely:

- Unity – the ability to unite the party
- Attention – the ability to garner attention for the party
- Strategy – the strategy to gain influence for the party and what policies are advocated

The second chapter will adopt an approach utilised by Tim Bale in analysing drivers of party change, and once again test the suitability of the approach to the Liberal Democrats, propose suitable adaptations and analyse the policy and strategy developments between 1988 and 2015, and draw conclusions as to the key drivers of change and the role of the leaders over this period. Once again, the use of frameworks to analyse, rather than commentate, on change within the Liberal Democrats is lacking. As such, taking an established framework that has been utilised in relation to other parties and reapplying it to the Liberal Democrats is the approach adopted once again in this chapter. In doing so, alongside showing the flexibility of the framework used, the limitations of it in relation to third parties will also be highlighted and addressed. This makes a unique, dual-pronged offering that expands both the framework’s credibility and breadth of application, and the literature in relation to the Liberal Democrats in this regard. It is a framework set out by Bale (2012b) which is utilised; it establishes three primary drivers of change in political parties – a change of leader, electoral defeat and change of factions within a party. He is clear that these should not be treated as independent, or exhaustive, variables and they draw on earlier work by Harmel and Janda. Alongside considering what drives change, attention is also given to the extent of change. The areas considered in this respect will be the public face of the party, the approach and organisation of the party, and changes in policy. As in the first chapter the necessity to adapt the model lies in the place the party occupies. For example, an electoral defeat, in the sense of obtaining an overall majority, may be a partial explainer in what drives change in the Liberal Democrats,

but there is a need for a broader and fuller explanation, which this chapter will set out. Bale rightly notes in the introduction to his work (Bale, 2012b:1-13) that there are a wide range of things that can drive change within parties, and similarly a wide range of changes that could be identified. His approach in focussing onto sizeable areas of particular importance will form the basis of this work. Harmel and Janda set out a framework which Bale uses as the basis of his analysis, at the base of which is the identification of what ‘change’ in a party is and how it can occur. Clearly there are a multitude of changes which flux from party to party and instance to instance, but Bale’s highlighting of three key areas of importance serve as a useful framework to utilise, namely:

- Public Face – the way the party appears to the public, or seeks to present itself
- Approach and organisation – how the party is organised and seeks to achieve its objectives
- Policy – the policies and strategic objectives the party seeks to achieve

There is a degree of subjectivity as to what contributes towards each of these aspects, which should be recognised, but where a justifiable decision in respect to what is or is not included exists it allows more systematic observations and analysis to be discussed. In utilising this framework for the Liberal Democrats, consideration will be paid to formal objectives and less formal objectives. To take an example, the manner an incumbent utilises the presidency of the party to pursue media coverage may influence the public face of the party but is not necessarily a formal objective beyond that individual. It is still of relevance so would be noted. Equally, as with any collection of actors, there will be a multitude of individual objectives that are being pursued at any given time and it would not be useful to seek to incorporate all of these into a study, so a modicum of common sense underpins some exclusions and inclusions. In addition to the three areas identified above, consideration will also be given to the role of equidistance in the party. Equidistance is a term that features throughout literature related to the Liberal Democrats (examples are numerous but include (Evans and Sanderson-Nash, 2011; Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005; Cutts, 2011; Ashdown, 2000; Quinn et al., 2011). It relates to the treatment of the party towards the main two; are the Liberal Democrats closer to Labour, the Conservatives or ‘equidistant’ to both? This has at times been publicly and formally adopted or dropped and the second chapter will consider this alongside the three other defined areas of change.

In addition to identifying loci of change, Bale also offers explanation as to the driver of these changes. Drivers of change can be internal or external to the party; that is to say a driver of change can be entirely, or partly outside the structure or membership of the party; or an active part of it. The causality and correlation of change has to be considered in any change, and this

will likely vary depending on if change is a ‘shock’ or ‘gradual’, in the case of gradual change it is likely that more than one factor will have influence. As with the loci of change, there are number of things that can drive change, but the three primary drivers identified by Bale will be adapted and utilised here, namely:

- Leader- changes driven by the change in leader, or their preferences and priorities
- Electoral performance, or anticipation of electoral performance – changes driven in the face of an electoral outcome, or anticipation of one
- Dominant factions – changes driven by a particular faction, or group within the party outside of the leadership

These terms – which should not be conceived as exhaustive, or indeed independent of each other - will be clearly defined and applied to draw conclusions as to what drives change in the Liberal Democrats, and the extent to which this has varied over the period being studied. As with the first chapter, adaptations to an established academic model are required to suit the Liberal Democrats – or indeed any other UK party that is not one of the largest two.

Lastly, in the third chapter, Langer’s work on party leaders and their visibility provides the starting point for analysis of the leaders in each general election, considering their visibility in relation to the party, the type and level of coverage they secured and offering conclusions on the development and performance of the Liberal Democrat leaders over 6 general election campaigns. Coverage of the Liberal Democrats – as with all parties – increases during the short campaign, but also increases as a share of coverage, particularly in relation to broadcast media. Whilst this means that the analysis pertains to an atypical period, it is also an important one – directly ahead of general elections – where one would suspect coverage to be more impactful. That means that the conclusions made will be in relation to leaders and election campaigns, rather than the personalisation and visibility of leaders in other parts of the electoral cycle. The other key question is the degree to which personalisation of leaders has occurred through this period – that is whether the coverage of leaders has increased or decreased, and if so whether this has become more focussed on them as individual actors, rather than as a spokesperson or figurehead for the party as a whole. This is a contention advanced by some (Foley 1993,2000, 2002; Mughan, 2000) and should be properly analysed in respect to the Liberal Democrats. To achieve this samples of newspaper coverage from each election will be coded and analysed to assess the visibility of each leader in each election, and the degree, and type of personalisation of this coverage. Trends will then be identified, and conclusions offered as to whether coverage has become more focussed on party leaders, and what the coverage is defined by. There is more limited literature in this area than may be expected, though key works that will be drawn on include (Langer, 2007; Mughan, 2012;

Mughan, 2000; Bartle and Crewe, 2002; Crewe and King, 1994; Langer and Sagarzazu, 2017; Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014; Langer, 2011; Langer, 2009; Boumans et al., 2013). In particular Langer's approach to combining studies of leadership with that of general election campaigns will form the basis of the framework that is used. There is established literature on the importance of the personality of a leader in relation to a party's prospects, and also how political parties are developing their campaigns to accentuate the leader (Boumans et al., 2013; Van Aelst et al., 2011; Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014; Adam and Maier, 2010). In addition to this, interviews with key figures from the Liberal Democrats over this period also emphasise the importance of the leader in general election campaigns. These interviews offer a unique insight into the party's leadership over the period being considered.

The chapter as a whole will establish:

- To what extent have the general elections campaigns, and the subsequent coverage, of Liberal Democrat campaigns, and leaders, been personalised?
- Has this increased or decreased over time?
- Why this development – where there is one – has occurred?

The framework that will be used will code a sample of selected coverage to consider how 'visible' the party leader is in coverage of the party's campaign. Of that coverage there will then be codification of:

- The personal qualities of the party leader
- The characteristics of the party leader
- Mentions of the personal life of the party leader

This will allow for quantitative analysis of the concentrated visibility of the party leader, and then the personalisation – or lack of – in the coverage of the leader in general election campaigns. Alongside this, qualitative assessment of coverage, the party's campaigns and leaders' perceptions of their own role will inform overall conclusions.

The chapters draw on a mixture of qualitative and quantitative material. Chapter 3 is predominantly quantitative in nature and focusses on the short campaigns of general elections. In contrast Chapter 2 is drawn more on interview material, academic sources and contemporaneous reporting for developments over the 27-year period of study. Chapter 1 is predominantly qualitative research and focusses on leadership campaigns which last around two months each. As such Chapter 2 is considerably longer than those aside it.



In considering each of these aspects, this thesis will then be able to draw conclusions on the importance of Liberal Democrats leaders in explaining the party's fortunes, construct and political proposition between 1988 and 2015. This in itself is a contribution to the wider literature on the Liberal Democrats, however the application of three distinct theoretical frameworks is an original contribution to literature in relation to the party, but also to the application of these frameworks. Establishing that theoretical approaches that have been utilised in respect to the Conservative and Labour parties can be applied to other parties – particularly one like the Liberal Democrats which has not been perceived to be approaching the parliamentary representation required to govern as a majority, supports the strength of the models used. The fact they need adaptation to enhance their explanatory power in relation to the Liberal Democrats is another original contribution and opens up further possibilities for research in respect to other Liberal Democrat leaderships, as well as that of other UK parties. Whilst each chapter engages thoroughly with distinct theoretical frameworks and will answer the questions outlined above, at the heart of this work is establishing:

- Who becomes the leader of the Liberal Democrats and why?
- What changes did they drive when they were leader, and was this dependent on their being leader?
- To what extent has coverage of Liberal Democrat election campaigns focussed on the party leader, to what extent is that coverage personalised, and has this changed over the period of study?

Or at its most succinct:

- Who has led the Liberal Democrats, and what impact have they had on the party?

## **CHAPTER ONE: ELECTING THE PARTY LEADER**

This first chapter considers what it takes to become the leader of the Liberal Democrats, evaluates each contest and candidate and offers explanations as to why each was successful.

Alongside drawing on contemporaneous reporting of each contest and primary interview materials this chapter will make an contribution to the application of theoretical frameworks to leadership elections by adapting and applying an approach pioneered by Leonard Stark to considering why candidates are successful in leadership elections (1996). It will also be informed by analysis offered by Punnett (1992) and Heppell (2007 and (2010)). The approach of this chapter will differ from the work of Stark and Punnett in that it will treat each leadership contest distinctly, applying detailed analysis to the contests, as well as being informed by new primary material. The chapter will instead adopt a similar approach to that established by Heppell (2007 and (2010), offering analysis of each leadership contest in turn whilst applying thematic analysis.

By adapting and then utilising a framework which draws on established literature, this analysis will make a contribution to literature in this area, allow for some conclusions as to the suitability of existing frameworks to UK parties beyond the Labour and Conservative parties and set out what could be used as a basis for further research in other leadership contests in the Liberal Democrats, or other political parties. The framework proposed in this chapter could be applied to parties such as the Greens or UKIP. A strength to adopting a similar approach to Stark in setting out a 'pyramid' of criteria is that it is concise, clear and visually reflects the notion of a hierarchy of competences in an effective manner.

**Figure 1: Getting on the Ballot Paper (adapted from: Liberal Democrats, 2018)****Getting on the ballot paper- the rules for leadership candidacy**

The rules outlining who could stand for leadership of the party have changed since the party was formed.

The 1988 contest was the first held under the provisions of the Party's new constitution.

Until 2005, only two MPs were required to nominate a prospective candidate but this was increased to 10% of the Parliamentary Party. Additionally, to counter problems where MPs would nominate multiple candidates without intending to vote for them, each MP was limited to nominating one candidate from 2005. (Waugh, 2006), (Kelley, 2007)

As of 2018 the requirements for nomination are:

*“Nominations must be of a Member of the Parliamentary Party in the House of Commons, who must be proposed by at least ten percent of other members of the Parliamentary Party in the House of Commons and supported by 200 members in aggregate in not less than 20 Local Parties (including, for this purpose, the Specified Associated Organisations representing youth and students).”*

Each leadership election will then be considered against these criteria. Throughout this chapter those voting for the party leader- i.e. Parliamentarians and party members will collectively be referred to as the selectorate. In terms of how the leader is chosen, the Liberal Democrats' constitution requires that an electoral system of 'one member one vote' is used to elect both the Party Leader using the Single Transferable Vote electoral system. Whilst this has at times been amended, substantively the rules have remained broadly similar throughout the party's history – more notable changes are discussed later in this chapter, however. In terms of removal of the party leader, there is provision in the constitution for triggering a leadership election in certain circumstances. These are:

- Leader calls an election
- Leader dies or is incapacitated
- Leader loses his Parliamentary seat
- Leader resigns or declares intention to resign
- Majority of all Liberal Democrat MPs pass motion of no confidence
- 75 local parties write to the Liberal Democrat president demanding election
- Anniversary of previous general election passed without leadership contest. Federal Executive can postpone contest for a further 12 months by two-thirds majority. Entire rule dis-applies when leader is a member of Government.

(Quinn, 2012:134)

On each occasion a leadership election has been triggered by the resignation of the incumbent leader, though as will be discussed the circumstances were very different each time.

### **The Stark Model**

Leonard Stark sets out three reasons for a candidate standing, and three criteria upon which they are ultimately selected in his 1996 work 'Choosing a Leader: Party Leadership Contests in Britain from Macmillan to Blair': to win; to raise awareness; or to establish oneself as a viable candidate for the future (Stark, 1996:99). He contends that most candidates stand to win, something that is true in Liberal Democrat Leadership Elections too (Appendix One). The main consideration of this chapter will be to consider how each candidate sought to win, as that was generally their aim. When this aim differed, this will be discussed.

Specifically in relation to who stands, Stark notes that "It appears that leadership candidates enter the Commons at a significantly younger age than those MPs who never stand for elections" (Stark, 1996:82) and of the Liberal Democrats that, "Given the small number of MPs ... it is unsurprising that their leadership candidates typically serve less than 12 years in the Commons before standing. This compares with 19.2 years of parliamentary experience for Conservative candidates and 21.1 years for Labour candidates" (Stark, 1996:82). The Stark model, however, lacks explanatory power in assessing the importance of formal Parliamentary experience; in contrast to his suggestion, in both 1988 and 2007 the successful candidate was less experienced than the Parliamentary Party as a whole. Interestingly in 2006 and 2007 the average experience of all the candidates was less than that of the Parliamentary Party as a whole too.

In fact, in 1988 and 2006 the candidate with the most parliamentary experience did not win- in 2007 both candidates had the same amount of Parliamentary experience, so it is only in 1999 where the most experienced candidate won- and even then it was the younger of the two candidates who shared the most experience. Cowley has put forward the idea that there has been a general shift towards candidates with less direct parliamentary experience, arguing:

The fact that British politics has ended up with such inexperienced leaders, therefore, does not appear to be a fluke, but seems rather the result of a change in the nature of the candidates now considered to be suitable leadership material (Cowley, 2012:34)

He also contrasts the succession of leaders seen at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup>:

Brown thus had 24 years of Commons experience at the point at which he became Labour leader; he was replaced by someone with five. Howard had 20 years' experience of the Commons when he became Conservative leader; he was replaced by someone with four. And Campbell had 19 years'

experience when he became Liberal Democrat leader and was replaced by someone with just two. (Cowley, 2012:32-33)

However, it must be noted that Clegg, Cameron- and later Miliband- had broader political experience outside of Parliament, and their successors in turn – May, Corbyn, Farron and Cable are experienced Parliamentarians.

As for what makes for a successful candidate, Stark outlines three criteria, based on the work of Gunnar Sjoblom (1968). Stark represents these criteria as a pyramid, with the importance of each criteria reflected in how close it is depicted to the base- his Hierarchy of Party Strategic Goals’.

**Figure 2: Hierarchy of Party Strategic Goals (Stark, 1996:125)**



Stark’s contention is that ‘unity’ is the most important criteria; how well a candidate can unite the party is fundamental to winning a leadership contests. The second most important criteria can be summarised as ‘victory’; the likelihood that the candidate will appeal to the wider electorate and deliver an election victory. Thirdly, ‘policy’; what policies the leader will pursue if successful in gaining power.

Each of the criteria applies to a different aspect of leadership, and these are demonstrated in differing ways. Stark summarises this in the form of a table.

**Table 1: Table of Criterion (Stark, 1996:126)**

Order	Arena	Goal	Criterion
1st	Internal	Unity	Acceptability
2nd	Electoral	Victory	Electability
3rd	Parliamentary	Policy	Competence

It has been suggested that the 1988 and 1999 Liberal Democrat contests were determined in accordance with Stark's model, drawing attention to the first two criteria offered, suggesting that the party's members aims were:

first—and arguably foremost—to choose a leader who is broadly acceptable to the Party on ideological grounds; and secondly, to elect the candidate most likely to project the Party's image and policies in a favourable light to the British electorate as a whole (Denham and Dorey, 2007:31)

### **Adapting the Stark Model**

Before considering the cases of the Liberal Democrats' leadership elections, it is necessary to consider how far the Stark model needs to be adapted, if at all.

The first criterion is clear in its meaning, and there is no reason for adaptation. The second criterion proposed by Stark is not adequate in relation to a smaller party in a first-past-the-post system. The reality is few Liberal Democrat members would contend that when electing the leader they are potentially electing a future Prime Minister. Instead consideration has to be given to the positive attention that a leader can capture and maximise to improve the party's electoral showing- a subtle but important difference to the Stark model, which is focussed on the execution of tangible power and decision making.

Denham and Dorey suggest that the first two of Stark's criterion are applicable, however they too have subtly departed from the second criteria set out by Stark ('Victory') instead talking of the ability of a candidate to present the party and its policies in a "favourable light"(Denham and Dorey, 2007). This is not the same as Stark's contention. Duncan Brack, though not directly, also draws attention to this writing:

the more that the leader can establish a Liberal Democrat position that is both memorable and different from those of the other parties, the more effective he will be in projecting the party as a whole. (Brack, 2007:78)

Put simply this change to the Stark model is clearly required.

As well as changing the manner in which the second criterion is considered, the third criterion as outlined by Stark is also inadequate when considering third party leadership elections. In the case of the Liberal Democrats this for two reasons, firstly, insofar that candidates' policy differences have been debated these have predominantly been strategic considerations. For example, the role of 'equidistance', and the party's strategy for entering Government or influencing the Government's agenda has been a consideration in several of the contests in one way or the other.

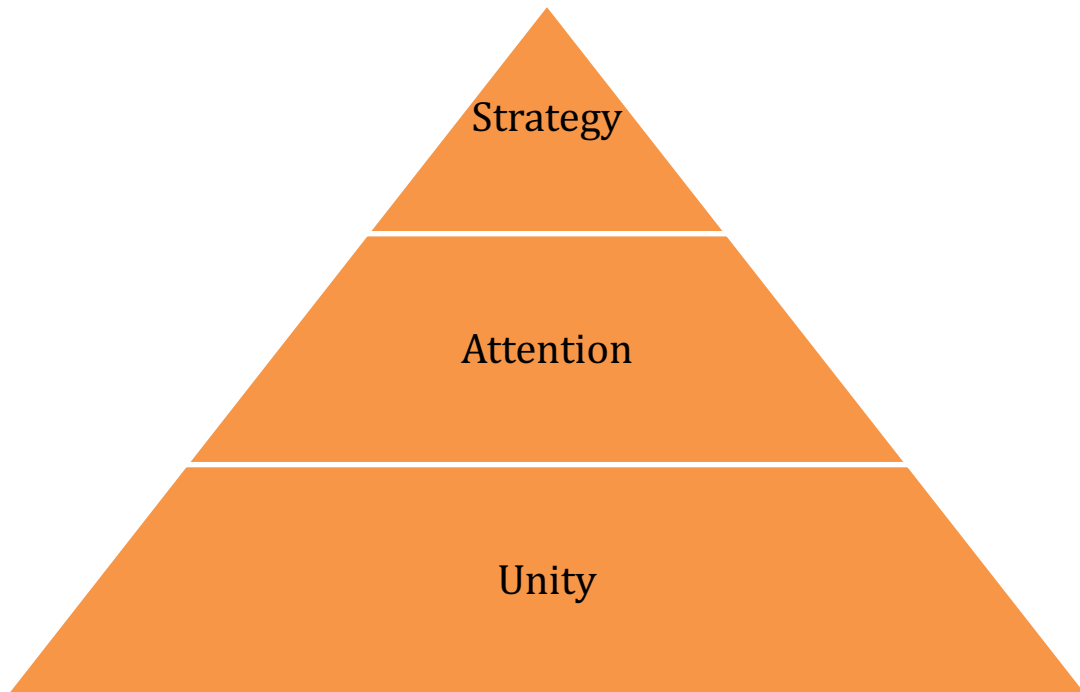
Alongside this there is the important fact that the party's policy is debated and voted on by voting representatives at two annual conferences. As such a leader's view on policy, though important and indeed something that could be a factor in their success, does not in itself determine the party's agenda.

Thus, Stark's description of the third criterion as "competence, the capacity to head a successful government" (Stark, 1996) is a useful point to consider, but has to be married to consideration of the prospective leaders' overall strategic suggestions, which informed much of the coverage and debate in the contests. Indeed, even in the Liberal Party the role of equidistance was a consideration (e.g. Pirie, 2013).

Consideration is also paid to the outside context in which the leadership contest is taking place; leadership elections do not occur in a vacuum and a party's perceived weaknesses; current standing and the general political climate define the terrain on which the contest is ultimately placed. Though not a criterion- falling as it does outside of a candidate's control or competencies, it is nonetheless important to recognise.

Having established the limitations of Stark's model, it does not mean that the explanatory model is redundant although a new model will be adopted. The idea of offering three criteria to help explain party leadership contests is a useful vehicle for analysis and discussion. In the following analysis, however, a new model will be used for analysis, based on the revisions discussed above. The first criteria will be '*Unity*'. This will be a measure of how well a candidate is perceived to be able to unite the party. The second criteria will be '*Attention*'. This will be an assessment of how well a candidate would be able to gain attention for the party, and appeal to the electorate; this is a departure from Stark's model which offers less explanatory power to the leadership elections of third parties. Lastly, the third criteria will be '*Strategy*'. This is an assessment of what the candidates' strategy to gain influence and what policies they advocate are. Again, this contrasts to Stark's more simplistic reference to 'policy'.

**Figure 3- Adapted hierarchy of party strategic goals**



### **1988: A new leader for a new party**

[Ashdown] is the risk taker's choice and nothing much is achieved in politics without risk. The new party does not have an easy decision. It could do with a leader who amalgamates the better qualities of both men. Political instincts rather than rational judgement will probably determine not only who is the new leader of the party but in a real sense its creator. (Editorial, 1988)

The merger process between the Social Democratic Party and the Liberal Party was far from enjoyable, and anything but swift. The process itself began in the aftermath of the 1987 election, and though formal negotiations concluded with the launch of the new party on 3 March 1988 it was not until 1989 that the party was to be christened the Liberal Democrats, after brief flirtations with first the Social and Liberal Democrats (abbreviated by some to 'the Salads') and simply the Democrats (which caused outrage from many former Liberal Party members). Even once a name was settled on it wasn't until 1990 that the 'bird of liberty' was adopted as the party logo-which was quickly derided by Margaret Thatcher as being a 'dead parrot' (Hoggart, 2011).

### **The Candidates**

Nonetheless, once the ink had dried on the formal agreement the decision as to who was to be the party leader became a more pertinent question. Two candidates were ultimately



forthcoming, Paddy Ashdown and Alan Beith. There was little surprise in either of these candidatures, and both were motivated by a desire to win. Reports as early as 1984 had suggested that in the event of a Liberal Party leadership election it would be a contest between Beith and Ashdown (Young, 1984). Young also suggested two other possible candidates- David Penhaligon and Michael Meadowcroft. The former was killed in a car accident in 1986, whilst the latter left the party following the merger. Of the other Parliamentarians who did not stand, Stark singles out Russell Johnston as being a potential candidate, having previously expressed interest in standing for the Liberal Party leadership in 1977. Johnston is quoted as saying, he had “observed at close hand what being leader of the Liberal Party meant in personal terms and I decided that wasn't something I wanted to do”(Quoted in Stark, 1996:96). Ian Aitken speculated on the future suitability of Charles Kennedy, who was then 29, suggesting, “the truth about the bruised and battered SLD is that young Kennedy is almost certainly their best long-term hope. The boy wonder’s only handicap is his youth- something which cures itself with the passage of time” (Aitken, 1988).

Of the two parties incumbent leaders, there was also speculation that Robert Maclennan may stand, and though he did not put himself forward, he did refuse to rule himself out until the close of nominations, whilst Steel had announced he would not stand on 12 May 1988 (Ashdown, 2009: 234) Malcolm Bruce was another who some saw as a possible candidate, though he did not stand due to family reasons, though he notes:

I also didn't think I would beat Paddy; I was quite clear that Paddy had that energy and commitment ... I might have come second which may have made things different in the future but that is under the bridge now- Paddy then, partly also to encourage me to step out of the fray, asked me to come and chair his campaign, which was really just to buy me in. I didn't run the campaign - I just chaired it - and nevertheless I think we became friends over that (Bruce, 2016)

Interestingly, for what is by any measure a hugely important leadership election contest it is not one which receives more than a cursory paragraph in many accounts of the period. For example, Ashdown's own autobiography devotes a little over two pages to the contest (Ashdown, 2009: 234), and other examples are similarly succinct (Cook, 2010) (Williams, 2009:332).

The contest was took place at an expected point in time- following the merger of the SDP and the Liberals- and with two expected candidates (Cook, 2010: 201). There was generally considered to be little difference between the two on policy matters, with *The Guardian* noting that there were “mutual protestations that there were no policy differences between them” (Carvel, 1988a). It became a contest that would be defined by the different vision each

candidate had for the new party, and where they sought to place the party on the political landscape. Beith appealed to the long established history of liberalism, whilst “Ashdown argued strongly for the ambitious strategy to replace Labour as the alternative to the Conservatives” (Punnett, 1992:145). Campbell notes that Beith was, in his view, “the brightest mind by far in the parliamentary party”, but he “backed Ashdown because I thought the party needed to take risks” (Campbell, 2008:113). The support that the candidates found in the Parliamentary Party was grounded largely on this question; Michael Meadowcroft- who was to leave the Liberal Party as a result of the merger- recalls his support for Beith, stating:

I thought that if Alan Beith became leader of the new party there was just a chance that it might become Liberal enough to encompass those who felt bereft. It was nothing personal against Paddy Ashdown, whose company I’ve always enjoyed, but simply a political judgment based on an assessment of their relative consistency and awareness over the preceding years. (Meadowcroft, 1998)

Ashdown also elicited early support from party figures, *The Times* noted,

Lord Jenkins said that Mr Ashdown, SLD MP for Yeovil, would give ‘the most effective leadership’ to the new force in British Politics. In a BBC World Service interview, he said the party need strong and dynamic leadership after a ‘dismaying year’ in which ‘an awful mess had been made of the centre ground of British politics’ (Ford, 1988)

The campaign was noted as being reasonably sedate in most quarters, even described as bland (Francis, 2010:1; Punnett, 1992:145)- but this followed from an initially spikey opening to the contest where the main dividing line was over what place the Liberal Democrats should seek in British Politics. Beith was critical of Ashdown’s aim to seek to replace Labour as the credible alternative to the Conservatives, stating he was “not prepared to see the next general election handed on a plate to Mrs Thatcher or her successor while we conduct a battle for second place with the Labour Party” (Naughtie, 1988a). This provoked Ashdown into responding that Beith was merely offering “another magical mystery tour through the muddled middle of British politics” (Fletcher, 1988a). There was indeed some debate around this point, with Parliamentarians publishing articles that thinly signalled their support for one approach, if not definitely a candidate- Russell Johnston wrote in the *New Democrat*:

What to me makes little sense is the notion that somehow we can tailor our approach so that ‘our aim is to replace Labour’ or ‘our aim is to displace the Tories.’ Both these Parties attract great numbers of people for whom they are the second choice. We have to demonstrate to them that we are a viable option to both. (Johnston, 1988)

Beith recounts his:

biggest motivation of all was that someone had to stand up for Liberals, and Paddy did not at the time ... appear to understand how important identity was to activists... I probably didn't recognise at the time that Paddy offered it quite a lot more of something it certainly needed, which was the ability to appear as a party that was going somewhere (Beith, 2017)

Ashdown's motivation for standing was to advance his ideas and policy agenda:

I was very conscious of one thing that really drove me – there is no bloody point in being a leader unless you know what you want to be a leader for. There is no point to be a leader to just wallow in the bubble bath of leadership (Ashdown, 2016b)

Another area of controversy was to be campaign spending; whilst Beith's campaign expected to spend £5,000, Ashdown's campaign was estimated to spend three times that- though Beith's team suspected his opponent spent close to £30,000 (Fletcher, 1988c), with Ashdown's team pointing to the higher printing costs attached to the more professionally presented literature his team were producing. Whilst Beith says that he recognised from early in the campaign that Ashdown was likely to win (Beith, 2017), he also is clear that he stood with the intention of winning himself,

I didn't say 'right I better go through the motions because someone has to do it', that is too far, but I went into the campaign with a wish to win. (Beith, 2017)

To summarise the contest concisely, Ashdown's campaign focused on professionalising what he saw as a new party, whilst Beith focused his campaign on his experience- a steady hand for important times, and a party that should be proud of its Liberal heritage. There is a lot to be found in a name: Ashdown wanted the party to be referred to as "The Democrats"; Beith was insistent on the inclusion of the word "Liberal".

### **The First Criterion: Unity**

Both candidates could be considered to be a 'unifying' candidate, Stark is one who advances this view. Whilst that is a view, there were a number of differences that it can be argued may have given Ashdown a slight advantage.

Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, Beith was seen as a candidate of the 'Liberal establishment'; having been an MP for 14 years and serving as Chief Whip of the Liberal Party, and Party Chairman he could be considered to be part of the Liberal tradition. Ashdown, who had only been an MP for 5 years, had been quickly noted as a leadership contender of the future (Beith, 2008:119) (Dutton, 2004:269) and though less politically experienced also carried less baggage from either predecessor party. Secondly, and related to this, was the decision of Beith to style himself and his campaign as being part of the Liberal

canon; this emphasis being clear from his description of his politics to his fight to ensure the word “Liberal” remained in the party name, to the release of a campaign document claiming Ashdown was “outside the Liberal tradition” (Punnett, 1992:145). These factors arguably detracted from Beith’s appeal as a unifying candidate, particularly against a backdrop of a newly merged party, which had to establish itself as a credible, united force- made all the more important given the continuity Liberal and SDP parties, the latter of which some feared may continue to garner support. Beith’s strength lay in his track record; he was well respected, held a number of high offices within the party, was experienced and there was little doubt of his liberal credentials- he was seen as one of the ‘old guard’ who would protect the soul of the Liberal Party through the merger process. Ashdown on the other hand had little to do with the protracted, and rocky, merger negotiations. Beith readily admits that he believes “I was tainted by that”(2017:120; Beith, 2008). Tony Greaves and Rachael Pitchford recount two observations of this period, which bear repeating. Firstly, the manner in which negotiations were conducted led to their conclusion that “merger or no merger, Steel and MacLennan were finished as credible national party leaders” (Pitchford and Greaves, 1989:129). Though in and of itself this comment is specific to the two leaders, there is little doubt that the authors felt that the merger negotiations were more a hindrance than a help to political careers.

The second observation is the importance of the suggestion that Beith had ‘set up’ Steel by not adequately warning him of the impact that the new party’s Policy Declaration may have, or the extent of the proposals it contained. The content of this document provoked sufficient controversy to be withdrawn and almost derail the entire merger process. Beith’s involvement, and any possible motives, were hotly contested. Greaves and Pitchford conclude:

Whatever the truth may be, few who dabbled in any way with the merger negotiations came out of them without making enemies along the way. Those people like Paddy Ashdown who had stayed clear of the quagmire lived to be grateful. (Pitchford and Greaves, 1989:110)

Ashdown himself outlines taking the conscious decision to not get involved in the merger process for this very reason. In his autobiography he notes that even as the immediate aftermath of the 1987 election a group of supporters, adopting the title the “Ming Group<sup>1</sup>”, were already discussing the Ashdown’s leadership bid. As for Ashdown himself, he felt:

I should stay out of it altogether...the best place for the ambitious to be when the coup is taking place is somewhere else. (Ashdown, 2009:231)

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<sup>1</sup> The name was chosen as a nod to Menzies ‘Ming’ Campbell who was at this point yet to be elected to Parliament.

Ashdown additionally sought to build links with influential groups within the parties in Parliament. The education portfolio for the Alliance allowed him to be at the forefront of opposing the central plank of educational reforms being introduced by the Thatcher Government. The Liberal Party, in particular, had a strong ‘education bloc’, which Ashdown explicitly recalls planning to target in an upcoming leadership election (Ashdown, 2016b), as well as reaching out to key SDP figures such as Shirley Williams, whilst opposing the Government programme (Ashdown, 2009:231). He notes that he made a deliberate pitch for former SDP members – something that only accentuated his prospectus as a unity candidate:

This was a difference of view between me and Alan but I thought the Liberals PLUS the SDP could make something different. Each of them could add something to a new party... I thought  $2+2=5$ . Alan thought the SDP were coming to join us. (Ashdown, 2016b)

This empire building may have later paid dividends. Whilst Beith played an integral part in the (necessarily) closed-door sessions of negotiating the merger, Ashdown was busy building a power base for the forthcoming leadership election. Significantly, Roy Jenkins, the former SDP leader, endorsed Ashdown- something that can only have helped in regard to coming across as the ‘unity’ candidate.

As the official contest began on June 24<sup>th</sup>, the Ashdown team published the results of a partial survey of SLD councillors showing 330 supporters for Ashdown, 16 for Beith and 124 undecided (Carvel, 1988b), which did somewhat underline where the weight of opinion in the party rested.

The circumstances of each candidate in the period before the leadership election were as important. Ashdown could be many things to many people and focus on establishing a unifying persona based on a new platform. Beith had to adopt a ‘traditional’ Liberal position in merger negotiations to safeguard key areas in the merger compromises, as such he would - in spite of any volition to the contrary- perhaps still be seen as being the more partisan of the two. This was not, however, a uniform view. Martin Fletcher of *The Times* went so far as to argue that

Steel was a figure around who the party could and did unite. Ashdown would dearly love to be the same, and is supported with varying degrees of enthusiasm by a clear majority of SLD MPs. But to a hard core of fervent former Liberals, including a quarter of the parliamentary party, he is a deeply divisive figure. Their dislike and distrust of him is astonishingly intense. (Fletcher, 1988b)

This view is perhaps overstated; however it is fair to say that this reading underlines the extent to which some saw Ashdown as representing a change in direction for the party. Fletcher recounts comments from several SLD MPs,

“We don’t know Paddy or what he believes” said one MP, “The problem,” said another, “is that he’s not a Liberal” (Fletcher, 1988b)

Hughes notes:

There was a higher proportion of people in the parliamentary party who were nervous about Paddy becoming leader than there was in the party as a whole, because they knew him less and they probably regarded him as a brash ‘Johnny come lately’, not been there very long. So in his case, he had to work to gain the confidence and respect of the parliamentary party.(Hughes, 2017)

Whilst Beith was clearly identified as being a Liberal, Ashdown himself is on record as saying he sees himself as being cut from different cloth than other leaders:

I’m probably not a Lib Dem in the same way as David Steel was (Rawnsley et al., 2001:8)

Both candidates had the ability to be seen as a unity candidate, but on balance it was Ashdown who probably had the edge. This is in a large part due to the fact the he kept his hands clean by steering clear of the merger negotiations, but also because he cast his campaign in terms of building a future for the new party, not a continuity of one tradition over another. This should not be overemphasised however; neither candidate was viewed as dogmatic or being solely from one ‘wing’ of the party in the manner seen in some Labour and Conservative leadership contests.

### **The Second Criterion: Attention**

The reality was that neither Ashdown nor Beith were likely to be elected as Prime Minister; what they did need to do was draw attention to the party and appeal to the electorate as a whole.

In this regard, Ashdown was clearly the stronger candidate. An outgoing, charismatic candidate, he sought to set out a pathway for the merged party that, in its simplest expression, focussed on the ‘newness’ of the party, and his aspiration for it to replace the Labour Party as the viable alternative to Conservatism in the country. This aim would, as will be discussed in other chapters, change but at the time of the leadership election was Ashdown’s view. Beith in contrast saw the party’s role as being to fight both parties noting he believed it would take as much effort to displace one party as it would the other. Even Beith’s supporters had to concede that Ashdown was the more charismatic of the two- though some argued that this might not be the most important attribute. with Barbara Beith (first wife to Beith) stating:

he has got, in percentage terms, the largest SLD majority in the country. Either he has charisma or it doesn't matter (Mason, 1988).

Given Beith's strengths lay in his experience and reliability, in some regards his more considered, reserved approach complemented his overall campaign strategy. Whether this would be effective in courting those who did not already vote Liberal is disputable. *The Guardian* released a poll on June 9 that seems to underline this judgement, the top-line figures leading them to report:

Only 7 per cent of respondents said a victory for Mr Beith would make them more likely to vote SLD, against 23 per cent who were attracted by the prospect of an Ashdown leadership (Mckie, 1988).

*The Times* was of the view that:

The choice the Social and Liberal Democrats have to make in voting for a leader to launch their more or less new party is between a safe pair of hands and what is vulgarly called charisma, which in political terms means eye catching star quality. Mr Beith offers the first, Mr Paddy Ashdown the second.(Editorial, 1988)

Once again Beith's main advantage in this criterion was his experience. Richard Wainwright-an influential former MP from Leeds wrote in a letter to the *New Democrat* that

There is a startling contrast between the two candidates in the extent and depth of their service in party management; Alan Beith, in and out of the Commons has brought us out of many hot sports in the torrid political kitchen with selfless disregard for personal acclaim. MPs of the other parties seem to me clear that it is Alan whom they would fear as our leader against them. (Wainwright, 1988)

The new party was at a challenging position in the polls, and Ashdown conceded that the public more widely did not especially acknowledge that a leadership contest was being held. Against this backdrop it was seemingly more appealing to the selectorate to opt for 'charisma' over a 'safe pair of hands.

### **The Third Criterion: Strategy**

In terms of policy differences, this area of consideration is more problematic to analyse, not least because both candidates argued there were not any fundamental differences between them, Beith going so far as to argue that "what [the contest] cannot be, however, is an election based on major policy differences" (Beith, 1988) because in his view the party did not have a 'left-right' divide as in Labour, or a 'wet-Thatcherite' divide as in the Conservatives. He also commented on the importance of the leader not imposing party policy upon members:

“I am strongly opposed to the idea that as leadership candidates we should announce what the party's policies would be under our leadership, as if that democratic process did not exist.” (Beith, 1988)

This had been the case in the Liberal Party, and the role of the Federal Conference in determining policy had been enshrined in the new party's constitution. It is also very important to recognise that this issue didn't exist in a vacuum; there had been a lot of debate in the merger process with a compromise being agreed that removed the 'leaders veto' on policy that the Liberal Party had maintained prior to this (Pitchford and Greaves, 1989:59). With this delicate issue not far from the front of the selectorate's collective mind, it is sensible that the candidates chose to avoid making policy a central pillar of their arguments.

This was underscored by Beith's article for *The Times* on June 3, which carried the clunky subtitle of “Vision of SLD leadership at the head of the existing democratic policy-making machinery”(Beith, 1988). The other key points he set out, alongside the above assertion, were the importance of decentralising power and the way that he saw the party as being fundamentally being about freedom:

I believe [what makes the SLD different] to be about, above all else, freedom; not freedom confined to the successful, as Mrs Thatcher would offer, and not freedom subordinated to the interests of state, class, union or ideology which is the unappetising reality of Labour... Liberalism has been of developing the concept and reality of freedom so that it extended from the few to the many. (Beith, 1988)

In a slight contrast to this, Ashdown developed a message focussed on entitlements and responsibilities, arguably something of a forerunner to New Labour's 'rights and responsibilities.'

The Yeovil MP, widely expected to defeat Mr Alan Beith in the leadership election, will insist that consumer choice is a central part of SLD policy. He will argue the state monopoly over the delivery of social services such as education and health must be broken down, so risking the wrath of leftists wedded to the idea of the state as sole provider. However, he will insist such services must continue to be free at the point of use.

Mr Ashdown is also understood to be talking of adding the idea of personal 'entitlements' to the rights built into social services. (Wood, 1988)

Even then, the divide is bordering on semantic; Beith's aims of extending freedom from the few to the many is not incompatible with Ashdown's proposals. One area that was seen as a possible source of policy tension was over the maintenance of the British nuclear deterrent, with Ashdown having in the past supported a unilateralist position, in contrast to Beith who favoured multi-lateral disarmament (Naughtie, 1988b). This was, however, not to prove the case with Ashdown advocating a multilateralist response, arguing that since his time in the



Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament that the global situation had changed, and his views with it (Oakley, 1988). The biggest division was to be found over where the candidates saw the party being 'positioned.' As already outlined Ashdown saw the party as being of the centre left, whilst Beith sought to move beyond the traditional 'left vs right' arguments. Oakley's question and answer session again provides a useful overview of this argument:

Q: Would you lead the SLD as a party of centre right, pure centre or centre left?

Ashdown: I see our party as centre left. Some say this is dangerous, that we should see ourselves as a centre party. Fine, then don't vote for me. A left of centre party is one which stands for ordinary people against privilege and the abuse of power, one with a profound commitment to the removal of poverty by the redistribution of wealth, the creation of an economy that is fair as well as successful and one committed to the decentralization of power.

Beith: We make a great mistake if we allow ourselves to be trapped in the outdated left-right terminology of the other parties. Left is a term that has become totally identified with the Labour Party. We stand against the authoritarian tradition of both the other parties. The SLD's fundamental approach must be to wrest power from the concentrations in which it is now held and distribute it to the people. We are in the business of putting power into the hands of the people, strengthening their ability to have an effect on their own lives, communities and environment. (Oakley, 1988)

It is this clash of approaches that was the largest difference in policy terms between the two candidates- but even this does not resemble the differences seen between candidates such as 1976 and 1980 Labour leadership contests, or even the 1988 contest between Benn and Kinnock- Heppell presents the ideological spectrum on offer in the form of a table (Heppell, 2010). Take for example the key promise of both candidates to change the locus of power; for Ashdown this is "the decentralisation of power" for Beith it is "the business of putting power into the hands of people". The differences far less black and white than varying shades of yellow.

Further similarities in approach could be seen on the issue of a deal with the continuing SDP to not stand against each other (both Ashdown and Beith were opposed), the name of the new party (both favoured Liberal Democrats). Even in regard to the approach to social policy, there was little difference in the substance of their outlook. Compare:

Ashdown: The SLD should pioneer a new concept of citizenship listing entitlements in the fields of health, welfare and education and acknowledging the Thatcher agenda of choice. If you say a citizen has entitlements you will be moving to an area where the state doesn't have to be the monopoly provider.

...

Beith: It is sensible to use a market mechanism wherever it can produce a better result for the consumer. But the State must recognize what the market cannot do. On housing, for example, the market is not delivering the goods. (Oakley, 1988)

There is a subtle difference in the construction of similar positions; Ashdown starting from a position in assuming the state is a monopoly provider, Beith from one in assuming market forces are a system of delivery. This is significant, but- as in other examples- hardly a chasm of a division.

A key theme that is presented is Ashdown's "new concept of citizenship listing entitlements"- this Q&A was followed two days later with an article by Nicholas Wood for *The Times* entitled "Ashdown raises stakes in leadership election". Wood reported that Ashdown:

is understood to be ready to accept elements of the Thatcherite agenda in his attempt to give the new party a sharp cutting edge on policy and to oust Labour as the main opposition... By raising [these ideas] at this stage, Mr Ashdown is taking a calculated gamble. (Wood, 1988)

This presentational difference is important. Although both candidates are advancing similar positions, Ashdown has cast his prospectus as being a departure from the party's previous platform. This supports his overall message as the candidate of change and 'newness'. In contrast Beith explicitly refers to the work he had done setting up a review through the policy committee, explicitly calling for a 'reassertion' of previous Liberal Party principles- this supported his overall message.

The main difference was each candidate's view of strategy- Ashdown's desire to replace Labour as the main opposition to the Conservatives against Beith's desire to campaign for a Liberal Democrat majority, maintaining equidistance in the case of a balanced parliament. The contrast here is clearer, compare for example Ashdown's statement that:

We must project and project the slogan that Labour is the party of the past, the Tories of the present and the SLD of the future. My constituency within the party consists of those who look to the future. (Oakley, 1988)

To Beith's:

The party's task is to win power to create a fairer and freer society. It must draw from both the old Liberal Party and the old SDP a commitment to values and an ability to campaign for them. (Oakley, 1988)

The clearest divide is between Ashdown's call for the party to 'look to the future' against Beith's position of 'draw on our past.' Ashdown commented:

I think the strategic mistake that [Beith] made in the leadership election was that he wanted to recreate the old Liberal Party, whereas most of the members wanted to create something fresh, something different. (Rawnsley et al., 2001)

Whilst the policy differences were limited, for a newly merged party what mattered more was a message that resonated on the ‘grand vision’ of what the party would become. In this regard, Ashdown’s position was more appealing; many SDP members had not been a member of a political party before it was formed and were thus perhaps less likely to be swayed by appeals to the Liberal Party’s history. This was also reflected in the support for each candidate, see figure 4.

The contrast between a radical, cross party approach to...the more traditional approach to perpetuating old-style Liberalism in the new party could not have been more marked (Smith, 1999:19).

**Figure 4 - Supporters of Paddy Ashdown and Alan Beith (Smith, 1999:19)**

<b>Supporters of Paddy Ashdown</b>	<b>Supporters of Alan Beith</b>
Malcolm Bruce (Campaign Chair)	Geraint Howells MP (Campaign Chair)
Archy Kirkwood MP	Cyril Smith MP
Tim Clement Jones	Alex Carlile MP
Des Wilson	David Alton MP
Alan Leaman.	Lord Mackie
Matthew Taylor MP	Richard Wainwright
Richard Livsey MP	Annette Penhaligon
Ronnie Fearn MP	Andrew Gifford
Ming Campbell MP	Roger Roberts
Tom McNally (SDP)	
Lindsay Granshaw (SDP)	
Anne Sofer (SDP)	
Dennis Marquand (SDP)	
Roy Jenkins (SDP)	
Shirley Williams (SDP)	

## The Result

<b>Paddy Ashdown</b>	<b>41,401</b>
Alan Beith	16,202
Total ballots issued	80,104
Total ballots returned	57,790
Turnout	71.9%

(Rosenstiel, 2010)

## Why Ashdown Won

Ashdown met each of the three criteria to a greater extent to Beith. In terms of providing party unity, this advantage was narrowest with both candidates clearly recognising the importance of building a strong foundation for the party. Beith, in contrast, to Ashdown sought to emphasise the Liberal and SDP traditions, which inevitably elevated the former, and in doing so perhaps could be seen to be the less unifying of the two. Broadly speaking, however, the two were reasonably evenly matched.

The second criterion, attention, is more distinct. Ashdown was widely perceived as more energetic, charismatic and having only been in Parliament for 5 years was not seen as an establishment figure. Beith was seen as a safer, more experienced option; the less risky choice. If the leadership contest was taking place in either of the two larger parties, Beith's competencies and experience in Parliament may have carried added value, but for the Liberal Democrats, and any third party, it is gaining attention and votes which are paramount. In this regard Ashdown clearly held an advantage.

The last criterion is more complex. In terms of specific policy areas, there was little to divide the pair. Where differences did lie were in the overall electoral strategy, with Ashdown wanting to replace Labour as the opposition to the Conservatives, and Beith seeking to actively campaign against both opposition parties. This was communicated through Ashdown setting out his stall for a 'centre left' party, and Beith one which would 'oppose the authoritarianism of the two main parties'. With a Labour party still failing to seriously break into Thatcher's majority Ashdown's proposition did carry some appeal. The prospect of 'equidistance' had

also led to some confusion during the Alliance's 1987 campaign so Beith's position could have been construed as 'more of the same' - an attack Ashdown certainly did employ.

Put simply, the outcome of the election hinged more on personal competencies and characteristics than strategic differences. Ashdown's personal charisma and perceived freshness was a decisive factor in securing his leadership victory. This was underpinned by a strategic message that appeal to the future and set out a new electoral strategy.

Whilst Beith was clearly the more Parliamentary experienced candidate, and perhaps seen as a safer option, for a new party desperately seeking to widen its electoral appeal these were attributes valued less highly than those of Ashdown.

## **1999 The End of the Project**

It was the British people that made Paddy's agenda disappear when they gave Blair a majority of 160 (Brack, 2008:41)

### **The end of the Project: Ashdown resigns**

By 1999 Ashdown had accepted that 'the Project' - the close work between the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties - had run its course. He announced his decision to stand down as leader on January 20<sup>th</sup> 1999.

Ashdown had overseen the party's merger, staved off bankruptcy and secured 46 MPs in the 1997 Election, an increase in the number of Liberal Democrat Councillors by 40%, proportional representation for the elections to the European Parliament, and the establishment of Joint Committee of Electoral Reform for Westminster. Even those who criticised his style of leadership had to recognise his impact. Ashdown's diaries suggest that he had intended to stand down around this time at any rate and the timing was as much to do with it being an opportunity he took as anything, with arguably his main goals all achieved - a point as observed by some academics (Alderman and Carter, 2000:312).

There was, however, undeniably unease amongst supporters, and Parliamentarians at how close Ashdown was to Blair with some feeling he had too much invested in a project that would not come off. Russell and Fieldhouse offer a contrary view stating:

It was tempting to see Ashdown's resignation as the public acknowledgement that the Project has run its course (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005:43)

This unease had not manifest itself in any serious moves to remove him as party leader, however. Though the 1998 Spring Conference passed a 'triple lock' this was an exercise in

erecting a hoop Ashdown would have to jump through rather than an attempt to remove him from post.

**Figure 5: The Triple Lock (Spring Conference 1998)**

The Triple Lock

*Conference notes the absence of specific constitutional provisions which clearly define the Party's approach to gaining positive consent to proposals for an important change in strategy or positioning;*

*i) in the event of any substantial proposal which could affect the Party's independence of political action, the consent will be required of a majority of members of the Parliamentary Party in the House of Commons and the Federal Executive; and*

*ii) unless there is a three-quarters majority of each group in favour of the proposals, the consent of the majority of those present and voting at a Special Conference convened under clause 6.6 of the Constitution; and*

*iii) unless there is a two-thirds majority of those present and voting at that Conference in favour of the proposals, the consent of a majority of all members of the Party voting in the ballot called pursuant to clause 6.11 or 8.6 of the Constitution.*

The decision to part on his own terms is important. Firstly, prospective candidates had a prolonged period to prepare for the contest. Secondly, no one had 'wielded the knife' to bring about his resignation and thus were not tarnished by such an association. The party was largely united. Essentially the context of the 1999 leadership election was one of a prolonged, calmer discussion, where candidates could seek to be more than a unifying figure. A contentious aspect of the contest was the election timetable. Though Ashdown announced his decision in January, he was to remain leader until later in the year something that drew criticism within the party as there was a European Election campaign in this transition period where Ashdown was yet to stand down as leader. This effectively led to a period of 'pre-campaigning' where some candidates mobilised to build up their power bases ahead of the summer contest, including a new innovation which were structured hustings. These were held before nominations closed and focused on different policy areas though some felt that they were organised in a way that limited the opportunity for candidates to set out their agenda for the party (Smith, 1999:22). The reaction of leadership contenders to the Project would inform much of the debates in the weeks of the campaign which would ultimately see five candidates on the ballot paper, though at one stage this could easily have been more.

## The Candidates

Kennedy was arguably the least surprising candidate and he emerged the favourite in the contest ((Ashdown, 2001:384) and (Woolf, 1999a)). Hughes too was not a surprise candidate- he was more sceptical of Ashdown's project than Kennedy and had served in Parliament since winning the Bermondsey by-election in 1983.

Kennedy had been tipped as a future leader for years and had held a wide range of portfolios in the party. Duncan Brack suggested that he had been planning for the election for some time:

He was an obvious contender for the leadership when Ashdown decided to go, and friends in the party, based mainly around the Reformer magazine, began urging him to make preparations from mid-1998. (Brack, 2007:84)

James Gurling confirms that a group had been formed well in advance of the contest

Writing Charles' - manifesto is probably too strong word for it - campaign literature was substantially, easy, because those details, the Q&As, were already settled - it was about how to present it. (Gurling, 2019)

Hughes was arguably Kennedy's greatest challenge from the outset. A well-known individual in the party, he had been expected to be one of those seeking to be the candidate for the role of London Mayor but he announced he would not seek the role in anticipation of the leadership election (Alderman and Carter, 2000:317). He had not been anticipated to be the winner, however, and his eventual performance (easily securing second place) was in some respects surprising, Paul Waugh at the time commented:

it became clear that Simon Hughes's popularity among activists was much greater than many pundits, not to mention his rivals for the "left wing" mantle, had anticipated. (Waugh, 1999)

Hughes explained his motivation for standing as

I believed firstly I could give a more energetic leadership, secondly the party needed to grow in England and urban areas and not just around the Celtic fringe and thirdly I thought that I could probably – Charles had great communication skills and was very well known on particular airwaves – but I thought that I could excite a lot of people to join the party and engage minority communities (Hughes, 2017)

Whilst Kennedy was seen as the favourite by many (e.g. (Brack, 2007), (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005) and (Schaefer, 1999)) Cook takes a contrary view, suggesting that Hughes was the strongest candidate (Cook, 2010:249). Whilst the former view seems more credible, the diagnosis that Hughes and Kennedy were the strongest contenders is sound.

Malcolm Bruce ruled out extending co-operation with Labour beyond the remit of the Joint Committee and was seen as another ‘anti-Project’ candidate. Whilst he would suggest an increase to that tax threshold, Matthew Parris concluded of his performance at a hustings “Malcolm Bruce was fine, but prompts the question: Why?”(Parris, 1999). The main challenge Bruce faced was creating a distinctive reason for his candidature; why was his approach distinctive to Kennedy or Hughes, what unique traits could he bring to the party leadership?

Jackie Ballard’s decision to stand was largely due to her perceived support amongst the party’s grassroots, enhanced by her work as a former Councillor, and her opposition to the Project. She also sought to advocate a change in leadership style arguing that Ashdown had been too aggressive in his rhetoric:

Paddy Ashdown is guilty of using military allusions which do not necessarily connect with women.(N.A, 1999)

David Rendel was seen as another outsider and also opposed co-operation with Labour (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005:44). An old-Etonian, he was seen as being to the right of the party, with one journalist noting his “clipped accent and decent, cheery style would have a Festival of Britain audience waving their trilbys and throwing their ration books into the air”(Parris, 1999). Hughes bluntly offered his view of his candidacy:

David Rendel was a maverick in the extreme and it was frustrating and a lot of efforts were made to discourage him(Hughes, 2017)

Most notable in his absence from the field was Ming Campbell- someone who Ashdown had expected may put himself forward, and even described him as the wild card who could beat Kennedy(Ashdown, 2001:384). Alderman and Carter suggest:

he had concluded that he could not win and wished to avoid the damage that a defeat would do to his standing. At 57, there was clearly no question of his wishing to use the election to put down a marker for the future (2000:316)

Campbell for his part argues that he recognised the party wanted a change of direction:

[the members] were ready for something else. And it didn’t seem to me that someone who had been so close as I had could provide that something else. (Brack, 2008)

Significantly, Nick Harvey and Matthew Taylor also chose to back Kennedy- the latter taking up the post as his campaign manager, though both had been touted as possible candidates in the lead up to the election (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005:45). Also absent was Don Foster, who had initially expressed his intention to stand. Foster was in favour of extending co-operation with Labour and an enthusiast for Ashdown’s project, his decision was reportedly



informed largely by his belief that he could not beat Kennedy (Lansdale, 1999), and that he had received assurances from Kennedy that he would continue to work with Labour (The Independent, 1999).

Thus, the five candidates who put themselves forward and were nominated, Kennedy was seen as the most warm to Ashdown's project - though he was not a 'pro-Project' as others who did not stand. The other four candidates could only be described as sceptical, although Quinn notes that all five candidates were more wary of co-operation with Labour than Ashdown (Quinn, 2012:137).

### **The First Criterion: Unity**

In terms of their ability to unite the party the candidates varied. Kennedy, the eventual winner, was seen as a gifted communicator and popular amongst the wider party (Schaefer, 1999), as well as being backed by most of the party's MPs and 'armchair membership' (Brack, 2007:84). Regular television appearances boosted his profile as a charismatic individual, and his long involvement with the party- having been elected in 1983- meant he also had a strong network of supporters. A senior strategist explained that:

Curiously, although he's been a politician almost all his adult life, [Kennedy] comes across as somebody who's a little bit detached from politics, a bit more relaxed than the average politician. He looks like a human being (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005:45).

Cook noted that Kennedy drew strong backing from across the party- a "near unassailable line-up of supporters. There was not only Shirley Williams, Ming Campbell and Don Foster [but] also the Chief Whip, Paul Tyler, the Campaigns' Chairman, Nick Harvey and the former Chief Whip... Archie Kirkwood"(Cook, 2010:250).

He had the backing of a clear majority of Parliamentary colleagues, and was clearly the most unifying candidate amongst the Parliamentary Party with 25 supporting him by the close of nominations (Alderman and Carter, 2000). Kennedy sought to position himself 'above the contest', firstly by – at least overtly - adhering to the 'no open campaigning' rules set out following Ashdown's resignation at the start of the six month campaign (Alderman and Carter, 2000) and then "running an above-the-fray "statesman" campaign"(Riddell, 1999). Doing so meant initially less direct engagement with other candidates, and allowed him to position himself as the voice of the party- a clear example being his decision to debate the merits of the Euro with John Redwood. Geographically, Kennedy would find strong backing in Scotland and his decision to appoint Truro MP Matthew Taylor to lead his campaign was seen as being an important one in establishing support in the South-West, a Liberal Democrat

heartland (Cook, 2010). Kennedy himself recognised the importance in uniting the party base in a Q&A with *The Scotsman* when asked why he would make the best leader he replied, with an answer that carried more than a grain of truth:

The leader must unite the party...I'm encouraged that my support comes from all sections of the party-including a majority of our MPs. (*Scotsman*, 1999)

Simon Hughes was seen as being of the 'left' of the party, and Brack suggests "was often seen as erratic and populist" (Brack, 2007:84). He was one of only two MPs to vote against the extension of the remit of the Joint Cabinet Committee in 1998 (Alderman and Carter, 2000:317). In the context of the election where distinction from Labour was a key battleground area this perception is arguably not as negative as it may have become by 2006. His team's announcement that he had established a regional network of 22 campaigns offices within days of nominations opening reflected his broad geographical appeal, as well as his team's organisation (Alderman and Carter, 2000:320). He emphasised his Welsh upbringing, contrasting it to his inner London constituency – a juxtaposition to Kennedy's Celtic roots. Whilst he did not secure the wide backing of Kennedy in the Parliamentary Party, he was able to announce the backing of 200 constituency parties early in the campaign (Alderman and Carter, 2000), and understood the importance of unifying the party:

A precondition of being a good leader of our party – as any other – is that you have confidence of colleagues (Hughes, 2017)

Hughes, however, believes he had been slower off the mark than Kennedy,

Paddy stated his intentions at the beginning of the year. Charles got up and started doing stuff, running around, and I was loath to start... I think it is not impossible – let me put it like that – that if I had started in January, there was the team there, that I could have won, but I didn't! (Hughes, 2017)

Bruce was the former leader of the Party in Scotland and had shadowed the Labour Chancellor, Gordon Brown, which had led to "a mutual 'animosity over tax and spending'" (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005:44). Early in the campaign he said that he believed "he is picking up grass roots support from among those sceptical about moves towards an alliance securing Liberal Democrat seats in the cabinet"(Perry, 1999a). He was well regarded in the party as a political heavyweight and his third place in the contest reflected that, though he secured only three nominations from within the Parliamentary Party. As for his motivation for his standing he points to a regret to not standing in 1988 (Bruce, 2016) and a concern that if Kennedy did not win, that it may mean Hughes, who he differed from on economic issues, could emerge as winner:

I also felt Charles was a risk, and that if Charles messed ... I think I was there as a 'Plan B' emergency (Bruce, 2016)

Ballard was only elected to Parliament in 1997 and was not predicted to have much impact on the contest. However, she had chaired the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors- a key powerbase in a party wedded to the idea of localism (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005:44). She emphasised the fact that though she held a seat in the south-west, she had been born in Scotland and educated in Wales- as with other candidates there was a clear desire to appeal to the Party's heartlands (Alderman and Carter, 2000:323). For all her 'anti-establishment' positioning Ballard in some regards alienated voters more open to the prospect of work with Labour through her rhetoric more so than an especially unique position on the issue. Amongst Parliamentary colleagues, she lacked support initially securing just two nominations.

Rendel was seen as being to the right of the party- at odds with the party membership, who identified more as centre-left than centre-right (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005:119) though some who saw him speak at hustings were impressed. One activist commented

when you come to the hustings- you realise that it is people like David Rendel who are the hub of the party (Schaefer, 1999).

This would be encouraging, except only a tenth of members are estimated to have attended any of the hustings (Alderman and Carter, 2000:325). Amongst Parliamentary colleagues he secured just two supporters to nominate him. The notable lack of press coverage that accompanying his bid reflected the lack of support required for him to be a serious candidate.

In regard to the first criterion Hughes and Kennedy had a clear advantage. The former quickly established a national network of campaign centres and was known to be sceptical of closer links to Labour. Kennedy, on the other hand, was a unifying candidate within the Parliamentary Party, was well known and recognised as well as being a long serving MP. Hurst notes that "In a pattern repeated throughout Kennedy's subsequent leadership, senior Lib Dems began to rally to Charles Kennedy to stop Simon Hughes from taking charge of the party"(Hurst, 2006:99). Of the other candidates, Rendel was the least unifying. Ballard was appealing to the Local Government base of the Party but lacked support amongst Parliamentary colleagues. On the other hand, Bruce was a unifying figure, well regarded for his work in Scotland- there was little doubt he would be able to hold the party together, the fact he did not perform better in the final election lies more in a weakness in the second criterion.

Crucially too, there was a recognition between both the front runners that party unity was important, and that after the contest there would be a need to move forward together. The two went so far as to make an agreement:

Charles and I did a deal before the election – we went to the National Liberal Club and we talk through what would happen and we agreed that whoever won would offer the other the choice of whatever they wanted to do, and Charles honoured that. (Hughes, 2017)

### **The Second Criterion: Attention**

In terms of the second criterion, there are two aspects, which are important to consider in the case of this election: the individuals' current ability to gain the party support, and how this could be enhanced if they were to gain the exposure afforded to the party leader. Axiomatically those with a media platform were at an advantage, but it is not the only factor to consider. In the 1988 contest both candidates had a comparable profile, whereas in 1999 this was not the case.

There was clearly an advantage for two candidates- Kennedy and Hughes. Turning attention first to the other three candidates, Ballard received the most attention for her commitment to promote women's representation in parliament, and combatting voter disengagement. Ballard was noted for doing the most to seek to raise her standing through the campaign:

Ballard was a particularly good self-publicist; numerous press releases exploiting her position as the sole woman contestant made her the subject of several newspaper interviews and profiles (Alderman and Carter, 2000:319)

Rendel was disadvantaged in regard to this criterion. He had not been elected for long and lacked an existing media profile. Mentions of him throughout the campaign were sparse and varied- though he was once cruelly likened to a "sip of warm water"(Schaefer, 1999). Rendel was also observed as being "The only candidate who could attract wavering Conservatives" (Parris, 1999)- not necessarily the strongest asset in 1999. Bruce was the party's Treasury spokesperson, and had clashed with Gordon Brown on tax issues, making him more recognisable than Ballard or Rendel. He also actively dealt with the issue of attracting attention to the party:

The Bruce camp admit Mr Kennedy is way ahead on charisma - as a high-profile communicator.

But they claim party workers are not sure where he stands, while Malcolm Bruce has a detailed and attractive agenda (Perry, 1999a)

Bruce's acknowledgement of the accepted wisdom that Kennedy had a larger profile than him was astute as he sought the switch the question to how effectively Kennedy had performed in those appearances- an attempt to reframe the question.

Hughes effectively turned the contest into a 'two horse race' between him and Kennedy. He managed to gain considerable coverage for his views, and sought counterpoint Kennedy's campaign which, at least initially, focussed on portraying Kennedy as effectively the 'leader-in-waiting, with a gutsy campaign. Kennedy was clearly the most well-known of the candidates though it had been suggested that this was not necessarily for being an effective political operator. Hattenstone noted:

His colleagues began to voice their doubts Kennedy was too keen on the good life, too lazy, too light, too likeable, too trite. The consensus seemed to be that he was a more likely TV quiz host than senior politician. (1999)

Kennedy addressed this issue directly throughout the campaign arguing that it was important to reach out beyond the most engaged members of the electorate, and light-hearted shows were an opportunity to do this:

If it's a good news day on Newsnight you'll get a million people; on an average weekend over the two editions of Have I Got News For You, you get nine million (Hattenstone, 1999)

Whilst there is merit to this argument, it was clear that the Kennedy campaign recognised the need to enhance their candidates credibility and sought to do so in publishing 'A Vision for New Times' - his manifesto for leadership. It was wide reaching in its scope with commitments to social justice, the environment and Europe at its heart. Kennedy's biographer- Greg Hurst- describes

A planning brief for the document produced for his campaign team identified as its purpose, highlighted in bold type, to establish his credibility and ownership of the Liberal Democrat core values (2006:98)

What it was not was controversial- as noted by Cook (2010:250). Hurst argued that whilst the title was well produced and wove together his personality and philosophical roots it was less clear what Kennedy would do in practical terms. He did effectively argue his case on the agenda he was setting out. Where he was less effective was taking ownership of the argument over how relations with Labour should be handled, at times being forced onto a defensive footing by Hughes' campaign.

Rendel and Ballard struggled to excel in this criterion; Bruce's high-profile role as Shadow Chancellor could not be exploited fully as he struggled to carve out a unique position for himself in the race, and a narrative took hold that Hughes and Kennedy were the favourites.

Hughes harnessed attention well though it is undoubtedly Kennedy who had the advantage of the second criterion, as he was well known by a wide range of people within and outside the party. His campaign focussed strongly on allaying fears that he was too ‘lightweight’ in policy terms and this combined with the strong backing of well-respected party elders, and colleagues was arguably successful. This allowed Kennedy to portray himself as a credible candidate who had a charismatic, open approach to actively appeal to voters who did not necessarily engage in the political process- something that clearly would hold an attraction to the electorate.

### **The Third Criterion: Strategy**

Whilst in 1988 the key strategic challenge facing the leadership candidates was to establish the policy direction of the new party, by 1999 the main challenge had changed. In 1988 the new party had to respond to Thatcher’s Conservatives and a Labour Party whose future was less than clear. By 1999 Blair had delivered a landslide majority for Labour and Ashdown had begun co-operation with his counterpart through a Joint Cabinet Committee on Political Reform. The fork in the road was whether the party should continue to co-operate with Labour, or move to a more critical role in opposing the Government. It has to be recognised that in terms of the candidates’ strategic approaches, these rested firmly in this short term question, rather than long term plan. Duncan Brack is critical of Kennedy for his lack of strategy for the party in the mid-term, especially around 2003 (Brack, 2014:39).

The candidates were viewed broadly in two camps, those in favour of co-operation with Labour and those sceptical of closer links. In reality all the candidates’ views were more nuanced as they sought to win support from across the grassroots of the party. Alderman and Carter suggest that the number of candidates opposing closer co-operation could have aided Kennedy:

the decision of the pro-project Campbell not to stand and the failure of the sceptics to settle on a single candidate to represent their position, left Kennedy looking stronger than ever(Alderman and Carter, 2000:321)

This is an overstatement. Whilst the lack of a pro-Project candidate did make Kennedy the most obvious choice for those who saw co-operation with Labour as the most important issue for them, the Single Transferable Vote system allows for several ‘anti-Project’ candidates without the vote being split. If somebody was to rank Kennedy above another candidate, the chances are they would be pro-Project, or see other issues as more important. Kennedy sought to place himself in the centre of opinion and it should be noted that his manifesto was published when it still looked as if a (more) pro-Project candidate would stand, hence the

inclusion of plans to co-operate with Labour on Pension Reform. This was clearly a contrast to other candidates, who wanted to be seen as more sceptical to the Project, but as Alderman and Carter go on to note that:

Even the most sceptical—Hughes, Ballard and Rendel—favoured retaining existing links, though they opposed extension of cooperation beyond constitutional matters (2000:322)

These observations get to the crux of the issue. Unlike Foster, for example, Kennedy was not advocating closer links with Labour on a plethora of issues. He seemed more pragmatic than either those calling for something akin to a Coalition, or those calling for outward hostility. Pension reform is an issue that is less politicised than many others. To choose this as an area to propose closer co-operation was a shrewd move, as opposed to education for example. Kennedy sought to reassure that he did not want to see a merger with Labour through an Op-Ed in *The Independent* (Kennedy, 1999c) in which he unequivocally argued that:

The Liberal Democrats must be a permanent, independent force in British politics (Kennedy, 1999c)

This was clearly a move to quell fears that Kennedy wanted to see a merging, or formalised pact, between the two parties.

Of the other candidates Ballard was also noted for her opposition to fox hunting (Ballard, 1999a), raising gender equality issues and political disengagement (Ballard, 1999b). She also set on her stall on a more left leaning approach to public spending:

Gordon Brown has disappointed many by sticking to Tory spending limits, and being totally unwilling to ask income tax payers to contribute more to the cost of public services. (Ballard, 1999b)

This was in contrast to other candidates, such as Bruce who advocated fairness in the tax system by raising the tax allowance (Perry, 1999b). This was a clear difference in values between the candidates, but the attention afforded to this, and other policy issues, by the media was limited. Bruce's wife also played a prominent role in his campaign; as well as overseeing the day-to-day operation, she intervened to counter the criticism that he was too old for the role (Paterson, 1999), highlight his background in business (Binnie, 1999) and his previous experience leading the Scottish Liberal Democrats. This latter point was used to emphasise his experience at dealing with negotiations and policy development. Rendel stood under the slogan "the energy to lead, the vision to win". His approach to the issue at hand was to propose a party referendum on whether links should be developed with Labour (Wintour, 1999). This was a novel approach, but given the triple-lock that was in place it was not an especially new

idea- and it certainly didn't become a distinctive position as Hughes and Ballard had also promised this. Alongside this he called for decentralisation of power to local authorities:

In his speech, Mr Rendel held forth on the importance of local government and the party's commitment to the principle "small is beautiful". This really did touch the councillors, although it is unlikely to woo the nation (Schaefer, 1999)

Rendel was sceptical of closer links for Labour, but aside from this his policy agenda was not well established.

Kennedy had aimed to make the contest about a range of policy issues, but was unsuccessful (Kennedy, 1999b). This was in part because the other candidates may have seen that the most effective way to damage Kennedy's chances was to focus on this issue. Gurling notes

The differences in policy were always few and far between. And so you have to feel that that's the problem with in terms of internal elections, you end up trying to make small differences huge. (Gurling, 2019)

That being said, Kennedy did seek to talk about broader issues and penned a enthusiastic defence of Europe, arguing for closer integration (Kennedy, 1999a) and as Cook noted:

his leadership campaign emphasised the importance he would give to three themes: social justice, the environment and Europe. Kennedy was particularly emphatic on social justice (Cook, 2010)

Hughes had made clear that he opposed co-operation with Labour and had been one of only two MPs to vote against the extension of remit in 1998 (Alderman and Carter, 2000:317). He made clear that he would put the issue to referendum amongst party members, and aimed to portray himself as the 'anti-establishment' candidate in contrast to Kennedy- this was reflected in the former's extensive grassroots network compared to the endorsements from party grandees that benefited the latter.

Arguably the most sceptical of the Project of the candidates, Hughes also set out a more extensive policy agenda than other candidates, but this was not the focus of the campaign which was dominated by relations with Labour. He did, however, have to clarify his views on abortion as being a matter for free vote with his own position being support for a 22 week limit (Hughes, 1999). This was not extensively covered, but could have had an impact on some of the electorate.

In short, Kennedy and Hughes offered the most developed policy positions, though this was largely focussed on the shorter term. Whilst Kennedy tempered his initial position on the Project to appeal to a broader range of views within the party, in reality he was not as 'pro' as



Hughes and others sought to portray him. Kennedy was able to present himself a pragmatic and, importantly, consensual in listening to the party's views on the matter. Hughes clearly harnessed the 'anti-Project' voting base, but ultimately Kennedy was able to secure a broad spectrum of views. On this criterion Hughes and Kennedy were clearly at an advantage- though importantly, given his eventual victory, Kennedy had not established a coherent wider strategy beyond the immediacy of the response to the Project, and an outline of the principles he valued most in terms of domestic policies.

**The Result**

		Stage 2		Stage 3		Stage 4		
	<b>First Prefs</b>	<b>Exclusion of David Rendel</b>		<b>Exclusion of Jackie Ballard</b>		<b>Exclusion of Malcolm Bruce</b>		
<b>Jackie Ballard</b>	3978	+627	4605	-4605	-	-	-	
<b>Malcolm Bruce</b>	4643	+598	5241	+827	6068	-6068	-	
<b>Simon Hughes</b>	16233	+1145	17378	+1982	19360	+2473	21833	
<b>Charles Kennedy</b>	22724	+895	23619	+1545	25164	+3261	<b><u>28425</u></b>	<b><u>Elected</u></b>
<b>David Rendel</b>	3428	-3428	-	-	-	-	-	
<b>Non-transferable</b>	0	+163	163	+251	414	+334	748	
<b>Totals</b>	51006		51006		51006		51006	
<b>Total ballots issued</b>								82,827
<b>Total ballots returned</b>								51,006
<b>Turnout</b>								62%

(Rosenstiel, 2010)

## **Why Kennedy Won**

From the outset of the contest Hughes and Kennedy were seen as the favourites. Ashdown had overseen the party's increase from 6% of the vote in the 1989 European Elections, and the subsequent growth in the parliamentary party from 22 to 46 MPs. The party was largely united, and on each of the three criteria Kennedy was to establish an advantage.

In terms of providing unity to the party, Hughes and Kennedy were the strongest candidates. However, Hughes was less unifying amongst the Parliamentary Party and failed to secure the backing of as many recognised party figures as Kennedy. Ballard and Rendel were not as well-known as the other candidates. Bruce was a well-known figure in the party, especially given his portfolio as Treasury Spokesperson. What he lacked was a grassroots network to rival Hughes, the backing of Parliamentarians to match Kennedy, or a well-publicised distinctive position to justify more of the electorate backing him over the two front-runners.

In regard to the second criterion, once again Rendel and Ballard were less strong. Both lacked an established media profile, though Ballard exploited the contest's opportunity to raise her own media profile. Bruce, once again, was seen as credible without excelling- his performance would have done little to lose him support but he did not have the same cut through as Hughes and Kennedy. Kennedy was well known, especially for his appearances on television. Through the campaign he was able to point to this experience and being an effective tool in widening the party's appeal. Whilst he did have to answer the charge of how much substance he brought to the role there was little doubting that he would broaden the party's appeal amongst the electorate as a funny, charismatic effective communicator. Hughes was also well known, and able to get his message out to the party's membership through the grassroots network he established at the outset of the election. He was not as diverse in his media engagement as Kennedy, and though he could seek to position himself with more substance, he arguably trailed Kennedy slightly when considering the ability of each candidate to appeal the wider electorate.

Lastly, in terms of the third criterion and the candidates' overall strategy for the party Kennedy offered the most developed vision in terms of a policy agenda though Hughes also set out his vision for the party effectively. For those voters who were most concerned about the Project, Hughes offered the clearest sceptical position. He had voted against closer co-operation the previous year and promised members a referendum on any future collaboration. Bruce, again, had several policy ideas and set these out clearly., but lacked the media coverage of the two front runners. A lack of media cut through and less grassroots resources than the two main candidates hampered him. Rendel did not establish a clear reason for his candidacy and whilst

Ballard did campaign for more power for the grassroots in the party, and against the Project, this was in some ways more in the abstract form than in worked up proposals.

In short, Kennedy had a clear advantage across all three criteria compared to Bruce, Ballard and Rendel. Whilst Hughes also had an advantage over these candidates, he was not as unifying as Kennedy, and also lacked the wider electoral appeal Kennedy promised. He could have struggled to convince some voters of his own credibility given many of his media appearances had been on light-hearted television programmes, but if there was a 'credibility gap' he largely overcame this. Whilst Kennedy was not a runaway winner, and Hughes clearly ran a solid campaign to secure second place by some way, Kennedy was nonetheless the most effective candidate against all three criteria.

## 2006: A Caretaker Leader?

Perhaps paradoxically, it is the oldest contender in this competition who is the most committed to the modernisation of his party. (Campbell, 2006f)

### The Forced Exit: Charles Kennedy resigns

The 2005 General Election campaign saw the most Liberal Democrat MPs returned to Parliament yet, and more than the Liberal Party had achieved in a generation. Nonetheless, there was a feeling of it being an opportunity missed. Kennedy's leadership was by no means secure, as Hurst recounts:

[Kennedy's Head of Office] asked every Lib Dem MP to sign his nomination papers at their first meeting, effectively tying them to a declaration of confidence in his continuing leadership and snuffing out the prospect, however remote, of a challenge. (Hurst, 2006:219)

Securing re-nomination was usually seen as something of a formality, the fact that such action was taken is a clear sign of the threat that was felt even at this early stage. Campbell writes of his surprise at how soon the process began in his autobiography, suggesting that Kennedy may have feared a challenge from Hughes (Campbell, 2008:227). Hughes had visited a number of constituencies over the election campaign and caused some controversy in media interviews with comments referring to his disappointment with progress in the 2005 election and his belief that the party's policy regarding local income taxation was flawed- an issue that fell outside his portfolio. Alongside Hughes' perceived positioning other possible contenders seem to manoeuvre to shore up their own prospects, Vince Cable published two pamphlets, on the NHS and 'Britishness', neither of which fell within his remit, Mark Oaten delivered a speech on Liberalism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and Ed Davey robustly sought to defend the local income tax policy (Hurst, 2006:224). Campbell had until recently been seen as a 'leader in waiting', though seemed to have distanced himself from the role. As summer turned to winter, however, his candidacy once again became viable. Hurst outlines the ensuing year, where Kennedy's strength of leadership was called into question; firstly, at a reception for the newly elected MPs there was a general feeling of shock at how disorganised and unprofessional the party was, Clegg commented:

I was genuinely struck by the depth and strength of feeling amongst twenty newcomers about how poorly organised and unprofessional our induction in both Parliament, but also the parliamentary party, was. These two things came together. (Hurst, 2006:226)

This ill feeling was stoked further. Accusations from Kennedy that he did not trust two members of the parliamentary party, who he felt were drip feeding the media with stories;

unimpressive performances at parliamentary party meetings; lacklustre efforts to win what should have been seriously treated conference votes; and the Michael Brown donation scandal all combined to create a grim backdrop for Kennedy (Hurst, 2006:231-235). This is important, as the idea that it was Kennedy's alcoholism that caused his departure is too shallow. Hurst (2006), Brack (2007) and McAnulla (2009) all contend that whilst Kennedy's alcoholism provided the occasion for his departure- and, of course, was a contributing factor- there were wider issues and dissatisfaction with his leadership. By December issues were coming to a head. On 13 December, Kennedy confronted the parliamentary party with a demand for loyalty, Campbell recalls the tense discussion that followed (Campbell, 2008: 234). The next day *The Guardian* described Kennedy's leadership as being in 'crisis', naming Campbell, Hughes and Oaten as likely leadership contenders (White and Branigan, 2005). Andrew Stunell, the Chief Whip was tasked with sounding out MPs as to their views, and Chris Rennard, who was the party's Chief Executive, wrote to Stunell at the time stating:

Current discussion and debate in the parliamentary party is now between those who say that 'Charles has had his last chance' and those who say that 'this is his last chance'.

A very substantial proportion of the shadow cabinet, quite possibly more than half are probably in the 'had last chance' category. (Hurst, 2006:267)

Campbell himself confronted, Kennedy stating:

I think it's in the interests of yourself, your family and the party that you should now step down. I don't think we can go on as we are. It's not tolerable. There's drift and the parliamentary party is in a state of anxiety (Campbell, 2008)

It has to be noted that these rumours were not new- even during his own leadership election in 1999, with Dougary challenging him:

Some people say that you drink too much? "Hmm-hmmm," he says. What do you say to that? "Well, it's not true. I'm an open, up-front social drinker" (Dougary, 1999)

Attempts at forcing Kennedy's resignation in December failed. On January 5<sup>th</sup> 2006 the situation came to a head, with the resignation ultimately coming in two stages. Initially he announced that he was battling an alcohol addiction, and he was to call a leadership election in which he would stand to seek a vote of confidence from the party's membership (Hurst, 2006:224). At the same time a Channel 4 poll of 18 MPs found just one who supported Kennedy continuing as leader (Summers, 2006). On January 6<sup>th</sup> 2006, 25 Liberal Democrat MPs demanded Kennedy resign, and stated they would not serve in his shadow cabinet if he continued as leader (BBC, 2006c). This resulted in Kennedy announcing on January 7<sup>th</sup> 2006

that he would not seek re-election in the forthcoming contest. It is important to recognise that Kennedy was considered popular with the party's grassroots as a whole (Campbell, 2008:239); it could be argued that a leadership ballot appealing to a vote of confidence from these members, as well as Parliamentarians, was Kennedy's best chance of maintaining his position as party leader.

Two MPs who were willing to go on record in their criticism were Ed Davey and Sarah Teather. Davey's statement was clear, including a not-at-all-veiled demand that Kennedy step aside:

We have indicated to Charles Kennedy that we would no longer be prepared to serve under his leadership after this weekend and wish to give him the next couple of days to reflect on his position. (BBC, 2006b)

Sarah Teather went further, providing a full list of names of people who were calling for the Kennedy's resignation.

I have reached the same conclusion as Ed Davey and I can say with absolute confidence that a further twenty-three of my parliamentary colleagues also concur. The following MPs have indicated to us that they would not be able to serve under Charles Kennedy's ongoing leadership. They are Norman Baker, Tom Brake, Andrew George, Sandra Gidley, Norman Lamb, David Laws, Jeremy Browne, Alistair Carmichael, Nick Clegg, Tim Farron, Lynne Featherstone, Julia Goldsworthy, Chris Huhne, Evan Harris, John Pugh, Jo Swinson, Stephen Williams, Nick Harvey, Martin Horwood, Dan Rogerson, Adrian Sanders, Matthew Taylor and Jenny Willott. (in Hurst, 2006:272)

**Figure 6 Parliamentary Liberal Democrats who publicly called for Kennedy's resignation**

<b>Intake (Parliament)</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage of intake (rounded)</b>	<b>Percentage of those calling for resignation (rounded)</b>
<b>1970</b>	0	0	0
<b>1983</b>	0	0	0
<b>1987</b>	1	50	4
<b>1992</b>	1	50	4
<b>1997</b>	6	30	24
<b>2001</b>	6	46	24
<b>2005</b>	11	52	44
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>40</b>	
<b>Age</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage of age group (rounded)</b>	<b>Percentage of those calling for resignation (rounded)</b>
<b>20-29</b>	2	100	8
<b>30-39</b>	7	64	28
<b>40-49</b>	13	52	52
<b>50-59</b>	3	17	12
<b>60-69</b>	0	0	0



**Figure 7 Parliamentary Liberal Democrats who did not publicly called for Kennedy's resignation**

<b>Intake (Parliament)</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage of intake (rounded)</b>	<b>Percentage of those not calling for resignation (rounded)</b>
<b>1973</b>	1	100	3
<b>1983</b>	3	100	8
<b>1987</b>	1	50	3
<b>1992</b>	1	50	3
<b>1997</b>	14	70	38
<b>2001</b>	7	54	19
<b>2005</b>	10	48	27
<b>Total</b>	37	60	100

<b>Age</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage of intake (rounded)</b>	<b>Percentage of those not calling for resignation (rounded)</b>
<b>20-29</b>	0	0	0
<b>30-39</b>	4	36	11
<b>40-49</b>	12	48	32
<b>50-59</b>	15	83	41
<b>60-69</b>	6	100	16

What is striking about the list of names is the range of signatories and that many went on to serve in Government. In terms of perceived philosophical position in the party there is diversity between members such as John Pugh, Tim Farron and Andrew George and those like David Laws, Nick Clegg and Jeremy Browne. Figure 6 and 7 show the number and proportion of MPs who publicly called for Kennedy's resignation, and did not. It is important to note that some MPs who raised concerns privately, but not publicly, are counted as **not**

having called for Kennedy's resignation. Those calling for Kennedy's resignation were predominantly elected in 1997-2001; as one would expect given when most of the Parliamentary Party were elected. However, of those who were calling for his resignation, the largest group was from 2005, although the 2001 and 1997 intakes also had a notable number of MPs willing to go on record with their calls. There was a geographical spread of MPs adding their names to public statements, and in regard to age the younger the MP, the more likely they were to call for his resignation (Figure 6). Duncan Brack believed that the parliamentary party had not acted in haste:

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 different. In the end, it was Kennedy who destroyed his own support by failing to show any signs that he understood his lack of leadership and was capable of dealing with it. (in Hurst, 2006:272)

Cook suggests that "the election of David Cameron as the leader of the Conservative party... a telegenic Conservative leader, heralding a likely Conservative recovery in the opinion polls" (2010:282) was also an issue that contributed to the wider debate as to Kennedy's competence. McAnulla prefers to point to the erosion of public-private boundary for political leaders, where increasingly leaders were required to share information about their personal lives in order to 'connect' with the electorate. He also casts doubt on whether Kennedy had established a direction for the party stating,

Although Kennedy published a book, *The Future of Politics*, supposedly to outline his political vision, the text was noteworthy for its lack of original thought of insightful analysis (McAnulla, 2009:40)

Brack argued, "that alcohol was not Kennedy's underlying problem; rather he was a poor leader whose alcohol consumption made matters worse". Peter Riddell wrote in *The Times* that it was time for the party to be hardheaded, pointing to polling suggesting:

The number of voters believing that the party had a strong team of leaders had fallen from 74 to 52 per cent since September and the proportion thinking that the Lib Dems were united was down from 71 to 53 per cent (Riddell, 2006)

That being said, there was also a broad range of support for Kennedy amongst the wider party, and indeed amongst some MPs. His unrivalled ability to communicate, his courage and judgement in taking a clear stand on Iraq and embodying his own values so clearly were all qualities that won him support and would form the basis of a backlash against the perception he had been forced out.

Ultimately, there were a range of factors that led to Kennedy's resignation. Regardless of whether alcoholism was the primary cause, or merely the tinderbox to Kennedy's downfall, four candidates were to put themselves forward for what was to be the most colourful leadership elections since the 1988 merger.

### **The Candidates**

This paper has adopted an adapted model of Stark's hierarchy to provide a vehicle for exploring the outcomes of leadership elections. It is, however, worth considering for a moment what others had considered would determine the outcome of the 2006 election. Andrew Rawnsley noted at the start of the election campaign that:

The public will be looking for the reassurance that the Liberal Democrats would be responsible players in a situation where they could decide who forms the government. This demands an absolutely credible leader whom the public can trust with power and whom they can imagine sitting at the cabinet table.

That will be the essence of the appeal of Sir Menzies Campbell, behind whom a formidable amount of support, drawn from various wings and age groups among his colleagues, is already assembled. The hope of his supporters is that this will overwhelm Simon Hughes, who is popular with the more leftist Lib Dem activists, and anyone else tempted to come into the ring. (2006)

This is interesting as before now the concept of Liberal Democrats being seated at the cabinet table would have been restricted to fringe events at the party conference. Andrew Denham and Peter Dorey set out what they viewed as the key reasons for Campbell's eventual victory in their paper:

first—and arguably foremost—to choose a leader who is broadly acceptable to the Party on ideological grounds; and secondly, to elect the candidate most likely to project the Party's image and policies in a favourable light to the British electorate as a whole.” (2007:31)

The Parliamentary Party were reported as being divided between 'rebels', 'sceptics' and 'true believers' by the *Evening Standard* (Waugh, 2006). Alongside this, some in the Parliamentary party felt that the party risked becoming based on “a philosophy of good intentions, bobbing about unanchored in the muddled middle of British politics” (Laws, 2004:42) - a concern which had prompted the production of *The Orange Book* in 2004. Before the contest had even been called several names had been touted as possible candidates to succeed Kennedy. As well as Acting leader Ming Campbell, Simon Hughes, Chris Huhne and Mark Oaten, would all signal their intention to stand, while Nick Clegg, Ed Davey and David Laws were also named as possible candidates by *The Guardian* (The Guardian, 2006). Hughes

had kept the door open to standing again since the previous election, taking on the party presidency partly to maintain his profile for such an occasion:

I thought that it was a way of keeping things ticking over, and I was still energetic and keen. (Hughes, 2017)

His decision was ultimately informed by a desire to win too – he felt the previous outing had given him a good grounding in what was to come:

I felt we could learn the lessons of the last campaign, and given we were starting without somebody out in front, with someone having prepared 6 months before I thought there was a reasonable chance I could win. (Hughes, 2017)

In contrast, Clegg, Laws and Oaten would not end up on the ballot paper. Clegg and Huhne reportedly agreed not to run against Campbell, but Huhne subsequently asked to be freed from such a commitment. Campbell agreed although Huhne appeared to decide not to stand after all, only to finally put his name forward, after discussing the matter with his wife (Hurst, 2006:239). He had always intended to stand at some point, confirming that he had intentions of doing so even whilst serving as an MEP (Huhne, 2017). The rationale for standing was simple:

My thoughts were really that I didn't have much to lose, the reality was I would either put down a marker, I would have had to have done appalling badly to emerge from it worse than when I went in. The reality was it would make me an obvious contender the following time, and I was fairly convinced Ming wasn't the right person to do it. (Huhne, 2017)

Mark Oaten signalled his intention to stand but withdrew from the contest having failed to secure the 10% support from within the Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Party required to stand in the election. Two days later revelations surfaced about his private life, which saw him also resign from the frontbench. Other possible candidates included John Hemming, who announced that “The party needs an election where the membership decide who the leader is” (Hemming, 2006). His possible candidature was based entirely on ensuring there was not a coronation of Campbell as leader.

Vince Cable – who as Shadow Chancellor was also tipped as a possible candidate recalls the context of his decision:

there was a general sense because things were so difficult and personal relationships had been strained to the utmost that everybody needed to rally around Ming Campbell he was a solid figure, good public image who would restore some public confidence in the party after all the internal fighting.(Cable, 2017)

### **The First Criterion: Unity**

In contrast to the 1999 election, the 2006 contest was taking place against a backdrop of a party divided as much by personality as policy, with the grassroots party less convinced that Kennedy needed to be removed than their Parliamentary colleagues. It is arguable that although some of these MPs wanted to see progress from what they saw as the philosophical cul-de-sac of Kennedy's programme, this was not the moment for that battle. Instead, with the prospect of a General Election when Tony Blair was to finally pass the premiership to Gordon Brown the greatest concern appeared to be for a credible, unifying candidate who could guide the party through this period. This goes some way to explaining the enthusiasm for Campbell as a candidate- the long serving acting leader of the party was most unifying for several reasons.

Firstly, Campbell had steered clear from the politicking that had removed Kennedy from office. He recounts in his autobiography his annoyance when his attempts to remain neutral were twisted as being unsupportive of Kennedy:

Nick Robinson, the BBC's political editor, had put out a story about my running the gauntlet of reporters in the committee corridor and his interpretation of it was damaging to me. It made me look as though I was trying to increase the pressure on Charles by being less than loyal to him in public whereas my intention had been the opposite. I was furious at what I regarded as wilful misrepresentation...(Campbell, 2008:236)

Nonetheless, Campbell was generally seen as being loyal to Kennedy, if willing to step up to the leadership if required, Paul Waugh noting that Campbell: "behaved impeccably during the latest crisis but has private doubts." (Waugh, 2006) Waugh ranked Campbell's 'loyalty rating' to Kennedy as 7/10, in contrast to a loyalty rating of 3/10 which he judged Hughes and Huhne to display (See Figure 7). Aside from this rather crude pseudo-scientific assessment, reports of Huhne's 'U-turn' would do little to aid his perception as a 'unity' candidate, and was something that was highlighted at the time (Miles, 2006). Huhne himself commented:

if a leader is regarded as somebody who is there for a relatively short period of time, there is a danger that they become essentially the chairman of an ongoing leadership campaign amongst all of the young cardinals who are supporting an old pope. (Miles, 2006)

Huhne's second issue was nicely summarised in Alice Miles' title to the same piece- Huhne was an 'obscure Lib Dem'. Having entered Parliament in 2005 there were suggestions that he lacked the profile required to lead the party. Additionally, he had contributed to *The Orange Book* in 2004, which was something that some activists viewed with suspicion as being too 'right wing', an issue that had been stoked by some of the publicity surrounding the book's

publication rather than entirely being based on its content. Hughes was identified as being “the candidate the more economically liberal Orange Book Lib Dems dread to see as leader”(Guardian Editorial, 2006). In the case of Campbell he was arguably a figure of ‘the liberal establishment’, but this could be seen as the safe option needed to see the party through a forthcoming snap election, and was not strongly associated with either the economic or social liberal wings of the party.

The BBC summarised the candidates’ positions:

**Table 2: Adapted from the BBC’s summary of the candidates (BBC, 2006a)**

Leader	Political Agenda
Sir Menzies Campbell	Liberal Democrats' most respected "elder statesman" who promises to unite the party under policies on poverty, personal liberty, social justice, the environment and internationalism. Not allied to either wing of party.
Simon Hughes	Well-known traditionalist offering an unapologetically liberal agenda with an emphasis on public services financed through taxation, improving civil liberties and implementing voting reform. Widely seen as left of the Labour government.
Chris Huhne	Has placed great emphasis on higher environmental taxes to combat global warming and pollution, combined with lower taxes for least well-off. Seen as one of the new generation of economically liberal right-wing Lib Dem MPs.

As Acting Leader through the campaign, Campbell also had the advantage of being seen by some as ‘caretaker leader’ (Riddell, 2006). This perception would allow some of the party’s younger MPs to gain experience before challenging for the position as longer-term leader, a

view supported by some academics (Quinn, 2010:104), and contemporaneous journalists (Miles, 2006). Hughes himself was hit by revelations about his private life, which he sought to move on from but in many ways overshadowed his campaign. There was the added question as to whether in a contest caused by a leader admitting to a drink problem, with one prospective candidate ruled out before the contest began as lurid details of his sexual experiences were splashed across the papers, whether the party could consider electing a candidate who was also dragged through the press with revelations about his sexuality, something Hughes believes may have cost him the leadership (BBC, 2012).

It is clear from all this that Campbell had a clear advantage as the most unifying of the candidates, and for a variety of reasons. He had a broad appeal to many in the party. For the younger, more economic liberals he was a ‘caretaker leader’ who would not perhaps be in position for a prolonged period of time. For those who viewed the new ideas from the writers of *The Orange Book* with caution, Campbell would not signal an ideological upheaval. For those concerned by how the personality, and personal problems and publicity, of Kennedy had impacted the party, again Campbell represented a safe option. There was little doubting that he had a level of professionalism and competence that would guide the party through a General Election if one was to be thrust upon them and, to meet Rawnsley’s challenge, could be seen to be someone who would sit at the Cabinet table. This was underlined by the widespread support he found amongst colleagues- 32 MPs, 35 Peers, 8 MEPs, 4 MSPs publicly supported him (Campbell, 2006c) including David Laws, Nick Clegg and Ed Davey (seen as being from the ‘economic liberal’ wing of the party) but also Shirley Williams, Vince Cable and Paddy Ashdown (seen as more ‘social liberal’ (Campbell, 2006c) and (Denham and Dorey, 2007:35). The other candidates lacked anything resembling this stable of well-respected, identifiable supporters. Denham and Dorey described him as the “unity candidate” (Denham and Dorey, 2007:35). YouGov carried out polling at the start of February (YouGov, 2006a), which included questions addressing key areas around each candidate’s ability to unite the party, which has been adapted in Figure 8. From this it is clear that Campbell was seen as the most able to lead a united party, had the right kind of experience for the job, was not seen as too old for the position and was the candidate considered joint lowest as someone who should not be elected leader. He was also seen as being the best performer in the House of Commons. His biggest weakness was that he was not seen to know about life outside of politics, but given the context in which the contest was being fought it is hard to quantify how important this particular element is.

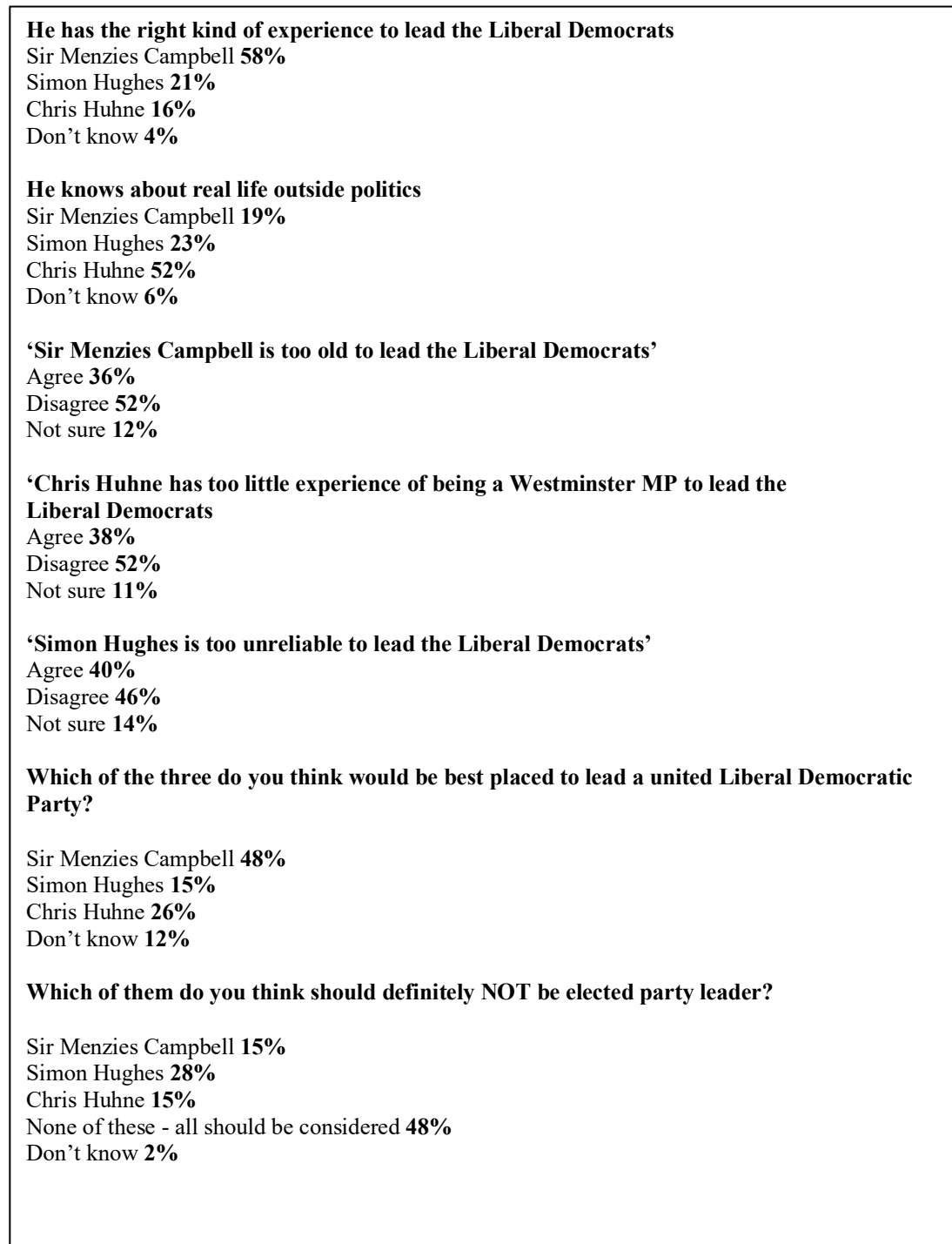
Hughes was seen as having more relevant experience than Huhne, but he was also seen as the weakest candidate in terms of providing party unity. He also was comfortably seen as the

candidate who raised the most objections to the idea of them being leader, and also received the most divided score on ‘personal competencies’ with 54% agreeing, or not being sure that he was too unreliable to lead the party (YouGov, 2006a). It is clear that Hughes at this point was not seen as a unifying candidate, and provoked a stronger reaction than others amongst those who did not favour him. It is important to recognise, however, that the fieldwork for this polling fell in the immediate aftermath of negative stories around Hughes’ private life, something he points to as the turning point in the campaign – he had enjoyed the position as frontrunner amongst some bookmakers prior to this (Hughes, 2017; Jones and Carlin, 2006). Huhne’s strength was most members feeling he had the most real-life experience. He did not provoke any stronger reaction than Campbell against the idea of his leadership, and although he was seen as having the least amount of experience to lead the party, people did not agree that this meant he could not be leader. He was seen as more unifying than Hughes, but some way off Campbell. Although members did not explicitly suggest that his lack of experience was an issue, it is possible that his relatively short tenure, combined with publicity suggesting he had reneged on an agreement with Campbell may have problematised his advances in coming across as a unity candidate, as well as his role in the removal of Kennedy- something Campbell and Hughes had avoided being involved in.

Put simply, Huhne hampered his ability to appear to be a unifying candidate by his involvement in the removal of Kennedy, his apparent U-turning over whether to back Campbell or not, and quite simply his lack in breadth and volume of key figures willing to help compensate for a lack of parliamentary experience. Hughes was seen as of being from one ‘wing’ of the party, and revelations of his personal life hampered his campaign strategy. Meanwhile, Campbell offered less flair, even charisma, but for a divided party he was a unifying figure and exuded competence, credibility and professionalism- attributes the party needed to strengthen. In regard to the first criterion, Campbell was, thus, clearly the strongest candidate.



**Figure 8: Extracts from YouGov Polling of Liberal Democrat members in relation to leadership candidates**



### **The Second Criteria: Attention**

At the time of the contest the Liberal Democrats were receiving a large amount of media coverage. This was largely down to the party's leader, and subsequent leadership candidates. The problem was that much of this was not positive. Kennedy's well publicised departure

coupled with the scandal that prompted Oaten to withdraw his prospective candidacy to provide a climate in which many party members would not be blamed for questioning whether more attention was what the party required. Thomas Quinn goes so far as to suggest that these stories combined to seriously threaten the credibility of the party (Quinn, 2012 :145). Aside from the internal comparisons, David Cameron was now installed as leader of the Conservative Party- and inevitably this leadership election has to be seen through the prism that Cameron is one of the other leaders the Liberal Democrat leader would have to compete with.

In regard to this criterion, Hughes was clearly weakened following newspaper revelations about his personal life. Put simply, alongside any reactions that were based on pure prejudice, his decision to initially and repeatedly deny speculation about his sexuality (Jones and Carlin, 2006), brought into question his decision making qualities in what were, understandably, difficult circumstances. Campbell had gained respect due to his precise, measured critique of the Iraq war- his legal background informing his clinical dissection of the case for war (Clegg, 2006). During the campaign he did, however, perform poorly during Prime Ministers Questions (Cook, 2010:285). In YouGov polling Huhne and Campbell polled roughly equally on being the most likely to boost the party's chances at increasing seats in the next election, and coming over well in the media; Hughes' trailed in both of these regard (YouGov, 2006a:3). Hughes believed that whilst Campbell had strengths, the perception he would garner in coverage may be an issue:

I was clear that actually, whilst he was completely reasonable candidate in one sense he wasn't going to convey the image of a youthful party (Hughes, 2017)

Throughout the campaign there were a series of televised debates and regional hustings. Campbell's performance over the campaign was described by some as 'lacklustre' (Denham and Dorey, 2007:45), however his established reputation was clearly not eroded. Huhne, on the other hand, was able to capitalise on the exposure afforded to him putting in a series of confident performances, Cook describing his media persona as "smooth"(2010:284). Although he emerged as a strong challenger he ultimately could not establish a clear lead to Campbell on this criterion- arguably his weakest- which helps explain why he was ultimately unsuccessful. Hughes had an established reputation as a solid performer for the party in the media. His weakness in this criterion lies not in his ability, but in the circumstance; it was a short-term weakness. For him, in this contest the atypical backdrop revelations about his private life played into a wider climate and context which effectively ended his leadership campaign, although this impacted the first criterion to a greater extent the fact he was having to address peripheral issues of his private life in the media as the campaign was progressing

weakened his strength in this area. Aside from the questionable nature of the relevance of the revelations- Campbell argued the revelations should have no bearing on the contest- the manner the story was acquired must leave a bitter taste. It was subsequently revealed that Hughes' phone had been hacked, which had led to The Sun confronting him. He was to receive an out of court payment of £45,000 to settle the case but nonetheless the affair clearly torpedoed his leadership campaign, something Hughes believes to be the case (Hughes, 2017; O'Carroll and Sabbagh, 2012). Campbell and Huhne thus had an advantage, although the perception amongst members was that the two were fairly evenly matched it could be argued that Huhne had an advantage through a perceived potential to appeal to women and younger voters, which was identified in YouGov polling (YouGov, 2006a). It is imperative to note this polling was not of women and younger members, and this was not ultimately decisive. Alongside this Campbell had proven himself to be eminently competent. In this leadership contest, more than others, the second criterion was, frankly, a lower priority.

### **The Third Criterion: Strategy**

It was impossible for the candidates not to be aware of the most pressing strategic challenge the party faced; which was to ensure the party 'weathered the storm' that had built up around the personal credibility of its leading figures. Although this context did dominate the contest, there was some discussion of policy and overall strategy, albeit being overshadowed. As noted by Denham and Dorey a degree of consensus on key issues:

all three candidates reiterated their commitment to: a fairer society; a more equitable tax system; vibrant and well-funded public services; the decentralisation of power; an extension of (local) democracy; and electoral reform. (2007:40)

Looking specifically at each candidate, a key strength of Campbell's campaign was the persistence on focussing on professionalisation of the party and the need for authority. His website had a whole section devoted to how he would professionalise the party, including a promise to:

instil a strong sense of professionalism in all that we do, in the way we develop policy, in the way we project ourselves in the media, in the way we campaign, in the way we manage our internal organisation, and in the way we represent our constituents. (Campbell, 2006e)

This was at a time where the party leader had resigned to battle a drinking problem, but nonetheless, there was concern about the role Chris Rennard played as Chief Executive, with some feeling he overstepped his remit in the day to day running of the party. *The Times* offered endorsement with a quick disarming of Campbell's opponents:

In their different ways, both Simon Hughes, emphasising his undoubted political passion, and Chris Huhne, placing the weight on his obvious novelty, are offering their party more of the same.

Intelligent Liberal Democrats will recognise that this is not enough. If their party is to be a credible and responsible potential partner in office, what it needs is not passion or novelty but change.

Perhaps paradoxically, it is the oldest contender in this competition who is the most committed to the modernisation of his party. (Campbell, 2006f)

This approach was particularly effective as not only did this play to his perceived strengths (see Figure 9) but it also highlighted his opponents' weaknesses. Campbell's website clearly positioned himself as being a Liberal Democrat leader with a vision of winning an outright majority proclaiming:

In Ming Campbell, the Liberal Democrats have a credible Prime Minister, able to lead with unity and authority.(Campbell, 2006g)

He backed up this position in an interview with *The Guardian*- where he also declared he would fight an election to the left of Labour:

The Liberal Democrats will fight the next general election to the left of Labour and campaign without any discussion of hung parliaments or coalitions with either main party if Sir Menzies Campbell wins the party leadership, he said yesterday (Branigan and White, 2006a)

Branigan and White comment that such posturing may appeal to voters who may be considering backing Hughes. In a juxtaposition of this, and it is important to note that *The Guardian* interview was published on January 13<sup>th</sup> 2006, Campbell was to be stylised as moving the party to the right just a few weeks later in *The Independent*. He is reported to have:

backed modernisers who want to shed the Liberal Democrats' high-tax image and made clear he saw no future for them as a statist, leftist party (Grice, 2006)

This is not incompatible with his stated commitment, which interestingly echoes the four pillars outlined in *The Orange Book* (Laws, 2004:19-20) to:

draw on the different strands of our liberalism, economic, social, personal and political, to mark out distinctive territory in the liberal centre of British politics (Campbell, 2006d)

Huhne was generally considered to be a candidate from the 'right' of the party, his contribution to *The Orange Book* was observed by a number of commentators. As noted in Table 2, however, Huhne emerged as a candidate closely associated with environmental policies. This was a policy area that polling suggested Liberal Democrat members felt particularly strongly

about with 77% of members polled supporting an increase in environmental taxes (YouGov, 2006a)- a policy associated with Huhne, along with the idea of lower personal taxation as he consciously sought to position himself to appeal to this group (Huhne, 2017). Campbell also advocated looking at how “incentives for good environmental behaviour can be built into the tax system” (Campbell, 2006a) and stated his priority was “the environment, the environment, the environment” (Branigan and White, 2006b). Hughes received the backing of Peter Tatchell, who explicitly mentioned Hughes’ environmental track record (Merge, 2006a). In regard to personal taxation Hughes had initially adopted a position of advocating a 50p tax rate for those earning over £100,000 (Carlin and Isaby, 2006), though appeared to shift on this issue. Huhne argued against the rate, stating:

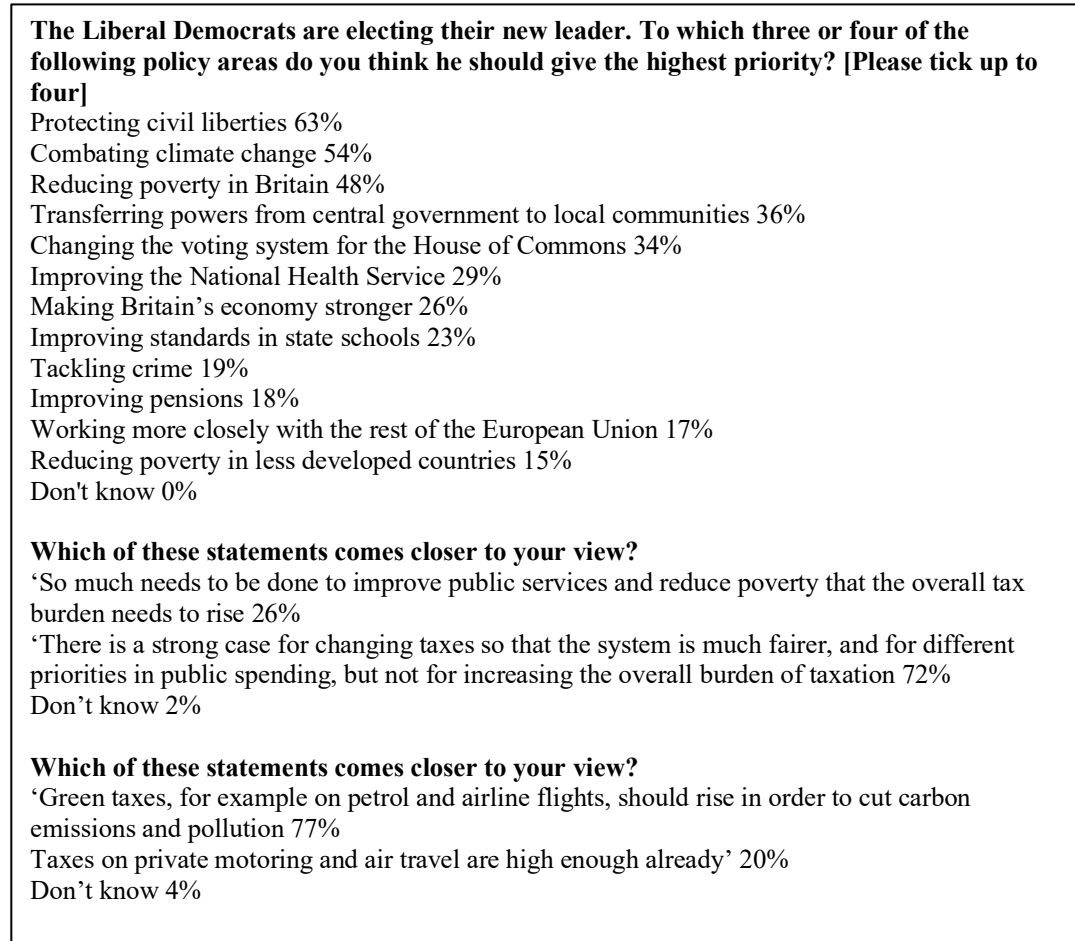
The 50p top tax rate is now looking in international terms quite uncompetitive...and there are alternative ways of being redistributive. (Tempest, 2006)

Campbell had backed the introduction of a 50% top rate of tax in the past, but moved to a position in favour of abolishing the commitment in the campaign (Morris, 2006). There was in several key areas a convergence of opinion, with the three candidates all opposed to nuclear energy, advocating a decentralisation of power, and reforms to the political system. It is conceivable that Huhne may have benefited from his comparatively low profile in this criterion. Whilst Hughes and Campbell were in many ways clearly established in the collective consciousness of the party, Huhne had a relatively blank canvass upon which to paint his campaign. He did so focussing on a number of key issues that were valued by party members. Whilst other candidates also did this, their previous reputations perhaps had a greater influence in gaining, or losing, support than in the case of Huhne who was opinion forming to a larger degree. Huhne indicated his willingness to work with either of the two parties in the event of a balanced parliament, whilst Hughes declared that electoral reform would be the price of any deal (N.a, 2006). Although there are real differences, broadly there was a choice between Hughes and Campbell who pitched the party to the centre-left and Huhne who adopted a more centrist position. This was tempered in each case by their position on how to deal with a balanced Parliament; whilst there were important differences, no candidate explicitly ruled out either of the other parties as potential partners.

In pure strategy terms, there was not a clear advantage for any of the candidates. Hughes was perhaps at a slight disadvantage, being associated with the ‘left’ wing of the party, whilst Huhne sought to change the perception that he was to the ‘right’ by focussing on policy areas such as environmental taxes. Campbell’s main focus was on the professionalisation of the party, with clear attention drawn to his personal ability to do this. He presented himself as a pragmatist on many issues, as did the other candidates. Huhne arguably was able to capitalise

in some sense, as his policy agenda perhaps carried greater weight in defining his candidature, helping to explain how he was able to emerge as the runner-up to Campbell. Campbell, however, was the candidate who was most highly rated in regard to his ability to serve in Government (YouGov, 2006a).

**Figure 9 Extract of YouGov poll of Liberal Democrat Members, February 2006**



**(Brack, 2007:87)**

## The Result

	<b>First Prefs</b>	<b>Exclusion of Simon Hughes</b>		
<b>Menzies Campbell</b>	23264	+6433	<b><u>29697</u></b>	<b><u>Elected</u></b>
<b>Simon Hughes</b>	12081	-12081		
<b>Chris Huhne</b>	16691	+4937	21628	
<b>Non-transferable</b>	0	+711	711	
<b>Totals</b>	52036		52036	

<b>Total ballots issued</b>	72,064
<b>Total ballots returned</b>	52,036
<b>Turnout</b>	72.2%

(Rosenstiel, 2010)

## Why Campbell Won

Despite emerging as an early favourite to win the leadership contest, Campbell's victory was by no means certain. As the campaign progressed, *The Sunday Times*, published a poll from YouGov which showed support for Hughes at 34%, Campbell 21% and Huhne 13% (BBC, 2006d). Equally, other polls had showed Huhne to lead the race with 38% support to Campbell's 34% and Hughes' 27% (Branigan and White, 2006a). Hughes was described as the front runner by the Mail on Sunday, with them noting:

Simon Hughes last night appeared unstoppable in the fight for the Lib Dem leadership with the promise of a new wealth tax and a denial that he was gay. (Oliver, 2006)

Alongside this in the following weeks an “ICM survey for *The Guardian*, Mr. Hughes polled 51 per cent to Sir Menzies's 29 per cent and Mr. Huhne's 20” (Merge, 2006b). So what happened to this polling lead?

Firstly, in regard to the competencies considered in this study, Hughes’ lead was soft; he was not seen as the most unifying candidate, his ability to draw attention to the party was arguably not that far in advance of Campbell, and his overall strategy was something that was less of an issue in this contest than in the 1999 affair. As such an increase in support, which was in part down to effective performances in the media and members’ hustings, was softer than the longer term advantage Campbell had established that was reflected in the early polling (YouGov, 2006b). Alongside this, Hughes’ personal credibility was impacted by press coverage regarding his sexuality which was compounded by his earlier denials on the issue. Coupled to all this was the withdrawal from the contest of Mark Oaten. This made a contest that was already focussed on candidates’ personal lives and competencies even more so. In regard to the second criterion, Huhne and Campbell had a clear advantage with Huhne edging this in some respects, Campbell in others. The decision of who to select to face Cameron and Brown seems to have played a lesser role in this contest than in 2007 and the fact was Hughes and Campbell were established media performers and Huhne proved himself to be capable. Whilst Campbell was seen as the more qualified, honest and likely to serve in Government, Huhne was seen as being more in touch with the public and could appeal to voters that Campbell perhaps could not. Lastly, in regard to the third criterion, the three candidates converged on a number of issues. Hughes was weakened in some regards by being closely associated with one part of the party. Huhne countered his initial styling of being an ‘economic liberal’ by focussing on environmental policy- something that party members valued. In terms of overall strategy, there were nuanced differences on a prospective coalition, but Huhne was clearly the candidate adopting the most equidistant stance.

Ultimately the most important criterion in this election was the series of external challenges based on the unity and credibility of the party, which had to be the paramount consideration. Quinn commented that

Electoral considerations were a medium-term issue; if the contest had been decided on that basis Campbell could have struggled to defeat Huhne (Quinn, 2012:150).”

Huhne’s campaign improved his profile, standing and reputation whilst Hughes suffered at the hands of the press. Ultimately, Campbell simply seemed more suited to the task of steadying the ship and, crucially, ran a campaign that didn’t give any potentially wavering supporters a reason not to support him.



## 2007: The road back to Government

There is reason to hope that under Mr Clegg's leadership the party would find a new vibrancy, challenging Mr Cameron and Gordon Brown. If this newspaper was to cast a vote, it would be for him. (Editorial, 2007)

### “Unable to trade out of it”: Ming Campbell resigns

Campbell's tenure as leader was to be brief. His record as leader will be looked at in more detail later, but his broad aims of his leadership campaign were in many ways met. Reflecting on this period he argues his main task was to provide:

stability, a greater degree of professionalism and to prepare the party for a General Election (Campbell, 2011)

Tim Farron drew a direct comparison to the set up under Kennedy:

[Under Kennedy] the Leader's Office was just disconnected from everything. Its job was basically to provide a nice bunker to protect their man...what Ming did was make sure there was a proper Leader's Office, and that it connected with Cowley Street (Farron, 2011)

For all of his successes in reforming the internal working of the party Campbell could not overcome the increasingly personal attacks made against his leadership from sections of the media, primarily focussing on his age. This became more of an issue once it became apparent that Gordon Brown was not going to call a general election after he succeeded Blair as Prime Minister. This is an important point. In 2007 all parties including Labour were anticipating a General Election (Mandelson, 2010:5; McBride, 2013:2136). For his part Campbell had set the ball in motion to contest an election that year:

I had spent [time] with the Parliamentary Party and then the Policy Committee, agreeing the terms of the Manifesto...75% of my programme was drafted...Then Brown said no. (Campbell, 2011)

Someone who was an MP at the time agreed that the party was more stable but felt this particular point was debatable - “we were really freaked out about that – I don't think we were ready”. Pressure grew in the autumn of 2007 as it became apparent an election was not going to be called. This gradual erosion of his credibility culminated in his resignation in October 2007. Campbell felt that the question surrounding his age was a key reason in his departure:

Every year [Brown] delayed [the election] was a year older for me and the age thing just kicked back and back and back... I used to think I could trade out of it, but it became clear I could not (Campbell, 2011)

The reaction amongst the press was mixed with some cruelly continuing to attack Campbell's age (Maguire, 2007), whilst other commentators sought to draw distinctions between Campbell's age and how he was treated, almost trying to justify the sniping he had been subjected to. Jonathan Freedland in *The Guardian* was one such author, advancing the slightly semantic point that "what did for Campbell was not so much his age as the fact that he looked old" (2007). Some support was to be found, an example being from Jackie Ashley (2007) and Andrew Rawnsley - who was of a similar view, commenting that "Campbell's qualities counted for little with a press which had largely made up its brutal mind that he should be in a retirement home" (2010:505).

There were some who aimed to examine whether it had been his age or ability that had ultimately caused his downfall, an example being Gerri Peev's 'Ming: Not good enough or a victim of ageism?' for *The Scotsman*. Aside from considering the general question- which remained unanswered- the included an interesting comment from Ashdown in reference to Campbell's resignation:

Campbell is a man of honesty, decency and integrity. He has also proven over the years to be a man of remarkable political judgment. That he has felt the need to resign this evening tells us more about the nature of modern politics than it does about Ming Campbell himself. (quoted in Peev, 2007)

This is an interesting argument, which chimes with Cowley's work around the rise of the novice leader (Cowley, 2012). It is also linked to an idea that Freedland advances around the changing role of leaders:

when we describe Clegg, or before him David Cameron, as "telegenic", what we mean is "OK looking". This is not to say you now have to be Hollywood handsome to lead a British political party, but rather you have to meet a basic standard of presentability even to be in the running. This may be unavoidable in a visual age like ours, but it is hardly acknowledged. (Freedland, 2007)

This is not a new idea, and some authors, such as Anthony Mughan have suggested a movement towards the presidentialisation of parliamentary elections. He concludes, that "from the mid-1980s onwards, the Conservative and Labour party leaders have figured more prominently than previously in media coverage of the campaign as well as in voters' choice of party" (Mughan, 2000:131). Langer's work in this area has established that there has been an increase in the coverage afforded to political party leaders, references to their personal qualities and reference to their personal lives (Langer, 2007). A later study suggests that there is a:

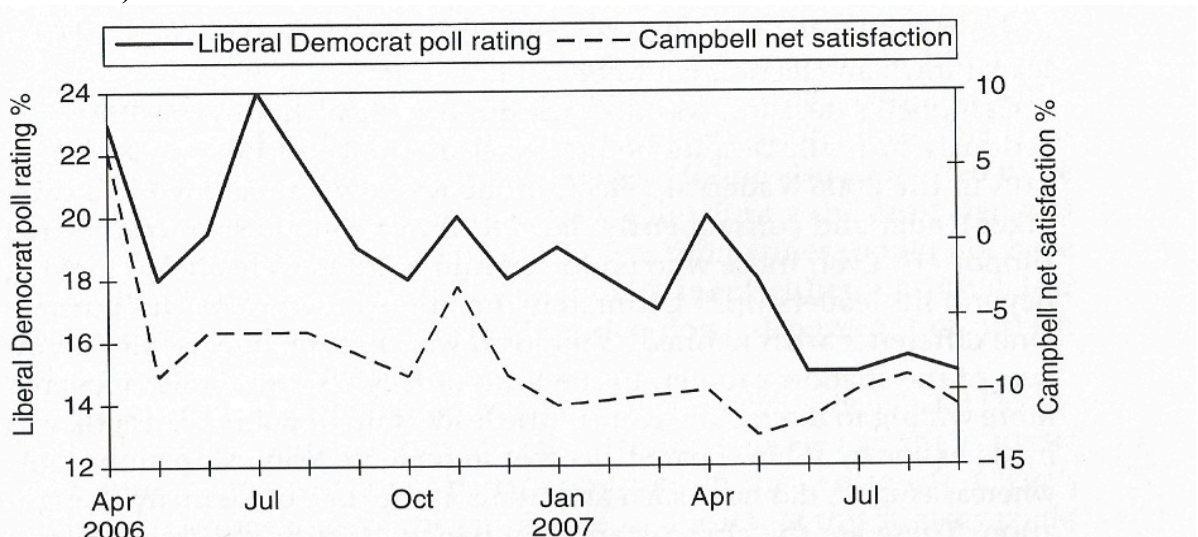
strong concentration in the coverage on the leaders of the three main parties at the expense of their parties and other representatives (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014:168)

Clearly there has been a growing focus on a leader's qualities and persona. McAnulla applies this specifically to the idea of the removal of party leaders, noting of Campbell that it was his:

misfortune to lead the party at a time when perceptions (or non-perceptions) of a leader are so closely equated with the political standing of a party (McAnulla, 2010:595)

Aside from the sniping critiques of Campbell's age, there was disquiet amongst colleagues about the party's standing- with some polls placing support at as low as 11% (Pascoe-Watson, 2007).

**Figure 10: Liberal Democrat Poll Rating and Ming Campbell net satisfaction (Quinn, 2012:151)**



Chris Bowers suggests that Campbell's indecision as to whether or not to turn down an approach by Gordon Brown to incorporate Liberal Democrats into his Ministerial portfolio also sowed the seeds of doubt in several senior party members' minds (Bowers, 2011). Alongside this some colleagues had not done all they could to sure up Campbell's position. Whilst people were not openly briefing against Campbell, his candid discussions with the parliamentary party were leaked to the newspapers (Campbell, 2008:258) and comments from Hughes that he should be judged on his performance at Autumn Conference did, intentionally or otherwise, undermine him- Campbell reflected that he had "told [Simon] how angry I was at his intervention. As Simon usually did when he said something that rebounded on me, he apologised"(Campbell, 2008:259). This was to crescendo in October however, with Peev reporting that:

Lord Taverne, a Lib Dem peer, urged Sir Menzies to stand down to avoid the party "going down the drain" (Peev, 2007)

Alongside this Hughes went on record in saying Campbell had to "up his game" and Vince Cable commented that his leadership was "under discussion"(both quoted in Cook, 2010:290). At a dinner with Peers including Robert Maclennan and Shirley Williams, Campbell was urged to consider standing down, a meeting which was apparently to be followed up with a visit from Ashdown and Steel, and on top of this Huhne's allies were suspected of briefing against his leadership (Quinn, 2012:151). A perfect storm was brewing. Cook succinctly concluded that "he had become the first victim of the non-election" (2010:290) and felt that Campbell's weakness was ultimately that "he was too old fashioned, or, put differently, if Charles Kennedy was too drunk, Ming Campbell was too sober" (Cook, 2010:291). The consensus amongst most academics is that Campbell's tenure was largely unsuccessful (Denham, 2012:580; Quinn and Clements, 2011), (Quinn, 2012:150). Given his three main aims of leadership were largely met, Campbell's tenure is in many ways analysed far too negatively by some, but the overall thesis that he was right to stand down is probably correct.

### **The Candidates**

The two candidates to put themselves forward were Nick Clegg and Chris Huhne. Huhne had, as discussed, previously run for leadership and Clegg had been touted as a candidate for the 2006 leadership election. As it was both Huhne and Clegg were tipped as the favourites to stand as soon as the vacancy emerged. The truth was, however, that speculation that one of the two would become the parties' next leader had been mounting over the summer (White, 2007)- with some writers speculating as early as February 2007 (Bright, 2007). There had been some speculation that Hughes may stand (Pascoe-Watson, 2007), but the reality was that having failed to win the leadership twice he would not put himself forward for a third time. Vince Cable, who was acting-leader, was quick to rule himself out because of the 'irrational prejudice' shown towards Sir Menzies over his age"(Settle, 2007). This was his primary consideration though he had asked around the party to gauge support:

I did ask around the Parliamentary Party what they thought with people who were personal friends and supporters, and the view was Nick and Chris Huhne – I hadn't realised this – had been vigorously organising, knowing that Ming Campbell wasn't going to last, and already signed up their teams(Cable, 2017)

Kennedy ruled out standing again and Susan Kramer, Ed Davey and David Laws also ruled themselves out (Tapsfield, 2007). Other people who were tipped as possible candidates declared their support for Huhne or Clegg- including Lynne Featherstone (who was appointed to run Huhne's campaign), Sandra Gidley, Julia Goldsworthy and Sarah Teather.

The support of MPs is sometimes overstated, but nonetheless Huhne's campaign was hit as some MPs who had supported him in 2006 switched their backing to Clegg in 2007- including Mulholland and Williams (Beattie, 2007). Despite speculation, Steve Webb did not run in the contest, though he did publish an article in the *New Statesman* setting out his priorities (Webb 2007). He also secured enough nominations to enter the leadership contest (BBC 2007c). As someone who was seen to be a candidate from the left of the party, this was by no means a hollow challenge, with several Parliamentarians suggesting they would not endorse Huhne or Clegg until it was clear whether Webb would join the race. Farron was among these:

I felt bound to back him to make a different case than would have been made when there were just two candidates (2011)

Webb decided not to stand, for a variety of reasons including the young age of his children, and instead signalled his support for Clegg's campaign. He suggests that postulating can only have assisted in making sure other candidates took his ideas seriously,

...inevitably there's an element of credibility within the party to be able to say 'enough of my colleagues would nominate me' gives you a stronger position, whoever wins in the end. (Webb, 2011)

It was suggested that Clegg secured 39 endorsements of MPs compared to Huhne's 11 (Branigan, 2007a). Clegg was notable in his support from a number of significant MPs who were seen to be of the 'left' of the party, alongside Steve Webb were Sarah Teather, Norman Baker (Bowers, 2011:183) and the then party President Simon Hughes (Deedes, 2007). In contrast to Clegg's Parliamentary support, Huhne found that he secured the support of many grassroots activists and even the majority of MSPs (Fraser, 2007), and as the campaign progressed, and his growing support outside of Westminster became clearer.

**Figure 11 Supporters of Clegg and Huhne (Brown et al., 2007), and author's additions****Nick Clegg**

Danny Alexander  
 Jeremy Browne  
 Malcolm Bruce  
 Alistair Carmichael  
 Ed Davey  
 Don Foster  
 Julia Goldsworthy  
 Mark Hunter  
 Norman Lamb  
 David Laws  
 Mark Oaten;  
 Paul Rowan  
 Sarah Teather  
 Steve Webb  
 Phil Willis  
 Stephen Williams  
 Lord Ashdown  
 Sir Robert Smith  
 Greg Mulholland  
 Tom Brake  
 Norman Baker

**Chris Huhne**

Tom Brake  
 Lynne Featherstone  
 Sandra Gidley  
 Paul Holmes  
 Martin Horwood  
 David Howarth  
 Mark Williams  
 Matthew Oakeshott

The similarities of the two candidates were noted by many in the media but summed up most succinctly by Kennedy:

Same school, both Oxbridge, shared previous European Parliamentary experience... Healey v Benn this is not (Kite, 2007)

Jo Swinson compared the two thus:

I thought the basic choice between Nick and Chris was with Chris what you saw is what you get, which is someone who would hit the ground running, be really aggressive in a good way for the party, really quite thoughtful, radical. He is a fighter you want on your side. Or Nick, who was less well formed but had much greater potential (Swinson, 2017)

Although some, wrongly, describe this contest as being one “characterised by a series of sharp disagreements over policy”(Francis, 2010:98), the contest was ultimately more about personality differences than distinguishing policies.

**The First Criterion: Unity**

This contest in some respects had parallels with the 1988 contest in that early on in the campaign negative briefings about candidates’ ability started to emerge. The Sunday Mirror reported as early as 21 October that Huhne’s team had described Clegg as “Cameron-lite” (Moss, 2007).

On the one hand this could be seen as surprising so early on in the race (Clegg had only launched his leadership bid two days previously) but on the other this contest took place in distinctive circumstances- it had in effect begun as soon as the last ended. Kennedy was of this view:

As Messrs Clegg and Huhne enter into battle - in truth a contest that has been going on in sotto voce fashion ever since the conclusion of the last one, just 18 months ago - what lies ahead for them and party members? (Kennedy, 2007)

With that in mind it perhaps explains how the campaign was to quickly become as confrontational as it was at times, the candidates were not going from a standing start with Huhne having stood in 2006, and Clegg being encouraged to- and even speculating on his candidature prior to Campbell's resignation (Carlin and Porter, 2007). Huhne's decision to stand against Campbell in 2006 impacted his ability to appear a unifying candidate in that contest and Campbell suggest that this was also the case in the race to succeed him:

Huhne had stood against me for the leadership after Charles Kennedy stood down. His decision to do so still rankled with some of his parliamentary colleagues who believed he had broken an agreement nor to do so. (Campbell, 2008:309)

At times both candidates came close to personally attacking the other- a leaked document from the Huhne team branded his opponent 'Calamity Clegg' (Truscott, 2007). Clegg suggested that Huhne was testing voters' patience (Grice 2007b) and launched a veiled attack on Huhne, who was the party's energy spokesperson, by expressing his disbelief that Cameron had been allowed to make a landgrab on environmental issues without sufficient challenge (Branigan, 2007b). For Huhne the on-air revelation of the 'Calamity Clegg' document's existence was particularly embarrassing and cannot have aided his aim to appear as a unifying individual. This followed Huhne branding Clegg a "kind of Michael Heseltine figure" (Summers and Taylor, 2007) after Clegg had signalled he may one day wish to be leader, though would not stand against Campbell. He went further stating that Britain did not need a third Tory Party- the implication this is what Clegg would deliver(Grice, 2007). Francis notes that this contest was particularly bad-tempered suggesting:

The debate on The Politics Show marked the most fractious and unpleasant episode of the campaign...The contest had, however, been remarkably bad-tempered by Liberal Democrat standards and, as such, stands out rather starkly from its three predecessors. (Francis, 2010)

Bowers describes the difference in the two campaign's backroom operations. In a candid discussion with Richard Allan, who in many ways led Clegg's London operation and was his predecessor as MP for Sheffield Hallam, explains that whilst Clegg's team had a number of

individuals experienced at delivering the air-war, Huhne succeeded in attracting people with more ground-war experience,

the classic Lib Dem by-election organisers, we didn't get, so the bit that was missing left us with the wrong mix. Chris was better at attracting some of those folks, so things like stuffing envelopes just didn't get done (Allan quoted in Bowers, 2011:186)

This led to a difference in mentality in the campaigns-Huhne's having had a previous run at a similar contest a year earlier, which Allan stylised in these terms:

Chris was fighting it like a Lib Dem will fight a by-election, while Nick was quite hesitant. Chris had more of a killer instinct than Nick: Chris was gloves off, Nick was gloves on. (Allan quoted in Bowers, 2011:186)

On this point too, Farron recalls:

I went to campaign meetings and was just amazed by the lack of grasp [and] organisation of Nick's leadership campaign... Nick's campaign bore all the hallmarks of a committee led campaign, too many people, too many cooks spoiling the broth and Chris' was sharp, small, nimble and able to make quick decisions ((Farron, 2011), see also (Cook, 2010:292)).

In terms of hard polling to assess this criterion, it is somewhat lacking; it would appear that Clegg perhaps held an advantage over Huhne- in many ways by default as he had done less to reduce his ability to appear as a unifying candidate. The most important thing to consider about this criterion in this contest was that it was not especially important. As Quinn notes, "[the party] was not especially divided at any rate. Unlike the eviction of Kennedy, the resignation of Campbell created no great trauma in the party"(Quinn, 2012:154). Whilst Clegg perhaps held a slim advantage to Huhne in terms of his ability to unify the party, it holds less explanatory power than it would have done in the political context of previous leadership contests.

### **The Second Criterion: Attention**

In terms of the candidates' ability to raise the party's profile there was a clearer advantage to Clegg in this criterion. This is for a number of reasons for this. Before considering these factors it is important to recognise the extent to which Clegg established himself as the candidate most able to draw positive attention to the party.



**Figure 12 Liberal Democrat members' perceptions of candidates' qualities in 2007**

<b>Candidate who...</b>	
<b>Has more voter appeal?</b>	
Nick Clegg	53%
Chris Huhne	9%
Not much difference	33%
<b>Would more effectively oppose Brown?</b>	
Nick Clegg	33%
Chris Huhne	31%
Not much difference	30%
<b>Would more effectively oppose Cameron?</b>	
Nick Clegg	40%
Chris Huhne	26%
Not much difference	28%

(quoted in Quinn, 2012)

Figure 12 clearly shows that in terms of electability and electoral appeal Clegg was perceived to have an advantage. Bowers observes that in his view:

Huhne seems to have a more laid-back manner in a suave sense, yet Clegg comes across as more personable. They have contrasting voices, and voices can be important in media terms-while Huhne has a deep lyrical voice, Clegg can sound a little like a shrill schoolboy who's getting a sore throat; yet Huhne's baritone can sound nerdy at times, while Clegg's higher pitched voice has a surprising depth to it(Bowers, 2011)

As Figure 12 shows, whilst Bowers was fairly even handed in regard to the candidates' appeal (at least their characteristics) Liberal Democrat members were less so. The other matter was, bluntly, how well suited each candidate would be at not only gaining attention but how they would capitalise on this. As one MP, who backed Clegg put observed:

Chris is not a left-winger, but he is to the left of Nick. In order to take the fight to Cameron we need someone who has the broadest possible appeal and Nick has that. He will play well in the south where we are ranged against the Tories in so many marginals. (Porter, 2007)

This is a view again that is backed up by the polling data in Figure 10. This was something also, reportedly, recognised by the Conservatives themselves (Kirkup and Carlin, 2007).

Another important facet to the campaign was Clegg's focus on adopting an outward facing approach, aiming to "connect with the millions of people who share our values, but do not yet vote for us" (Goldsworthy, 2007), whilst Huhne was seen by some as targeting the party's current members, consolidating their support:

While Chris commits himself to take the party base to the people – "lead[ing] nothing less [than] a Liberal Revolution for the British people" (an oddly top-down remark from such a decentraliser) – Nick opts to widen the party base

itself: “There are millions of people in this country who share our liberal values, but don’t yet give us their votes. (Tall, 2007).

In short, Clegg held an advantage in how he was perceived amongst the membership in terms of his ability to appeal to the electorate and enhance the party’ election prospects, though Huhne was also noted for his own strengths this did not seem to be clearly reflected in polling of party members.

### **The Third Criterion: Strategy**

The two candidates were united in many ways in terms of their policy agenda, though there were nuanced differences in a number of areas. Jones supports this view and summarised the policy differences between the candidates in stating:

Clegg emphasised social mobility, whilst Huhne preferred to focus on equality. Clegg was more amendable than Huhne to market reforms of the public services. Huhne also supported more green taxes. (Jones, 2011:153)

This is a contrast to Francis’ incorrect description of a contest “characterised by a series of sharp disagreements over policy”(Francis 2010:98). The reality was that minor policy disagreements were seized upon to highlight attacks on personality. One clear example being Huhne’s attempts to highlight dividing lines, which ultimately were being utilised as a way to attack Clegg’s character rather than the alleged policies themselves,

I don't think it's clear where Nick stands on Trident for example...I don't think we know where Nick stands on issues about public services reform, he's given journalists the impression for example that he's in favour of school vouchers, he's not retracted that...I don't think we know where Nick stands, for example on the National Health Service.” (BBC, 2007a)

This was a personal attack; whilst it was rooted in supposed policy ‘differences’, the charge was that Clegg ‘flip-flopped’ on issues- this is clearly an attempt to undermine his persona- not his politics. In short this was a campaign of personalities, and one that only really grabbed media interest when there was a clash between the two candidates for personal reasons ((Campbell, 2008:309), (Jones, 2011:216),(Cook, 2010:292)).

That being said, Huhne styled his campaign’s approach as having some grounding in policy and strategic differences:

I thought that Nick was the candidate of the right, and that needed to be made clear during the campaign. The other thing that I think, in retrospect, was rather prescient was that we were pressing on the fact Nick had done a load of wobbles on policy(Huhne, 2017)

That considered, it is worth looking at the policy and strategic differences that did emerge during the course of the campaign. Firstly, whilst Clegg was keen to challenge Huhne's assertions that he had 'flip flopped' on some issues around public service delivery, his platform was arguably more open to market reform than Huhne's, indeed he stated:

Our universal public services must be free to use and accessible to all. But beyond that, I want us to think afresh about how they should be funded and delivered (Clegg quoted in Grice, 2007)

Huhne claimed that Clegg was interested in introducing a health insurance system and school vouchers- both toxic issues in the Liberal Democrats. Whilst Clegg moved to deny both of these, the language of his own manifesto did suggest more flexibility on how services were delivered. Comparably, Clegg had also authored a paper focussed on the localisation of accountability within the NHS- which would inform the party's policy of democratising Primary Care Trusts. However, in this paper he used the phrase 'breaking up the NHS', to mean breaking up the bureaucracy, it was however a gift to Huhne's campaign. Evan Harris, who was an MP at the time commented:

it seemed not to have occurred to him that using words such as 'breaking up the NHS' could be construed as an attack on the nation's venerated health service (quoted in Bowers, 2011:185)

Turning to other policy issues from the contest Clegg won a lot of support amongst the selectorate for his opposition to ID Cards- saying he would organise a people's campaign of disobedience and that he would rather go to jail than carry a card (n.a, 2007a)- this was a policy Huhne also joined in opposing. There was also, crucially, agreement between the two in lowering the tax burden on the lowest paid- at this time taking the form of a cut in the basic rate to tax. Huhne was noted for his appeal to shift the tax burden from income to environmental taxes, and to scrap Trident (though he did support maintaining a minimum possible nuclear deterrent) (Branigan, 2007b). Clegg preferred to adopt a more cautious approach to abolishing Trident, giving Britain a stronger hand in multilateral disarmament talks. The campaign saw Clegg set out his 'five challenges' of:

empowering individuals, extending opportunity, balancing security and liberty, protecting the environment and engaging with the world (Jones 2011:216)

Huhne thus worked to cast himself as the 'left' candidate, whereas just a year before he was seen as a candidate of the 'right' of the party (Quinn 2010:106). Aside from the core policies debated, Huhne put forward the idea for a people's veto- which could see legislation overturned if 2.5% of the population were to object within 100 days.

In terms of broader strategy there was little substantial difference. The two candidates believed the party should move to a position of equidistance expressing no preference for either Labour or the Conservatives as potential coalition partners. Neither sought to embrace Cameron's audacious offer to build a progressive coalition between the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and the Green Party (Woodward, 2007). As touched on, Clegg saw the party's role as being one to drive social mobility and equality of opportunity, saying he would:

work ceaselessly for a more meritocratic, mobile and classless society in which everyone has the opportunity to progress just as far as their talents and hard work can take them (Clegg quoted in Grice, 2007).

Whereas Huhne seemed to focus on an equality of outcomes, going as far as to say

It is not enough to speak of equality of opportunity, aspiration and level playing fields (Huhne quoted in Grice, 2007)

For what would appear to be a significant policy difference it was not to become a central part of the contest. Indeed, as with many policy divisions there was an air of artificiality about it—ultimately, of course, Clegg is unlikely to dispute that actual outcomes do matter and conversely Huhne is unlikely to reject that a level playing field and equality of opportunity is a preferable mechanism to deliver a more equal society than through heavier intervention. Both men are, ultimately, liberals. When questioned about their red lines in any coalition negotiations Huhne was more keen to be drawn on his commitment to a change to the voting system whilst Clegg refused to be drawn (Clegg quoted in Morris, 2007).

The final key difference in their strategic pitch lay in the manner they spoke of the party's prospects. Clegg committed to speaking to those small 'l' liberals who lay outside the party's current supporter base - something Peter Riddell argued was crucial for the party's success (Riddell, 2007). Patrick Mercer, the then Conservative MP, identified that Clegg in particular could pose a threat to the Conservatives support base:

He made a very favourable impression in an area with no tradition of support for the Liberal Democrats, and I hate to say it, but he was the housewife's choice. He is talked about extremely favourably among the voters of Newark, who are prevalently Tories. (Mercer quoted in Kirkup and Carlin, 2007)

Huhne and Clegg both pledged increase the party's seats to around 150 within two elections (Russell, 2007). Ultimately, however, there was not a great deal of policy differences between the two and their broader strategy was similar with slight, nuanced differences around a few points. The most well noted difference was around Trident but this was focussed on varying shades of multilateralism—hardly a hark back to the 1980s debate within the Labour party. This was observed by several writers, and indeed politicians. Peter Riddell opined:

Attempts to claim big differences smack of pedantry and mean nothing to most voters. (Riddell, 2007)

Kennedy went further, arguing that the contest was reduced to little more than a squabble:

There's no clear message coming out of either candidate. It looks like a squabble about nothing. (Kennedy quoted in n.a, 2007b)

This is a view that has stood the test of, albeit limited, time- Shirley Williams reflected that:

The symptom [of differences] was much more in the personalities of the two men rather than their economic policy, in fact I cannot remember a distinct policy between them.(Williams, 2011)

In terms of establishing an advantage in this criterion- it is hard to assess; there are clearly an abundance of similarities and the differences were largely personal- which contributes towards each candidate's strengths in regard to the first criterion. Where differences did emerge, they were more tailored towards slightly different parts of the voter base. In short, neither candidate had an advantage on this criterion and their overall strategic aims were similar- although Huhne's tactics were notably more aggressive and spikier.

### The Result

<b>Nick Clegg</b>	<b>20,988</b>
<b>Chris Huhne</b>	20,477
<b>Total ballots issued</b>	64,728
<b>Total ballots returned</b>	41,465
<b>Turnout</b>	64.1%

(Rosenstiel, 2010)

### Why Clegg Won

The outcome of the leadership contest was Clegg securing 50.6% of the vote- a majority of just 511 votes. The close nature of the contest was underlined still further by reports that 1300

votes had been held up by Royal Mail postal strikes- though as Bowers suggests 70% of these would have to have fallen to Huhne for this to have affected the outcome (Bowers, 2011:188)

Turning to the contest as a whole the main explanation for Clegg's slim victory lies in his advantage to appeal to the wider electorate- the second criterion; his charisma, style and demeanour had the edge over Huhne- though Huhne competed well as a hard-edged political operator. In terms of the first criterion, it is possible that Huhne's aggressive tactics made him appear more divisive, however it is also those tactics that pushed Clegg onto the back foot. Even Ashdown- who was one of the first to identify Clegg as a future leader, and is generally seen as a loyalist commented that this was the worst campaign he had seen Clegg run (Bowers, 2011:187), as did Clegg himself when he noted, "the whole thing was so badly organised" (Clegg, 2016a). So perhaps Clegg was the more unifying of the two. The third criterion was of less importance in this leadership election, though it is important to recognise that the two shared some common goals and it is likely that the 2010 manifesto and campaign is likely to have borne similarities in several areas regardless of who had won. In particular commitments to greater education spending, lower taxation on low and middle earners, a commitment to voting reform and investment in the environment were all shared goals. Huhne's position on trident was ultimately the party's position going into the 2010 election meaning the main policy difference was that Huhne's commitment to greater 'green taxation' was not as prominent as may have been the case. Structurally, Huhne's campaign was clearly stronger; he had in place a strong local network of activists and fought a very strong campaign in which he dictated much of the debate. Clegg was ultimately successful, however, because he commanded greater confidence in his ability to appeal to voters outside of the party- which married up with his overall vision he set out. Clegg himself reflected:

He ran a much better campaign, in terms of strict point scoring, tearing strips off someone tripping them up he was brilliant. (Clegg, 2016a)

He also considers the reason for his victory as lying in his personality more than his political positioning:

I think what won me through if I am being self-critical is not because I took a particularly good ideological position, it's because I was considered to be modern, fresh enough without being excessively divisive and appeared at that time to have an appeal to the media and beyond the party, which the party had a real appetite for at the time. (Clegg, 2016a)

It must be said, however, with a similar policy agenda, similar parliamentary experience this election of personalities was one that was understandably closer than those before it.

## Becoming leader of the Liberal Democrats

The four contests considered show that the adapted version of the Stark Model can be utilised in relation to the Liberal Democrats. In most contests the candidate considered to be the most advantageous to securing attention for the party has been successful. The requirement to be unifying is essential, but not sufficient, in explaining victory in the contests covered. The following table summarises which candidates were perceived to be the strongest in each area. The criteria that carries the greatest explanatory power for the outcome of each election is highlighted.

**Table 3: Summary of leadership election results in relation to the hierarchy of goals**

<b>Election</b>	<b>Unity</b>	<b>Attention</b>	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Winner</b>
<b>1988</b>	Ashdown or Beith	Ashdown	Ashdown	Ashdown
<b>1999</b>	Kennedy or Hughes	Kennedy	Kennedy	Kennedy
<b>2006</b>	Campbell	Huhne	Huhne or Campbell	Campbell
<b>2007</b>	Clegg or Huhne	Clegg	Clegg or Huhne	Clegg

It is important to note that this table is a simplification of the contests; for example, Hughes was much stronger than the three candidates aside from Kennedy in the second criterion, but this is not reflected. Similarly, whilst the first criterion is only once considered to carry the greatest explanatory power, this does not diminish its importance.

What is shown is that the eventual winner of the contest was always seen as a unifying candidate - the base criterion of the pyramid which should also be considered the most important criterion. Interestingly the 2006 contest is an example of where a candidate had a perceived advantage in two of the three criteria but still did not win. Chris Huhne could be seen to have an advantage over Campbell in terms of attention and strategy but neither of these were critical aspects to the contest and he also lacked being perceived as being the unifying candidate - which is the base upon which other strengths must rest. What is also clear is that it is not essential to have a decisive lead in terms of strategy to win. In 1988, 2006 and 2007 this is reflected in the contests results. In 1999 there was clearly a wider strategic consideration for the party to make and the memberships' support for Kennedy's qualified approach and his 'lead' in this criterion betray subtleties of the contest, which saw him temper his support in many ways.

This chapter has used ‘Stark’s Pyramid’ as a starting point for analysing the Liberal Democrat leadership elections. The changes made to this model are justifiable based on this analysis- the conclusions and distinctions that have been made in each leadership contest would not have been possible under the original model. For example, in the 1999 contest considering Kennedy’s ability to lead a government in comparison to Bruce’s does not reflect the essence of the contest or explain in anyway the differences that did play a part in the outcome. The adaptations made at the outset of this chapter have achieved this and provided explanatory power to each of the contests studied. This has enabled proper evaluation of the candidates and their competencies as well as how the context of each contest and the rules for electing the leader allowed the winner to emerge.

In the 1988 contest between Ashdown and Beith, it was Ashdown’s ability to appeal to the wider electorate that secured his convincing win- though he was also arguably more unifying. In terms of Kennedy’s victory in 1999, personal appeal to a wider portion of the electorate is clearly his main advantage though this is underpinned by also being a unifying figure. Campbell’s election in 2006 took place in a period of instability in the party; as the most experienced parliamentarian and the most unifying, his success can be explained in those terms. In contrast, Clegg’s victory took place just over a year later, but was against the backdrop of a unified party. Whilst he may have slightly edged over Huhne in terms of being the unifying candidate, it is probably his perceived advantage in the second criterion that secured a slim victory. The fact that every successful leadership candidate has been the strongest candidate in terms of unity is not a coincidence and supports the overall model. The most obvious theme to emerge from these results is that where a candidate in some way had their personal integrity challenged - be it through perceived negative campaigning (Beith, Huhne), questions over personal affairs (Hughes, Oaten) or a less established network of sizeable, clear support (Rendel, Ballard) victory became less likely or impossible. This was because such challenges often undermine an individual’s strength as a unifying candidate. For others a lack of clarity as to their key objectives or how they may appeal to the wider electorate (Hughes, Bruce) also may have hampered their success. In contests where the most important criterion is not the first (1988, 1999, 2007) it is weaknesses in these areas that explain a candidate’s failure to win the election. As shown in Appendix One, most candidates sought to win the contest they entered; only in 1999 were there candidates for which the primary objective seemed to be to raise attention to themselves, or their views.

Having now considered the leadership elections it is important to turn to what the leaders did with their time in office, which is the topic of the next chapter. Having clearly established



what each candidate proposed in their campaign it is possible and necessary to evaluate their respective records.

## Chapter One Appendices

### Appendix One- Motivations for standing

Candidate	Motivation for standing
<b>1988</b>	
Paddy Ashdown	Win
Alan Beith	Win
<b>1999</b>	
Charles Kennedy	Win
Simon Hughes	Win
Malcolm Bruce	Attention/Win
David Rendel	Attention
Jackie Ballard	Attention
<b>2006</b>	
Menzies Campbell	Win
Simon Hughes	Win
Chris Huhne	Marker
<b>2007</b>	
Nick Clegg	Win
Chris Huhne	Win

## CHAPTER TWO: DRIVERS OF CHANGE IN THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS 1988-2015

The purpose of this chapter is to establish what the leaders did to try and influence the party's fortunes and how the party developed over time. This is, in the most part, characterised by how a party changes, in particular when this is the product of the preferences and actions of the leader. Similarly, preferences and decisions by the leader not to change aspects of the party's strategy or policies are also important in defining their leadership – as well as attempts they make to change things which fail.

Alongside this are decisions taken which do not necessarily constitute a continuity or change in policy or outlook but do help define the party – for example a stance on specific proposed military action. Lastly, it is also important to identify other key developments which are not the product of a decision or action taken by the leader but are the result of other factors. This is important in qualifying their influence and importance.

### Framework for establishing drivers of change

Establishing what causes developments within the party will allow these factors to be assessed. An important cornerstone of this literature is '*An integrated theory of party goals and party change*' (Harmel and Janda, 1994). In assessing the available theories, they put forward two conceptions in identifying moments of change. On the one hand, some have argued change in parties is a gradual, incremental process which is a product of the political backdrop against which they operate. Others argue changes are sometimes abrupt and Harmel and Janda draw particular attention to Panebianco's description of the German SPD's ideological shift to the right as such an example (1994:261).

The most convincing stylisation is their ultimate conclusion that analysis should incorporate:

elements of a number of extant theories of party change, which assumes most (though not all) party changes result from decisions of party operatives and which includes internal as well as external casual factors. Far from assuming that party changes 'just happen' or 'must happen', we suggest party change is normally a result of leadership change, a change of dominant faction within the party and/or an external stimulus for change. (Harmel and Janda, 1994:262)

There is also consideration of whether developments are conscious or unconscious decisions, with particular reference to Panebianco's contention that both play a role: "organisational change is the fruit of both choices and because of the actor's bounded rationality and the multiplicity of organisational pressures, unforeseeable effects" (Panebianco, 1988:241-242)

Harmel and Janda are supportive of each of these contentions, and the grounding of that decision is sound. In essence, party changes are not inevitable and are the result of a definable factor, or combination of factors, and these changes are a mixture of ongoing developments and accented, punctuated changes. The final aspect they draw attention to from Panebianco's work is his consideration as to whether change in parties was caused by factors internal or external to it, or a combination of both. Their own approach is:

designed to explain fundamental party change on a number of dimensions (organization, strategy and ideology/policy positions). Other internal changes (e.g in leadership personnel, financial resources, factional dominance) are incorporated as important casual factors but are not themselves explained by the theory. Independent of external shocks, changes in the dominant coalition may themselves result in fundamental change, but it is likely to be more limited than is possible when an external shock causes a significant reassessment of the party's effectiveness. (Harmel and Janda, 1994:266)

They argue Panebianco sufficiently acknowledge that a driver of change can be entirely internal to a party. Secondly, they argue external stimuli should be defined more precisely. Their nod towards the fact in some instances it is a combination of external and internal factors is important- an election result is an external factor, but the perception of whether this is a 'good' or 'bad' result is internal. Alongside this Wilson advocates the role of the leader in driving change is central; "it is disappointing to conclude party change is so heavily dependent on the choices and abilities of party leaders", he also notes this "stresses the idiosyncratic nature and unpredictable nature of change" (quoted in Bale, 2012b:6)

Harmel and Janda's decision to elevate some of these external factors is also important. The contention is each party has a primary goal, which can – and is – impacted by external 'shocks'. The key external drivers of change are those which cause a change in the primary aim of a party. Other factors exist but these impact to a lesser degree, or to associated aims. Whilst Harmel and Janda set out the framework, they do not apply it. Tim Bale adopts an approach in his analysis of the Conservative Party based on their framework which seeks to isolate and give a focus to three primary drivers of change within the party in his work (Bale, 2012b:5), these being:

- The change of leader
- Electoral defeat
- Change of factions within a party

Bale challenges the idea that these should be treated independent of each other arguing:

it is not immediately evident why, other than the fact it is practical to do so, such developments should be treated as independent rather than dependent variables (Bale, 2012b:7)

These three aspects are set out in Harmel and Janda's work (1994), which also sets out a framework for the arena in which drivers of change can be identified. Importantly, it draws on the work of Panebianco (1988) in identifying when these drivers of change act. Put simply, alongside identifying 'what' or 'who' can cause a change within a party, it is also important to determine 'what' they do, or don't do, or 'why' they act. Whilst the policy making process and powers of leaders differ between the Liberal Democrats and Conservative parties these three factors nonetheless do provide a sound basis for this chapter. In some ways, the more democratic nature of the Liberal Democrats' internal politics enhances the model – there are occasions, where the will of the leader has been publicly rejected by the party's membership and it is identifiable (BBC News Online, 2014). Harmel and Janda acknowledge the external stimuli will be different for different parties. They recognise four broad groups of party based on their primary goal: vote maximisers, office maximisers, policy advocacy and intraparty democracy maximisation. As with all parties there is balance and change in these primary goals at different times and ultimately all parties seek to gain votes. The Liberal Democrats can be considered broadly as having a primary goal of 'policy advocacy' and 'vote maximisation' – the advancement of liberal policies being the primary goal in many contexts, though clearly the winning of support is also important. Meanwhile Howarth and Pack recognise three party types- built on values, to advance the interests of specific groups or to secure Office (2016:2). In relation to the Liberal Democrats they note:

we can classify the Liberal Democrats as a party of values. The party does have elements of interest and manoeuvre, particularly at times when the party's representation at Westminster is weak and so when the geographical interests of the constituents of its remaining MPs come to the fore. But as a general rule, the party characteristically takes up causes on the basis of its substantive political beliefs rather than because of characteristics of the people intended to be benefitted. (Howarth and Pack, 2016:3)

This means one would expect the biggest impacts to come within the party as there are big changes in whether those values are being enacted, or when they change in some way. Additionally, when voter maximization/office maximization becomes the primary focus, one would expect changes to be driven to change barriers to those goals.

Bale's decision to rework the Harmel and Janda framework to consider the actions of leaders, as well as the *change* of leaders (Bale, 2012b:10) is one that is important; party leadership is rarely stagnant and develops. It is reductive to suggest the scope of a leader to drive change do not vary through their leadership. The same is true for dominant factions, who have greater

and lesser influence at different times. His other conclusions that electoral victory was in some cases as important as electoral defeat informs the need to adapt the model to consider electoral performance more generally, as well as his note that the ‘fear of losing votes’ as well as the reality of doing so could also inform change. As Sanderson-Nash rightly notes, an approach that only considers electoral defeat is unsuitable:

Electoral defeat, or “shock” as the “mother of all party change” lacks resonance in a third and smaller party, whose definition of “success” and “failure” will be different from those of its rivals, for whom executive office is the primary goal (Sanderson-Nash, 2011:156)

Throughout all analysis, it is also crucial to remember it is the *perception* actors have of their circumstances which is more important than the *reality* of those circumstances. People act on what they perceive to be the case; it is this which is the driver for their decision, as such it is how an individual, or group collectively, perceive their context which is most important in explaining a decision they take. The reality, though sometimes aligned, is in many respects largely irrelevant.

### **Model to be used**

Considering the above, this chapter will consider each leadership in turn, applying the adapted framework set out by Harmel and Janda and later Tim Bale in seeking to identify and explain the changes in the party’s policy and strategy. Where relevant other factors will be referenced. The decision to maintain analysis in chronological order of each leader, as opposed to the thematic approach adopted by Bale, is largely due to the contrary reason for his justification for his decision. Simplistically carving up the period in question into 5 or 10 year chunks would, as Bale states: “have resonance neither for the Party [in this case Conservative] nor for those interested in finding out more about it (2012b:10)”. Similarly, whilst his decision is taken so as not to have “privileged leadership as an explanation of change”(Bale, 2012b:10), he also recognises a thematic approach could be argued to privilege election victories and defeats. There is subjectivity in whichever approach is adopted, and as this work is focused on the role of party leaders as its central thesis, that has led to this chapter being also focussed in this way. In relation to analysis of ‘dominant factions’, this is a limited term as set out by Bale(2012b:11). This chapter uses the term as shorthand but is better framed as consideration of the strength of alternative options; recognising this may lack formal structure, or even ideological unity.

The three drivers of change which will be of primary focus and consideration are:

- The change of leader and/or changes in the priorities of the leader
- Electoral performance and/or anticipation of electoral performance
- Dominant factions

The main indicators of party change drawn upon are:

- the public face of the party – changes in leaders and key individuals
- the approach and organisation– for example changes in strategy, party structure, staffing and/or approach to external events such as by-elections.
- the policies or the prominence and focus given to policies.

Lastly, and as emphasis to the importance that explanations are unlikely to be exhaustive. It is also impossible – and wrong – to try and separate individuals from their circumstance when seeking explanation, even if this does make things less clean cut. Bale's concluding note to his work bears repetition in full:

We should never try to smooth out this interaction of structure and agency, this interplay of ideas, interests, institutions and individuals. This interaction and interplay, which is rarely completely random, inevitably makes politics less predictable than some political scientists might like it to be: in the case of party change it certainly renders traditional distinctions between independent and dependent variables more than a little problematic. In so doing, however, it ensures that politics remains a source of endless fascination, both for those who are directly involved and for those of us who hope to understand them. (2012b:317)

## **Paddy Ashdown 1988-1997**

I saw our recovery in three distinct phases. 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 be a very fluid period of politics (Ashdown, 2001:494)

### **1988 - 1992: *Citizen's Britain***

Paddy Ashdown's own assessment of how he saw the period following his election as leader serves as a more than reasonable blueprint for what was to follow.

Brack argues these three periods roughly exist as: 1988-1992, 1992-1997 and 1997-1999 (2007:80). This is broadly correct, though as will be discussed the election of Blair as leader of the Labour party in 1994 arguably acts as another division point, where the focus on realignment takes on a new impetus. Additionally, the first phase of 'survival' was arguably complete prior to the 1992 election.

Four challenges faced Ashdown in his first period of leadership:

- SDP: the party continued to fight for centre ground support and was seen as a direct challenge
- Labour: To a lesser, but important extent, his stated aim to displace Labour as the opposition to Thatcher
- Gaining attention: as with the second criterion in leadership elections, there was an importance in getting the party noticed.
- Defining the party: partly for differentiation (see above), but also many people simply had no idea what the party stood for.

Ashdown had been elected to raise the party's profile – his victory largely being down to his strength as a communicator- but there were immediate challenges on all fronts. The party was facing financial challenges, suffering in the polls and membership was also lower than the Alliance parties.



## **The extent of change**

### *The Public Face*

As the first conference assembled in Blackpool the main decision was to agree a name for the new party. It was an issue that could be seen as superficial, but ultimately encapsulated how every member was identified and the values and traditions it reflected.

Ashdown had spent the preceding weeks discussing with his team how the vote at the party conference should be approached, giving some idea of the importance attached to this task (Ashdown, 2000:10). What ensued was an impassioned debate and whilst Ashdown's preferred moniker of 'Democrats' was adopted by 650 votes to 500, it neatly served to almost perfectly bisect the party - the party in Wales simply refused to use it (Beith, 2008:126). Brack concludes the decision "proved disastrous, undermining the sense of identity and self-image party members need, particularly in difficult times" (Brack, 2007:80). At Autumn Conference in 1989 the party overwhelmingly voted to change their name once again, to Liberal Democrats. The issue had caused a lot of internal tension, with the Welsh party unilaterally changing their name, or not depending on which account is taken as fact (Ashdown, 2000:55). The episode was largely farcical and Ashdown's climb down to allow conference to determine a renaming so soon was ultimately necessary to draw a line under the episode.

Senior positions in the party were filled by Alan Beith on the Economy, which was a role he spoke to before too, Russell Johnston for Foreign Affairs and Robert Maclennan at Home Affairs (Cook, 2010:202). David Steel took a role as 'convenor' on Foreign Affairs but without a spokesperson portfolio. Maclennan had been leader of the SDP prior to merger and continued to play a prominent role. Ian Wrigglesworth was elected as the first Party President, again a former member of the SDP. In short, there was not a fundamental change in the appearance of the newly merged party's top team from the Alliance. The distinction was the absence of David Owen. The change in leader is significant, and he drove a lot of change in the party in this time, but around him were a number of recognisable, familiar figures. Campbell notes Ashdown had approached him to ask him to be Treasury spokesperson, this move falling only when Beith wanted the role himself (2008:114). Other posts went to Ming Campbell as Defence spokesman, Charles Kennedy as Trade and Industry Spokesman and Simon Hughes as Education Spokesman. One significant change in the public face of the party was to come in 1990 when Ian Wrigglesworth, the party president, was replaced by Charles Kennedy, who would serve two terms in the role until 1994. This was seen by some as an attempt to balance the 'liberal' leadership of Ashdown (Sanderson-Nash, 2011:56), though this arguably overstates the change, with Kennedy not being especially opposed to Ashdown's

agenda. The parliamentary party for the entire duration of the parliament was entirely male, the only female Alliance MP– Rosie Barnes – deciding to remain in the continuity-SDP, and there were no MPs from BAME backgrounds. On this latter point Ashdown took the opportunity in his first speech to party conference to challenge the party to improve the diversity in the party:

It may be uncomfortable to admit it, but admit it we must - we simply haven't done as much as we should have done to attract members and activists from the ethnic minorities - and their absence has been our loss. (quoted in Goodwin and Jones, 1988)

### *Approach and organisation*

There were two significant changes in terms of the main electoral challenges the party faced in this time. Firstly, was establishing itself as the centre party of British politics. The second was eroding the support of the main two parties.

In the initial stages of his leadership, the primary challenge to the party's electoral strategy and positioning was the continuity-SDP. The party's strategy developed significantly from the Alliance in there was now a competition to become the party of the centre ground, whereas previously the Liberal and SDP parties were united, at least electorally, in providing an alternative to the Lab-Con parties. With the end of the Alliance, gloves were off with the SDP and Owen at times venomously attacking Ashdown's Party. The Green Party also sought to make gains in this electoral market.

The summer of 1989 saw a number of meetings between Ashdown's team and the SDP. This was an integral part of addressing the first challenge set out above- to secure the Democrats position as 'the' centre party. The prospect was mooted of the parties working more closely together, which Ashdown saw as a way of removing the SDP – he wanted a single whip and the SDP removed from opinion polling (Ashdown, 2000:58). As one of the key priorities for the party, this was something he engaged seriously with, though talks collapsed as David Owen was unwilling to give ground on either issue, amongst others (Ashdown, 2000:60).

The importance in seeing off the SDP threat cannot be understated. As well as being a leadership focus, it was a rallying focus of the party's campaigning machinery:

The fact that the party survived at all was also due, of course, to the campaigning tenacity of the core of party activists who did not leave in the dark days of 1988-90, and saw off the other competitors for the centre-left ground - the Owenite SDP and the Greens. (Brack, 2007:81)

The slow grinding down of the SDP, which culminated in their folding in May 1990, had accelerated along with the Green party. Significant progress was seen with victories in the 1990 Eastbourne by-election on a huge swing<sup>2</sup>, and subsequent council election gains in 1991. This marked a turning in fortunes and a shift to the party being regarded as the third party of British politics, and the focus could move from the SDP and alternatives to the main parties, to the Labour and Conservative parties themselves. There were other by-election victories in Ribble Valley in March 1991 on a huge swing, and then Kincardie and Deeside which provided good news stories to energise activists and show forward motion. The former by-election came at a time of Government weakness, amidst the Poll Tax protests, and the latter in the face of unpopular NHS reforms. Gaining 520 seats in the 1991 council elections, and control of 19 councils set the party up strongly for the following year's general election.

In short, the 1988 – 1992 parliament was one of two halves. 1988 to 1990 was focussed on a grinding slog; a slow rebuild suddenly took pace in 1991 to 1992, where the party was making significant gains and growth in support.

Importantly the party was also in a difficult position financially, which naturally limited the number of high cost initiatives that could be pursued to deliver these aims. Dutton records that by the autumn of 1988 the party was technically bankrupt and suffering from a deep identity crisis (Dutton, 2004:269) The financial challenges to the party were the prospect of a £500,000 deficit by 1989, and resulted in the redundancies amongst the headquarters staff (Ashdown, 2000:15) ultimately including agents in the field and the Chief Executive (Ashdown, 2000:16). The culling totalled more than half the party staff (Sanderson-Nash, 2011:55). This change in staffing drove in part a focus towards key areas which Ashdown would focus on, discussed more in policy developments. There was a significant reduction in the policy staff in 1989 with two in three losing their jobs (Travis, 1989). It was at this time Chris Rennard was appointed as Director of Campaigns and Elections, something that was important give his influence in overseeing the delivery of successful by-election campaigns in the coming years, as well as the General Election campaigns in 1992 and 1997. The Campaign Department at HQ was cut drastically as noted by Sanderson-Nash:

In 1989 a campaigns team of 13 staff, comprising 11 area agents and two staff at Headquarters had been reduced to just one, Chris Rennard.(Sanderson-Nash, 2011:115)

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<sup>2</sup> Though Ashdown himself almost took the decision to not stand a Liberal Democrat candidate in this by-election, which was called following the murder of the incumbent MP by the IRA. It fell to Chris Rennard to – abruptly- tell him the party had to field a candidate. It was a crucial decision (Rawnsley, A., Brack, D. and Smith, H. 2001. Ashdown as Leader. *The Journal of Liberal History*. 30.:14)

In 1990 the department would grow to two members of staff in HQ, and to three in 1992. There was a small team based in the Parliamentary Office of the Liberal Democrats at this time, which supported the work of Parliamentarians. It comprised of two press officers, a senior researcher, an information officer to support MPs on standing committees and two staff allocated to the chief whip (Sanderson-Nash, 2011:134). At this point HQ and POLD were largely separated, with functions such as the Press Office falling into POLD or to individual MPs teams. This would develop into the 1992 elections, with the introduction of researchers based on policy areas, rather than being a role fulfilled by MPs own research staff.

Sanderson-Nash notes:

This is the first evidence of a move toward issue expertise taking precedence over constituency-based knowledge, since these researchers were connected to the portfolio, regardless of which MP held the spokespersonship at the time. (Sanderson-Nash, 2011:134)

As resources increased from the nadir of 1988, there was some flexibility for the genesis of a more professionalised operation to emerge.

### ***Policy***

Over this time there were significant changes in both policy, and approach to policy under the new leadership.

Ashdown would personally drive the policy change at this time, chairing the party's Federal Policy Committee. This is a crucial party body that can commission work (as Ashdown did with the Dahrendorf Commission on Wealth Creation and Social Cohesion) and can significantly shape the policies debated by conference. The development of what would be the more notable policies – on education and the more market-led approach to the economy adopted by 1992- would not crystallise immediately, but Ashdown showed he was serious in trying to carve out a position for the party on the electoral map from the start. In his inaugural speech as leader he chose to focus particularly strongly on the environment as well as political reform, freedom of information public services and housing. At this stage, this was a similar platform to that which the Alliance had set forward in the previous year's election.

Ashdown himself said of this focus:

I always believed there are some things that are neither left nor right – environmentalism, internationalism. We needed a clear position beyond being a limiter on the others (Ashdown, 2016b)

At the start of 1989 Ashdown set about writing a book, *Citizen's Britain*, which crystallised some of the key beliefs of his early years of leadership, as Ashdown wrote:

I had decided to write a book as part of my plans to reverse the decline of the Party and start building for the future. The aim was to mark out a core of ideas which would articulate what we stood for and explain why we still had a role (Ashdown v 1: 44)

The book itself was crucial to the direction Ashdown would drive party policy. It set out his view that the interrelated values of community and citizenship should be at the heart of the Liberal Democrats – and the country's policy agenda. Ashdown saw the need for engaged, active citizens with rights, entitlements and responsibilities to their communities. These themes were also reflected in the 1989 Federal Conference Green Paper *Our Different Vision*. The process is noted by Sanderson-Nash as having:

successfully served three purposes: i) to form the basis of the 1992 general election manifesto; ii) to establish Ashdown as a leader iii); and to establish the Liberal Democrats as a realistic political force (MacIver 1996) (Sanderson-Nash, 2011:90)

Ashdown described the deliberate moves he took to move the party away from the Keynesian position which was closely associated with the Liberal Party and then the Alliance to a more market-based position after 1990:

Where Alan Beith, as Treasury spokesperson, and I quite deliberately went about seeking to change the policy of the party away from – and I don't mean to be insulting to others – a soggy corporatism towards a more liberal policy, more interested in competition, small businesses and enterprise. We shifted the economic policy deliberately quite strongly to the right. (Rawnsley et al., 2001:5)

Economic policy would include commitments to make the Bank of England independent and saw a shift in the party in seeing Government as a guarantor of provision, rather than necessarily the deliverer. This was a crucial move pre-empting Labour's economic shift in the coming years. There were significant proposals for investment in transport and housing infrastructure aimed at reducing unemployment by 600,000. This was alongside measures to increase competition including:

We will break up the monopoly providers of services such as British Telecom and British Gas. We will permit access by private operators to the British Rail track network. (Liberal Democrats, 1992)

The Environment remained a key priority area through to the 1992 election, but there was a shift in policy, moving taxation towards polluters and the use of resources, rather than individuals' income (Jones, 2011:151). The development shown here tied in with Ashdown's

overall aim to provide a stronger economic backbone to the party's agenda, and a clear example of how the market could be utilised to achieve social outcomes. The 1992 manifesto- Changing Britain for Good- was focussed on these priorities – Economy, Education, Environment, Electoral and constitutional reform, European cooperation and integration. It also firmly took a position of equidistance in terms of positioning in relation to other parties and was fully costed – something of a novelty, which was not peculiar to the Liberal Democrats.

Compared to the previous manifesto it was considered more precise, defined, with “greater coherence and a more radical edge” (Jones, 2011:153) than the Alliance's last. *The Guardian* saw it as ‘out-distancing’ its competitors. It was well received, *The Independent* stating the Liberal Democrats were:

Alone in understanding that the market can be a potential ally in serving social ends (quoted in Jones, 2011:153)

There was a more critical take on the document from *The Times*, noting whilst some ideas were ‘bright’ others were ‘incomprehensible’, and the FT that it was “not a cohesive ideology” (both quoted by Duncan Brack in MacIver, 1996:90). In contrast Sanderson-Nash retrospectively considers it ‘somewhat bland’ and argues it “failed to seize upon any single issue that the electorate found exciting or distinct” (Sanderson-Nash, 2011:90). This styling feels harsh, and Sanderson-Nash herself notes the impact of the ‘penny on income tax’ policy which garnered strong coverage. Similarly Walter describes the policy as “the most innovative aspect of the Liberal Democrat campaign” (Walter, 2003:159)

Alongside the policy agenda developed over these years were a number of important interventions on key issues of the day which certainly helped define the party. The events of Tiananmen Square and issue of Hong Kong passports, as well as Ashdown's approach to the Gulf War, were important. On the former, the party took a lead in demanding those Hong Kong residents with British passports should have the right to reside in the UK after 1997 when China would regain sovereignty of Hong Kong. This was a distinctive position to both the Conservative and Labour parties. Although it was not necessarily in line with the majority of public opinion (Rule, 1989) it was viewed as a principled position that identified the party. In terms of the Gulf War, Paddy Ashdown was able to use his credibility on foreign affairs to position the party as cautious scrutinisers of the action, whilst being unequivocally behind the war. This contrasted with Labour's position which was far more fluid. It was also noted his own credibility, as a former member of the Special Boat Service, meant he was able to garner more press and television coverage as a result (Walter, 2003:157).

## *The drivers of change*

### *Leader*

Over the first parliament of his leadership there were a number of changes that clearly were driven by entirely, or in part, by Paddy Ashdown.

The spokespeople and public face of the party had a degree of consistency, but promotions handed to Kennedy and Campbell were notable. More notably, the decision on changing the name of the party was entirely Ashdown's, and – significantly – is unlikely to have been pursued in the same with if Beith had won the contest. Ashdown saw an opportunity in portraying the party as a new chapter in both of the unmerged parties' history. The subsequent 'U-turn' is something Ashdown was also responsible for though in the context of pressure from others. Beith was critical of the initial period of Ashdown's leadership on these grounds, commenting;

Paddy's first two years as Leader amply demonstrate why I was right to be concerned about values and identity. He made precisely the mistakes I had feared he would make (Beith, 2008:123)

In policy terms too Ashdown was individually very important in informing the direction taken by the party between 1988 and 1992. This was reflected in his decision to take chairmanship of the Federal Policy Committee and personally overseeing the manifesto writing process. There was a huge shift in policy in these formative years of the new party and it was driven by Ashdown's own passion for policy. He saw the value, power and necessity for developed, coherent policy ideals to underpin political action. It was at the core of his entire approach. He saw of his decision:

chairing the Policy Committee was a crucifixion, but it's a crucifixion I had to bear because if I hadn't had a hands-on approach, we would not have created that body of policy that it gave us. (Ashdown quoted in Rawnsley et al., 2001)

Interestingly, as discussed, Alan Beith was also fundamentally important in driving this change agenda. It is reasonable to assume whichever candidate had been successful in the 1988 contest, they would have played a leading role in reforming party policy. The shape of the development that was realised, however, was informed by Ashdown's thinking best set out in *Citizen's Britain* and a move towards the concept of citizens' rights, entitlements and responsibilities with a state ensuring provision, not delivery. David Laws, who was to join the party headquarters as a policy advisor noted of Ashdown:

Paddy was very involved in policy, he chaired the FPC, he was interested in it, he saw it as a bedrock of everything else we did (Laws, 2016b)

In short whilst Ashdown did not generate an entire policy prospectus himself, he produced a considerable volume of ideas, a clear narrative and took key positions that helped determined the direction of policy in the party.

### *Electoral performance*

The party's electoral performance was the main – arguable sole – driver of the strategy adopted in the early period of Ashdown's leadership. The context of the merger and election of Ashdown as leader was one of a failed breakthrough; the Alliance had secured 25.4% of the vote yet only 22 seats. Hopes of a balanced parliament and a breakthrough were far from realised and were an important driver in the move to merger. The merger was the most important driver of the initial period of Ashdown's leadership. David Steel had always seen this as a natural progression:

I thought from early on, when we had the Alliance that it would, and should, lead to merger. It seemed to me that was the only logical way: a whole series of things – joint policy, joint selection of candidates and so on. The SDP had a group of experienced politicians which we did not have. We had the grassroots organisation which they didn't have. The two therefore made a natural union. (Macrory, 2013)

Electurally, the first two years of Ashdown's leadership were to be disappointing for the party. Coming third behind the SDP in the Richmond by-election, a net loss of 100 seats in the local council elections and being pushed into fourth by the Green Party in the European Elections underlined the sorry position the party was in. Ashdown recorded in his diaries they were receiving a "miserable reception" (Ashdown, 2000:23).

The turning point for this came in 1991 – the strong gains made in local elections as well two more by-election wins provided credibility and breathing space for Ashdown to advance his reforms to the party's policy agenda. The increasing strength in the party, and alleviation of the financial pressures of 1988 allowed the party to increase the levels of staffing in the run up to the 1992 election. The key driver to this was an increased resource, partly secured through electoral success and donors being more willing to support the growing party. Similarly, this was inverse to the situation in 1988 where the electoral performance the previous year had led to a harsh round of redundancies. Whilst the driver of these changes is strictly resource led, this is linked to electoral performance. A party performing strongly and in a position of influence is able to secure more financial support than one which is not, and a party with more MPs – for example – has more institutional support available through Short money, but also parliamentary staffing. In brief, the party's electoral performance was important in delivering an increase in staffing to the 1992 election and the added benefit this had in policy



development terms. Similarly, it helps explain the initial period of hardship at the outset of Ashdown's leadership.

### ***Dominant Factions***

The balance of factions within the party at this time remained broadly similar and were not a significant driver of force at this time. Put simply, most of the party were united behind Ashdown's leadership and the merger. Aside from anything else the brief passage of time from the substantial upheaval and change of the creation of the party had not allowed significant tensions to develop.

There were two notable public occasions when clear opposition to Ashdown's leadership was challenged by the strength of feeling within the party. The first was in changing the party name to the 'Liberal Democrats', this came following a sustained period of pressure from a range of sources, including Alan Beith:

Paddy up the idea of calling the party 'Democrats', a term which conveys nothing in British politics, and only has meaning to those political enthusiasts who follow American politics.(Beith, 2008:125)

The second was the election of Charles Kennedy as President of the party. Give Ian Wrigglesworth was also a former SDP member the extent of the symbolism of this change has been slightly over stated as Kennedy himself was an enthusiastic supporter of the merger and was not seen as opposed to Ashdown 's leadership or strategy in any significant way. The strength of his victory – winning 82% of the vote – shows he drew broad support, rather than relying on appealing to a particular faction. As Wintour notes, he

was seen by some as the candidate of the old party. However, the size of his majority shows his personality won him votes from different wings.(Wintour, 1990)

Importantly though was Kennedy's motivation for standing- Hurst asserts Kennedy was "impatient to be more involved or used by the party" and:

The presidency offered a role in overseeing the running of the party, a platform for speaking at conferences, a political profile as a party spokesman across policy areas and an opportunity to build a base of support among members to further his future leadership ambitions. (Hurst, 2006:80)

Ashdown's own satisfaction ratings were still improving, standing at -11% amongst the public at this time (*Political Monitor - Satisfaction Ratings 1988-1997*, 1990) but there was no real move to displace him.

## Summary

**Table 4- Changes and Drivers of change 1988-1992**

Arena of change	Change identified	Primary driver of change	Extent of Change
The Public Face	Change of party name (to Democrats)	Leader	High
The Public Face	Appointment of front bench team	Leader	Medium- High
The Public Face	Change of Name (to Liberal Democrats)	Factions	High
The Public Face	Election of Charles Kennedy as President of Party	Factions	Medium
Approach and organisation	Aim to define as the main alternative to Labour and Conservatives	Electoral performance	Medium
Approach and organisation	Aim to replace Labour as alternative party to Conservatives	Leader	Medium
Approach and organisation	Reduction in party staff and financial situation in 1988	Electoral performance (impacting resources)	Medium-high
Approach and organisation	Appointment of more staff, including specialised research roles	Electoral performance (impacting resource)	Medium- High
Policy	Shift in macro-economic policy	Leader	Medium
Policy	Penny on income tax	Leader	High
Policy	Citizen's Charter	Leader	Medium-High
Policy	Move to environmental taxation	Leader (and factions)	Low- medium
Policy	Stance on 'Hong Kong Passports'	Leader	Medium - High
Policy	Stance on the Gulf War	Leader	Medium
Policy	1992 Manifesto	Leader Factions	Medium

## **1992-1999 ‘The Project’**

In the second and third periods of his leadership, Ashdown would see the party’s representation, relevance and influence dramatically increase and develop in both electoral and strategic terms. Electorally this second period lies from 1992 to 1997, where a series of by-election victories, strong growth in the party’s council base and the development of the strategy of targeting resources into seats led to a huge upswell in parliamentary representation. Strategically, the second period is more blurred – an initial move to replace Labour in the South of England as the opposition to the Conservatives was abruptly altered with the death of John Smith and the election of Tony Blair to succeed him (Ashdown phone call 2016). Ashdown at this stage pivoted to position the party to complement a Labour upswell, rather than seeking to gradually replace Labour as the main opposition party. The third stage of Ashdown’s leadership is where these two strands re-join– following a strong Labour victory and the Liberal Democrats’ approach in providing ‘constructive opposition’ to them. This whilst working in Joint Cabinet Committees through the final two years of Ashdown’s leadership would define the context and contest for his successor.

### *The Extent of Change*

#### *The Public Face*

The public face of the Party following the 1992 election did not change drastically, Michael White noting that the top roles in Ashdown’s frontbench team were left unchanged:

Mr Ashdown, who was accused of being a one-man band during his energetic election campaign, does not plan to change his leading lieutenants. (White, 1992)

There were though promotions to European Spokesman for Charles Kennedy, also Party President, and Matthew Taylor who became chair of the campaigns and communications. Alan Beith remained Treasury Spokesman, David Steel Foreign Affairs Spokesman and Robert Maclennan as Home Affairs Spokesman. Other prominent figures in the media for the party were Shirley Williams, made a life peer in 1993 and Ming Campbell.

In 1994 Paddy Ashdown conducted a reshuffle of his front bench team, setting up in effect a Shadow Cabinet under the banner of the ‘Leaders Committee’. This was in the wake of Tony Blair’s election as Labour leader and saw David Steel move from Foreign Affairs – he had announced his plans to stand down as an MP – and Alan Beith from Treasury. There was a change in the public face of the party this time, with Steel and Maclennan moved out of the “great office” portfolios and with high profile roles for Campbell and Bruce. There was a notable lack of women MPs included in the team, leading to no change in the gender balance

at the top of the party. Following the 1997 General Election the increase in MPs allowed Ashdown to recruit more MPs to what resembled a shadow cabinet. There were not, however any key changes to the lead portfolios established in 1994. Another key role, that of Party President also changed in this period. From 1991 until 1994 this was Charles Kennedy, before he was replaced by Robert Maclennan in 1995 having served his full two terms. Maclennan was opposed in the ballot by Don Foster, who would serve as MP for Bath, and Martin Thomas. The role of the party president in the public sphere was reduced compared to the manner in which Kennedy had approached the role. Sanderson-Nash stylises the transition to Maclennan as being to someone who was a “less well-known and less convivial character, credited by the party elite for skilful negotiations during the merger and a passionate advocate for a Scottish parliament” (Sanderson-Nash, 2011:56). Through this period the party again won a series of stunning by-election victories in Newbury and then Christchurch, which alongside steady gains in local elections established the party clearly as the ‘third’ party in British politics, and gave a sense of momentum into the 1997 general election. Chris Rennard as Director of Campaigns and Elections oversaw each of these, and it was part of his broader strategy of aggressively targeting seats. The strategy was piloted first in 1992 and in the intervening years was honed, with local government bases being built to enable to the 1997 breakthrough (Sanderson-Nash, 2011:110). The party also saw their ranks grow from defections- Emma Nicholson from the Conservatives and then Peter Thurnham (via a period as an independent).

The 1997 election saw an intake of MPs who would go on to play a high-profile role in the party’s future notably Vince Cable, Norman Baker, Steve Webb, Andrew Stunell, Mark Oaten, Lembit Opik, Ed Davey, Paul Burstow and Michael Moore. Almost all would quickly gain front post roles, and many would go on to serve in government in 2010-2015. Of particular importance was the experience many of these individuals had – Steve Webb as an expert on pensions and Vince Cable as a chief economist at Shell being stand out examples of this. As well as expertise this enhanced the credibility of the parliamentary party as a whole.

### ***Approach and Organisation***

There were a number of significant developments in the party’s approach and organisation in this period. These have to be seen against a backdrop of a 1992 election contest which sought to tackle three challenges, which MacIver recounts based on Des Wilson’s report to the Federal Policy Committee (MacIver, 1996:184):

1. The perception the Liberal Democrats were a 'wasted vote'
2. To maximise share of national vote
3. Run an aggressive public relations campaign to improve media coverage

Some in the party felt their performance in the 1992 election had been weakened by the fear voters had of a Labour Government. Ashdown himself came to acknowledge this:

We had underestimated the Kinnock Factor I was seen as opening the door of Number 10 for him. This awoke all the fears of a return to 1974. The Sheffield rally did the rest (Walter, 2003:162)

Of the changes in approach that did follow the election, perhaps most importance was Ashdown's 'Chard Speech' in which he set out the groundwork for abandoning equidistance. Some have argued this was the most important speech of his political career (Dutton, 2004:256). This was a departure from the position he had adopted since the party was formed, and from the traditional position the Liberal Party had taken before it. This decision underpinned a number of others, including policy development, electoral strategy and arguably the breakthrough the party made in 1997. The clarity of the shift was stark stating the party should:

Work with others to assemble the ideas around which a non-socialist alternative to the Conservatives can be constructed (Brack, 2015:380)

The intervention drew a warm response from Robin Cook who was running John Smith's campaign for Labour leadership as well as Bryan Gould who was Smith's opponent, and Tony Blair – then shadow Employment Minister – was also not dismissive (Walter, 2003:164)

At this stage Ashdown saw the move as a way of seeking to replace Labour as the opposition to the Conservatives in the South, especially the South West. It was not envisaged as being an anti-Tory alliance at this stage (Ashdown, 2016b) that would come only later with the election of Blair as Labour leader and the changes in policy he advocated (Ashdown, 2000:259). It is important to note Ashdown records in his diaries that he did not consider himself to have formally abandoned equidistance at this stage (Ashdown, 2000:273). In practice, however, the Tories were now the primary target of Ashdown's criticism and it manifested itself clearly in parliamentary voting. In forming an 'anti-Tory' stance with the Labour Party the Liberal Democrats could be seen as a 'safe' vote for those who opposed the Conservatives in areas Labour could not win. Tactical voting was a possibility and at least one newspaper, *The Mirror*, in 1997 did carry guides to show voters could vote to beat Conservative incumbents. This was in part a product of a series of secret discussions between the parties establishing which seats they would not invest resources in as they had less of a chance of defeating a Tory

incumbent (Brack, 2015:380-381). Notably at the same time as this there was an increase in the membership of the party to 101,768 at the time of the 1992 Party Presidential election – the highest ever, which was sustained over the next few years. This increase gave the party a higher income from membership fees and an increase, at least to an extent, in its activist base. On top of this, and alongside the shift in positioning, was the up-swell in the Liberal Democrats’ councillor base, surpassing the Conservatives as the second largest grouping.

Sanderson-Nash notes the party in this period made proper investment in training and supporting activists and candidates in the party (Sanderson-Nash, 2011:111). This combined with the strategy of ‘targeting’ saw the party become ruthless in identifying winnable seats, pouring resources and activists into them to great effect in the 1997 election, something Rennard outlines:

For the 97 budget, all the things like newspaper advertising, and lots of things like that was stripped out; the money instead of advertising, would go on target seats. So in 97, the general election budget of about £3 million became a budget of £1 million, so £120,000 in 92 to £1 million in 97 (Rennard, 2017)

The party headquarters also expanded to include a series of policy specific advisors, and bulkier press operation and the merging – in site if not spirit – of some parts of the Liberal Democrat HQ with the Parliamentary Office of the Liberal Democrats. The increase in resources available to the party sat alongside an enlarged parliamentary party, which was a huge opportunity as Sanderson-Nash noted:

The Short and Cranborne money that accompanied this meant a significant increase in the funds available, which prompted The Medium Term Review and in simple terms was spent recruiting a team of specialist researchers to shadow government portfolios, as well as expanding the party’s research and press operations. Party staff also expanded following devolution and by 2002 had evolved into an organisation with a quite different and more professional feel. (Sanderson-Nash, 2011)

In the lead up to the 1997 election Robert MacLennan and Robin Cook worked jointly on establishing a number of areas which saw the introduction of PR to elections in Scotland, Wales and Europe – significant given the opposition to this in the Lords as well as the introduction of some freedom of information (FOI) measures, and reforms to the House of Lords. Walter argues the JCC was important and successful – “compared with those of the Lib-Lab pact of the 1970s its achievements were substantial” (Walter, 2003:181). Hurst in contrast took a dimmer view – suggesting the FOI measures were watered down and other achievements amounted to little more than positioning statement of aspirations, rather than cold hard policies to be delivered (Hurst, 2006:126-7).

Significantly, Ashdown also sent Blair a list of what Campbell described as ‘guiding principles’ for the parties after the election – including the Liberal Democrat aim to deliver PR for Westminster and Europe, a “vested interest in the success of the first term of the Labour government” and that the “relationship with Labour and clear opposition to the Tories at Parliamentary level should not change” (Campbell, 2008:142).

After the 1997 election, Ashdown would position the Liberal Democrats as the constructive opposition to Labour, supporting the Government on occasion and working on a number of joint initiatives – including Joint Cabinet Committees – but also providing opposition. Ashdown continued to pursue what he termed ‘The Full Monty’, which would be the realisation of realignment. It was to be fruitless. Blair’s interest in key areas of reform like proportional representation were always lukewarm and cooled with the large majority he secured. Though Roy Jenkins chaired a Commission which published a report advocating reform of the electoral system – ‘AV plus’ – which would introduce an element of proportionality it was – in effect – long grassed. This third phase of the strategic approach would fade as Charles Kennedy’s leadership set in, and concluded the shift under Ashdown from one of replacing Labour when he became leader to working closely with them, to carving out a role as a form of opposition. A lot developed in the 11 years of his leadership.

### ***Policy***

The period from 1992 to 1997 was one of broad stability in terms of the policy priorities for the party. *Citizen’s Britain* continued to inform Ashdown’s approach.

One of the most significant early decisions taken by Ashdown was to support the government in crucial votes in relation to the Maastricht Treaty. It caused huge divisions with Labour and a huge Conservative rebellion meant the Government’s business passed only with Liberal Democrat votes. The decision on what to do on this issue caused Ashdown sleepless nights, but he ultimately determined the Liberal Democrats’ commitment to Europe must not be diluted in action or perception (Ashdown, 2000:198-202). There were a number of policies passed which fed into old themes for the party – calls for the Official Secrets Act to be abolished and replaced with a Freedom of Information Act at the Harrogate Conference in 1992 being a typical example. More controversially the party moved at the same conference to make the issue of abortion a policy issue – causing David Alton to say he would not stand at the next election if the stance was maintained (Leathley, 1992). Though this was not to be a flagship issue, it was a signal the grassroots were becoming more empowered. Jones argues the clarity to the pursuit of equality as being to enforce positive liberty, and provide equality of opportunity more so than outcome in the 1993 policy document ‘Facing up to the Future’

was an important move in the work and a market economy was the means, though not end in itself to delivering this (Jones, 2011:157). There was also an emphasis on preferring incentivising outcomes rather than direct intervention in industries, an idea which was not especially new, but would underpin a period of policy development which would see an increase in ideas such as environmental taxes – including calls for environmental indicators to be incorporated into economic policy (Liberal Democrats, 1993). The party in this manner also committed to independence for the Bank of England in relation to monetary policy.

As the fallout from Maastricht continued the Spring 1994 conference adopted bold policies calling for a federal Europe and condemned “the approach of successive British Governments, Labour and Conservative, which has ensured Britain has failed to make the most of its membership of the European Union” (Liberal Democrats, 1994b). In the Autumn – which was after Blair’s election leader – policy was established calling for taxation on polluters, and – to Ashdown’s annoyance – a debate on the role of the Queen though the contentious attempts to pave the way for abolition of the monarch were fended off<sup>3</sup>. He was not so fortunate in regard to moves to liberalise drug laws, with the party adopting policy to establish a Royal Commission to look at the decriminalisation of use and possession of cannabis (Liberal Democrats, 1994a).

Ashdown himself wrote:

I am tired and grumpy with everybody. I am very worried about the drugs debate this afternoon, when there is a half-baked resolution down which our enemies will be able to misinterpret as legalising cannabis (Ashdown, 2000:281)

Significant changes to policy were made in the ‘Opportunity and Independence for All’ paper committing the party to “taking low earners out of the tax net altogether”, the introduction of childcare vouchers and dropping a commitment to a partial basic income<sup>4</sup>.

Blair’s election in 1994 created policy challenges for the Liberal Democrats too – Ashdown noting:

I had been very depressed. I seem to have completely lost direction. I have been building the Party to fill a certain gap in politics, which I know is there and which would give us real electoral appeal. But then along comes Blair. (Ashdown, 2000:273)

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<sup>3</sup> Liz Truss, who would become a Conservative MP and Cabinet Minister spoke in favour of the defeated attempts.

<sup>4</sup> This was a form of ‘Citizens Income’, which had until then been party policy



In Spring 1995 policy was developed to reform maternity leave to be sharable between both parents alongside a plethora of policies in a motion to promote the ‘equal treatment of women’. New policy was created to oppose the introduction of voluntary or compulsory National Identity cards (Liberal Democrats, 1995b). There were also subtle, but important incorporations of more market led policies- such as the call to “reform outdated Treasury rules so as to allow for greater commercial freedom within the public sector” (Liberal Democrats, 1995b).

The Autumn conference adopted a range of significant policy developments. In Health, the party opposed the government’s structural changes whilst calling for commissioning to be brought under the responsibility of local authorities. There was a ‘catch all’ economy paper designed to draw together proposals such as the independence of the Bank of England, new proposals to toughen up corporate governance. Significantly the party also switched from a policy of pursuing a ‘savings target’ to one where borrowing could be used only for capital expenditure – this shift is significant in that it gave more fiscal leeway into the 1997 election manifesto (Liberal Democrats, 1995a).

In 1996 as the general election drew nearer policy strands were pulled together to create substantial policy on crime reduction at the spring conference- with a pledge to increase police numbers by 3,000 within a year of the election – and further and higher education, interestingly the party rejected policy to oppose tuition fees, instead opting to finance the full cost of studying with a progressive form of repayment (Liberal Democrats, 1996b) alongside the introduction of individual learning accounts which would allow people to earn credits to channel towards financing courses and training. The Autumn conference too saw comprehensive policy strands pulled together in prominent areas including Energy, Health, Education, and Political Reform (Liberal Democrats, 1996a). Whilst the 1992 Election manifesto was known as being focussed on the ‘5 Es’ the 1997 offering was to be known in shorthand as focussing on CHEESE – Crime, Health, Education, Economy, Sleaze and Environment. The only real change from the prominent issues from 1992 was the secondary focus given to Europe and the promotion of Crime as a top line policy area, whilst electoral reform (one of the E’s) was broadened slightly and rebadged as ‘sleaze’ to play into wider contemporary concerns about the integrity of the political system. Sanderson-Nash comments those working on ‘Make the Difference’ (the manifesto) realised it was:

necessary to cost the manifesto with sufficient attention to detail that it was able to withstand rigorous scrutiny, ‘rather than produce a wish-list and have to whittle it down’ (Sanderson-Nash, 2011:91)

The manifesto was also well received in the media:

*The Independent* called the party's manifesto the most challenging of the three, saying 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 Blair feared to tread (Brack, 2015:378)

Alongside the internal policy formation process was the Cook-Maclennan process, which was discussed as a shift in approach. The policy achievements in this process must also be seen in their own right however – agreement on a package of proposals including devolution, electoral reform alongside the incorporation of ECHR in UK law and FOI measures are notable, as was the principle of two opposition parties working together in such an extensive manner into the election. This would form the basis of the Joint Cabinet Committees set up between the parties when Labour entered government and delivered on most of these areas – though notably not a referendum on the electoral system or an elected second chamber (Brack, 2015:384) Privately, Ashdown also drafted various versions of a full blown partnership agreement with Labour (Ashdown, 2000: Appendix E, G, H), which were shared with Blair – as it was they would remain private as the prospect of a full Coalition diminished.

Nonetheless, as Brack argues:

The Cook-Maclennan agreement had a direct impact on the shape of the constitutional reforms Blair implemented after 1997. Thus, Ashdown and the Liberal Democrats contributed to permanent and profound changes in the way in which Britain is governed. (Brack, 2015:388)

The establishment of the Jenkins Commission by Blair after he became Prime Minister at the back end of 1997 to bring forward plans for electoral reform were significant and perhaps driven by the relationship he and Ashdown had, but the failure to implement its proposals showed a fundamental lack of interest or commitment in electoral reform from Blair, and fundamental opposition from within the Labour party.

The 1997 Autumn Conference saw the party strongly come out against the setting of up-front tuition fees, as well as developments in economic policy that demanded the passing of a 'Fiscal Responsibility Act' to limit borrowing to the value of investment only over an economic cycle – in effect matching Labour's 'Golden Rule'. New policy also sought to introduce new green taxes and establishing a Royal Commission on euthanasia – another example of the party's grassroots becoming emboldened in embracing topics the wider public – and the party– may be more cautious of.

Spring 1998 was to see grassroot patience and tolerance of Ashdown's approach to Labour run thin; a significant motion to introduce a 'triple lock' to prevent any moves towards closer workings was passed requiring Parliamentary Party and Federal Executive back proposals by

a three quarters majority, or require a special conference approval by two thirds, or the approval of a majority of party members (Liberal Democrats, 1998). This was a large stumbling block and the vagaries about what would constitute a ‘substantial proposal’ arguably shifted power in such decision making drastically towards the grassroots. The Autumn Conference saw the party develop policy further, with a watered-down commitment to reduce the tax burden on the 10% poorest adults, called for clearer moves towards adopting the Euro and adopted a policy of effectively abolishing tuition fees for undergraduate study<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> This was to be delivered by crediting ‘Individual Learner Accounts’, a proposed universal account that could be credited to cover education costs, with enough credits to cover study up to undergraduate level.

## *The Drivers of Change*

### *Leader*

Through this period Ashdown's personal motivations and drive explain many of the changes seen in the party's image, approach and policy.

Firstly, in terms of the party's public image, the reshuffle of 1992 was limited. Ashdown did move Charles Kennedy to a more senior spokesperson role, a recognition in part of his increased visibility as president. The 1994 reshuffle was influenced at least in part by the change in leadership in the Labour party. Malcolm Bruce's introduction to the Treasury post was an attempt in part to generate new policy ideas and sharpen the media performance of their delivery. Similarly, the ending of equidistance was partly informed by Ashdown's own preferences. Blair's 'land grab' for his policy sphere partly annoyed him, but the opportunity to seek realignment and some of partnership government succeeded the initial move from equidistance because electorally a united opposition to the Conservatives was thought to hold most fruit for the party. The work of Cowley and Stuart underlines this view – the ending of equidistance began in parliamentary votes *before* the formal announcement of the shift in policy let alone before it was endorsed by conference in 1995 (See Tables 15-18) (Cowley and Stuart, 2016). Whilst the electoral landscape favoured an ending of equidistance, it took a personal buy-in to 'the Project' for things to play out as they did – the opposition seen to Ashdown even in his inner circle is indicative of the fact this was something reliant on him being leader – all of his successor candidates either opposed the move, had misgivings in public and in private and none stood as a continuity candidate to the agenda. This suggests much of what had happened until this point was driven specifically by Ashdown.

In policy terms, as an active chair of the FPC who was noted for his attention to policy, it is little surprise that much of the agenda and development was led, or endorsed, by him. Of note are decisions outside of the formal conference policy making process: his decision to support the Government on Maastricht was, again, a leadership decision. The work between Cook and MacLennan is perhaps the clearest example of Ashdown driving forward the influence of the party on government policy and doing so shaping the party's own in turn. Finally, after the 1997 election the continued meetings of the JCC and the possible extension into other policy areas was something that would almost certainly not have been pursued by any leader other than Ashdown. It was indicative of the extent to which he pushed the party, rather than leading them, in this regard he presented a joint statement with Blair to announce the extension to the Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Party meeting only three and a half hours ahead of its publication. Greg Hurst notes they rightly felt they were being bounced into backing the move,

or undermining his leadership (Hurst, 2006:94). Indeed, as soon as Kennedy was in control of the party the process was quickly curtailed.

### *Electoral Performance*

The first change in this period driven by the party's electoral performance was the 1992 reshuffle; a solid result led to a large degree of continuity with changes focused on longer serving MPs who had not yet had prominent front bench roles – Kennedy's appointment as Europe spokesman being a good example of a longer serving MP being given a more senior brief. In contrast the 1997 reshuffle was undertaken with many new MPs – the new breadth of choice was a product of the party's electoral performance and the decisions Ashdown took – as discussed above- must be seen in relation to this result. The uplift in MPs – and then MSPs and AMs – afforded the party a greater resource in respect to staff. Whilst the leadership would have some influence in allocating where to focus some of the extra resources, the only reason it was even an issue that could be considered was due to winning elections. The change in 1997, which was the start of a phase of professionalization, is significant, Evans and Sanderson-Nash noting:

Short money has enabled the Liberal Democrats to organise and mount a significantly more professional function at Westminster and at party headquarters (Evans and Sanderson-Nash, 2011:463)

The 1992 election had seen the party win 20 seats mainly in the South West, mainly in Conservative facing seats. The party had come second in 154 further seats. Whilst this was notionally a drop from 1987, having been polling so lowly at the turn of the decade, this was a considerable achievement. The string of by election victories too helped build a narrative that this was a party that could win, particularly against the Conservatives – this helped challenge the credibility gap the party suffered. This was an issue to the extent that it was the subject of a 1997 Party Political Broadcast presented by John Cleese which aimed to show how many seats the Liberal Democrats would win if people voted how they wanted, not tactically. The party's gradual move from equidistance was driven by Ashdown's perception of the electoral landscape and was turbocharged by the election of Blair as Labour leader. The formal ending of equidistance was the culmination of a protracted process but the electoral success against in supplanting the Conservatives as the second largest council base is significant.

Ashdown admits that public remarks about the role of the party were not entirely reflective of reality:

We were not genuinely equidistant, but we pretended to be...At the end of the [1992] election I simply said that I am not going to play this charade anymore, I am not going to pretend we could support a Conservative government. (Rawnsley et al., 2001:12)

The necessity to take this position was entirely one driven by the election result though; had the Conservatives not unexpectedly won the 1992 election then it is debateable as to whether Ashdown would have felt the same need to reposition the Liberal Democrats formally.

The combination of the move away from the stance of equidistance, which firmly positioned the party as being part of the ‘change’ narrative also being pursued by Blair helped give credibility alongside improved polling which can only have helped in securing the successful defections seen in this period, something Ashdown himself agrees with (Ashdown, 2016a).

The final development driven by the party’s electoral standing was the work of Cook and Maclellan – had the Liberal Democrats been in a poorer state there is little reason this work would have occurred. Whilst Ashdown was committed to the ideal of closer workings, it took the credibility of his party’s electoral fortunes to actual translate this into tangible action.

### *Factions*

It is important not to conflate Ashdown’s largely successful attempts to bend the party’s agenda to match his own preferences with the assumption the party was entirely united behind this agenda.

From the 1992 election through to 1999 there were several occasions when the agenda was shaped by those outside of the leadership. There were occasions where the party’s policy development took turns that ran counter to Ashdown’s strategy. A particularly notable example of this was the party’s adopting policy for a Royal Commission on legalising cannabis, which Ashdown saw as a distraction, he wrote:

I have spent the last seven years trying to change the image of the Party to one that can be trusted with power. That will have been very severely damaged by today. And having Blair in the ascendant makes it even worse. Do they not see the danger? (Ashdown, 2000:282)

More significantly was the move to introduce the ‘triple lock’ on engagement with other parties. This was the culmination of a period of unrest amongst the wider party membership – and some in the parliamentary party – about Ashdown’s approach to relations with Labour. As Brack noted,

The system was deliberately designed to tie Ashdown’s hands (Brack, 2015:385)

## Summary

**Table 5- Changes and Drivers of change 1992-1999**

Arena of change	Change identified	Primary driver of change	Extent of change
The Public Face	Charles Kennedy replaced by Robert Maclennan as Party President	Factions	Low- Medium
The Public Face	1992 Reshuffle	Leader and Electoral Performance	Low
The Public Face	1994 Reshuffle	Leader	Medium
The Public Face	1997 frontbench appointments	Leader and Electoral Performance	Medium
The Public Face	By-election wins and defections	Electoral Performance	High
Approach and organisation	Membership increase	Electoral performance, policy agenda, leadership appeal	Medium
Approach and organisation	Replacing Tories as second largest councillor base (focus on achieving this)	Changes in Electoral Strategy and Performance	Medium- High
Approach and organisation	Targeting seats in 97 – huge upswell in support	Changes in Electoral Strategy and Performance	High
Approach and organisation	Investment in training for candidates	Change in staff and electoral performance	Medium-High
Approach and organisation	Ending of Equidistance	Leader (Change in priorities) and Electoral Performance	High
Approach and organisation	‘The Project’ 1994-9	Leader (Change in priorities) and Election of Tony Blair as Labour leader	High
Approach and organisation	Constructive opposition	Leader (Change in priorities) and Election of Blair as PM	Medium
Approach and organisation	Increase in Parliamentary staff support and resource	Electoral performance	High
Policy	Cook-Maclennan work, and Jenkins on PR	Leadership and election of Blair	Medium
Policy	More controversial policies e.g. Abortion as a policy issue; access within 14 days; Cannabis being Royal Commission on legalisation of cannabis.	Factions (some of the grassroots membership)	Low- Medium
Policy	Maastricht – Supporting the government	Leadership	Medium-High

Policy	1997 Manifesto	Leadership Factions	Medium Low
Policy	JCC work	Leader Electoral Performance	Medium
Policy	Triple lock on party relationship	Factions (Grassroots membership)	High



## Charles Kennedy 1999-2006

He was in favour, other things equal of an easy life. Paddy, all things equal wanted a difficult life. (Newby, 2016)

Kennedy's election as leader was against the backdrop of a contest which he had entered as the favourite and where the key issue facing candidates was the party's approach to relations with the Labour party.

The criticisms that Ashdown had faced had centred primarily on this, and also on his style of leadership being seen as not always collegiate, with colleagues being kept in the dark on occasion. This informs the early moves Kennedy sought to make. In the first two years of his leadership, the predominant changes are found in his assembly of his frontbench team, with policy changes and strategic shifts being much lower order – in part because of the short length of time until an election – it was also an election at which the outcome was clearly going to be a Labour victory (Newby, 2016).

### *The extent of change*

#### *The Public Face*

The main change in the public face of the party was Kennedy's election as leader. As set out clearly in chapter one, he had an established media profile and had earned the moniker 'Chatshow Charlie' for his ease at appearing in a range of programmes. In what was seen as a clear attempt to adopt a more open approach than Ashdown Kennedy took the extraordinary step of inviting all MPs to write to him setting out what role they would like to take on (Landale, 1999). Lucy Ward noted in *The Guardian* that this move led to the novel situation of MPs:

agonising over whether to aim high - and risk a humiliating knock back - or low, and be seen as unsure of their own abilities (Ward, 1999)

Malcolm Bruce was removed from his post as Treasury Spokesperson in favour of Matthew Taylor, Alan Beith was removed in favour of Simon Hughes at Home Affairs. The only survivor in the 'great offices' was Ming Campbell as Foreign Affairs spokesman, who had privately been consulted by Kennedy about splitting Defence from the rest of the Foreign Affairs brief, something Campbell vetoed (Campbell, 2008:167). Taylor had run Kennedy's leadership campaign and Hughes was his closest rival. Some saw the key roles as going mainly to loyalists – a charge that was not entirely without merit (Grice, 1999), Hughes confirmed that the two had agreed to give the other their choice of office if they had not won the leadership themselves (Hughes, 2017).

Following the initial appointment of the ‘great offices’ were the appointment of a full team of spokespeople and junior spokespeople with new MPs gaining a plethora of posts. It marked a change in approach for the party, as it:

Reinvent[ed] the concept of backbenchers in the party, which previously had so few MPs that all had jobs and reshuffles simply meant exchanging portfolios. (Ward, 1999)

The analysis is fair; though it is perhaps better to consider this period as having seen the creation of a backbench in the Liberal Democrats, rather than a Shadow Cabinet.

The 1999 team is notably slimmed down from the team assembled by Ashdown in 1997. The rationale was seemingly briefed to *The Independent*

At least half of the party's MPs are expected to be stripped of their spokespersonships and told to return to their constituencies to campaign to increase their majorities. Mr Kennedy is expected to replace many of Paddy Ashdown's office staff and media advisers with his own team after this month's party conference. (Woolf, 1999b)

The only changes to this team before the general election were in March 2000 where Mike Hancock, a newly elected MP, was given a junior role in Planning, and a small number of others gained or moved portfolios in the junior ranks, this cannot be said to have significantly influenced the public face of the party. The team was notable for its lack of women in high profile roles. Jackie Ballard was moved in what was generally seen as a demotion, and the party's spokesperson for women was Evan Harris – something that would not escape the attention of newspaper diarists.

In May 2000, a by-election in Romsey would see a stunning victory against the Conservatives, with the party increase their vote share by over 20% and Sandra Gidley returned as the Liberal Democrat MP. She would retain the seat the following year. After the 2001 election, and now with 53 MPs in Parliament Kennedy's frontbench team was notably more volatile than in the past. Annual murmurings that he would move those associated with Ashdown, or ‘sharpen’ his team to take on the Tories typified the autumnal coverage – see for example (Brogan, 2003), (Woolf and Boardman, 2002), (Ward, 2001b).

The election saw several MPs elected who would play a prominent part in the coming years, notably David Laws, who would author *The Orange Book* and serve in the Treasury team, Norman Lamb, Paul Holmes, John Pugh and Alistair Carmichael. The reshuffle that Kennedy would carry out had been trailed into the election – *The Guardian* running a story titled ‘Kennedy to reshuffle his top team’ reporting:

The Lib Dem leader will move senior party figures promoted under his predecessor, Sir Paddy Ashdown, to make way for a new generation who have proved their mettle in the last parliament.

Strategists... are keen for him to freshen his line-up of spokespeople and develop new policy ideas if his claim to be the effective party of opposition to a returned Labour government is to have any meaning. (Ward, 2001a)

For all that it was trailed, however, the changes in this first reshuffle were limited – the spokespeople for the ‘great offices’ remained the same. The most notable move was Nick Harvey from Health to Culture, with Evan Harris taking over his former brief. Lucy Ward of *The Guardian* noted it was, “a minimal reshuffle to the team charged with making a reality of effective opposition” (Ward, 2001b), though Greg Hurst arguably overstated the significance of the changes suggestion “The manner of the shuffle illustrates Mr Kennedy's newfound confidence”(Hurst, 2001).

The team put in place would last little over a year, however, with Hurst reporting as early as July 2002 that Kennedy had “left colleagues on tenterhooks over the summer by warning them that he is planning to reshuffle the Liberal Democrat front bench in the autumn” (Hurst, 2002b) a. When the reshuffle did come it was trailed as being the end of ‘Ashdown’s Old guard’, with Kennedy saying to his autumn conference, "A reshuffle? Now there's an idea. (Woolf and Boardman, 2002). But, again, what followed was limited change, especially given speculation of the removal of Willis and Evan from Health and Education (Liberal Democrats, 2002b). With the creation of the Office of Deputy Prime Minister overseeing Local Government, Ed Davey was promoted to shadow the department. Andrew George became Food and Rural Affairs lead, with Norman Baker replacing Malcolm Bruce who had overseen the unsplit portfolio (Hurst, 2002a; Woolf, 2002). Of most significance was David Laws recruitment to Shadow Chief Secretary of the Treasury – his economic outlook would become crucial in the party’s development and his appointment to the frontbench team was a recognition of his strength of mind.

All in all, though the top portfolios remained unchanged, and would only be significantly changed the following year in preparation for the general election. In his most wide-ranging reshuffle Kennedy moved Vince Cable to Shadow Chancellor and Mark Oaten to Home Affairs – removing Matthew Taylor and Simon Hughes from his Shadow Cabinet appointments. Paul Burstow replaced Evan Harris at health, Tom Brake became the lead voice on International Development and Malcolm Bruce re-joined the frontbench team at Trade and Industry. Ming Campbell by this point was the only Great Office shadow who had survived since Ashdown’s leadership, and the breadth of changes across the frontbench was redefining. Other survivors included Steve Webb who continued at DWP, Don Foster at Culture Media

and Sport, and Phil Willis at Education.

The transition was intentional – the promotion of ‘Young Turks’ aimed to “impose an image and policy make-over on the Liberal Democrats to win over more than a million voters he believes are ready to desert the Tories” (Brogan, 2003). Some tabloids considered the reshuffle as a ‘slide right’, and Melissa Kite of *The Times* saw it as

a radical reshuffle took many by surprise and represented a significant shift towards the free-market thinkers in the party. Dr Cable, a former chief economist at Shell, is an economic liberal whose mantra is "fairer taxes not higher taxes. (Kite, 2003)

Vince Cable’s characterisation as a chief free-marketeer would juxtapose with his future stylings and some were unhappy, Tony Greaves describing Mark Oaten, Vince Cable and David Laws as "pseudo-Blairites with little following in the wider party" (Hall, 2003)

*The Independent* welcomed the changes, declaring;

The promotion of Vincent Cable to head the Treasury team with David Laws marks not only the formation of a gifted partnership but a tacking away from the tired tax and spend approach and towards a more venerable tradition of economic liberalism. The promotion of free markets and smaller government may be Gladstonian, but these principles ought to be very much in vogue when it comes to reforming the public services. At last, the Liberal Democrats seem willing to place the interests of consumers - patients and parents - ahead of those of producer groups. That is refreshing.

If economic liberalism can be allied to Mr Kennedy's instinctive social liberalism and a stronger sense of discipline, the party's ambition to replace the Tories could, finally, be regarded as more than a pleasant daydream. (Leading article: Mr Kennedy has made the right move, 2003)

This was clearly the most significant reshuffle of Kennedy’s tenure, and one where he found more purpose than the tinkering amongst more junior ministries that had come before.

His final reshuffle as leader came in 2005, after the party’s most successful ever general election campaign. 62 Liberal Democrat MPs gave Kennedy more choice than ever in terms of who to appoint to Shadow Cabinet. New MPs Nick Clegg and Chris Huhne were both handed spokesperson roles – as a Foreign Affairs spokesperson and shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury respectively- both senior roles for newly elected MPs. Ed Davey was promoted to Education Spokesman with Steve Webb moving to Health after a long stint at DWP. Norman Lamb was promoted to Trade and Industry and David Laws to DWP. This reshuffle did see movement in a number of important public service roles, but arguably were less of a change than the 2003 movements.

The Party President changed hands in 1999 with Diana Maddock becoming President having stood unopposed. She served only one year before being succeeded by Navnit Dholakia. Diana Maddock was the first woman to serve as President of the Liberal Democrats, and Navnit Dholakia the first ethnic minority President in 2000, again standing unopposed. Whilst neither had the media profile of Charles Kennedy it was a small increase in diversity amongst an otherwise white, male top team. In 2004, Simon Hughes comfortably beat Lembit Opik to the role (Rosenstiel, 2016). Insofar as this was a measure of their politics rather than their personalities, Hughes was still seen as a rallying point for the ‘left’ of the party and his victory over Opik, more associated with the ‘right’, reasserted the strength this part of the party had. Hughes would take a higher public role in the media than Dholakia, not least as he stood for London Mayor in 2004 and was a long serving MP with an established profile by this point.

### *Approach and strategy*

Kennedy’s approach to Labour marks the most significant change in this period. Ashdown had pursued closer ties between the parties and though this had retreated in some respects, Kennedy would cool collaboration further still.

The most notable manifestation of this was the gradual disengagement with the JCC process—it met just twice more. This wasn’t especially down to Kennedy opposing the mechanism, more just not seeing it as delivering actual change. Whilst he was constrained from agreeing to deeper cooperation with Blair by the triple lock introduced by the party membership, he had little appetite to do so. Hurst reports Tim Razzall’s summary of the issue to be:

Charles was thought of as being against all this [JCC project]. Actually, he didn’t see the point of it because it wasn’t achieving anything. He didn’t have any principle objection to it. But if you couldn’t get PR through, what was the point? (Hurst, 2006)

With ‘the Project’ effectively dead, the focus into the 2001 Election became on replacing the Conservatives as the ‘effective opposition’ – something reflected in the Liberal Democrats gradually voting with the Government on fewer occasions, and then much less frequently.

Kennedy’s appointment of something more akin to a Shadow Cabinet also saw staff apportioned accordingly, with some researchers and other staff moved to support portfolios rather than individual MPs. This was part a product of the ‘Medium Term Review’, which was set up after the 1997 election to evaluate the party’s HQ staffing configuration. The recommendations varied, but notably sought to better define the roles of each HQ department and was seen as an attempt to professionalise the operation (Sanderson-Nash, 2011).

Aside from the initial capacity increase in 1997 itself, the review and the crystallisation of roles under Kennedy and the introduction of a cabinet style system was probably the most important and significant evolution in the party's history. This Shadow Cabinet was supported by a new team of researchers funded by the increased Short Money allocated to the party (Hurst, 2006:108). The redeployment of press officers from being based in Parliament to being part of the Party's HQ and the growth in the team's size also coincided with this change (Evans and Sanderson-Nash, 2011:464) Whilst the change in approach to move the party away from Labour had begun under Ashdown, it accelerated under Kennedy, and would fundamentally alter in the 2001-5 Parliament. Chris Rennard though notes there was an almost wholesale change in key staff with Ashdown's departure:

This was a mistake, it meant he got a whole new set of staff with no continuity, no experience, lots of mistakes, lots of gaffs ... handling things handling reshuffles, meetings, media things, what to do what not to do. (Rennard, 2017)

Kennedy's Chief of Staff, Dick Newby reflected that the defining moments of Kennedy's leadership fitted aptly the claim attributed to Macmillan that it is ultimately 'events' that establish the legacy, priorities and reputation of politicians (Newby, 2016). 9/11 and the Iraq war were to completely shape the 2001-5 Parliament and Kennedy's time as leader. Tony Blair's leadership can be considered in the three acts (1994-1997; 1997-2001; 2001-2007), and Kennedy's own intertwined with this third stage intimately. Kennedy's opposition to the Iraq war was borne out of principle, but also added to the sense of the Liberal Democrats becoming 'the real alternative' to the Labour Government – particularly as the Conservatives supported the war. He set out this position clearly in his 2003 Autumn Conference speech saying:

There is no law which says when the Conservative Party is down it must come up again. And there is no law which says the Liberal Democrats need forever remain third amongst Britain's political parties (quoted in Hurst, 2006:156)

Kennedy's position on Iraq brought tensions with Campbell over who led on the issue (Campbell, 2008:168-169), as to who should lead the party's response in the House of Commons, as well as amongst colleagues who didn't necessarily agree with his opposition to the war initially – one of whom significantly included Campbell himself (Campbell, 2011) (Newby, 2016). It was however to prove a strong electoral move. As the lack of planning that had been undertaken for a post-conflict Iraq became apparent, the opposition to the government's actions grew. This became clear with subsequent calls for inquiries being backed by the Conservatives, as well as the Liberal Democrats. The upshot of this clear position was a distinctive, important pitch to voters – the Liberal Democrats had opposed this

conflict. Malcolm Bruce reflected that the 2005 election was as a result “the easiest campaign I have ever fought” (Bruce, 2016). This is not to suggest in any way that the decision to oppose the war was an electoral calculation, but is a reflection on the importance that the conflict had amongst the public, and the salience as an issue it would maintain into the 2005 election.

The issue of Iraq was to drive something of a wedge between Kennedy and Blair, though it was far from being the only issue where the parties diverged.

This was not entirely down to the change in leader, so much as Blair’s change in approach. The party’s relationship with Labour was the biggest strategic question facing Kennedy upon his election (Hurst, 2006:123). Newby recalls Kennedy regularly being invited to Downing Street in the early years of his leadership, even after the 2001 election (Newby, 2016). Iraq was one example of this, but other differences emerged, particularly post 9/11 as the Labour government pursued more authoritarian policies. Ming Campbell agrees with this assessment:

The public perceptions were that we were close. That was because we were close, but we gradually moved away and the influence for that was events, but in particular Iraq (Campbell, 2011)

The combination of a more mistrustful approach to Labour and the dynamics of the personal relationships between Blair and Kennedy are perhaps best reflected in a brief exchange recalled by Dick Newby at the height of the pressure for an inquiry to be held into the Iraq war. He said of Kennedy:

He was completely unfazed by the aura of power. It didn’t worry him. For example after Iraq, Blair set up the Butler Inquiry and he rang up Charles about 6 o’clock and said “I want to set up an inquiry into Iraq, I want to put a Lib Dem on, my proposal is Alan Beith and I want to announce this at ten o’clock in the Commons is that alright?”

Charles said, “what are the terms of reference?” Blair answered, and he said, “well that won’t do- they don’t go to the central point and I won’t put a person on the inquiry” and he didn’t.

He didn’t need to ask ten advisors; he had an amazing feel for it. He was like a great footballer or conductor, he felt it, as firm as anything. (Newby, 2016)

Chris Rennard praised Kennedy’s approach through this period – which he also said was a period of greater confidence following the Romsey by-election:

He could do good things like unite the party on Iraq where actually he had flak for his indecision over whether to back the Iraq war or not. But actually, his deliberative process, consulting, consulting, consulting, taking advice, and taking good advice, from people like Tim Garden, and keeping in touch with Ming who was having his cancer treatment in Edinburgh, meant that he was the only leader that took all 53 Lib Dem MPs all into the same lobby, which I think is a considerable achievement (Rennard, 2017)

Something that was ever present throughout his time as leader was Kennedy's battle with alcohol. Whilst early suggestions of a condition had been present in his leadership campaign (note in particular Dougary, 1999), many had assumed it was little more than Westminster gossip. As it was it was something that would impact many areas of his approach over this period. Campbell recalls a meeting he had attended with Arafat and Kennedy where the latter performed poorly, largely due to what Campbell assumed was the influence of alcohol (Campbell, 2008:158). Dick Newby who was Kennedy's Chief of Staff through this period, reflected on the impact Kennedy's addiction had, and how

It is very difficult to explain what an all-consuming thing this was. There were hundreds of hours spent trying to get him to have proper treatment for it and the fact that he nearly did and we'd booked this press announcement and a time, and we left him at 7 o'clock on the Friday evening and at 10 o'clock on Saturday morning he was going to stand on the street and say "I have got a problem and I am going to get treatment for it", but then he went back [on it] (Newby, 2016)

The issue gained public prominence when Jeremy Paxman questioned him on his drinking on Newsnight, something Hurst reports led to complaints being raised in parliament (Hurst, 2006:181).

The issue was one that would challenge those around Kennedy throughout his leadership, with events being missed and even contingency plans being made for if he were to miss election press conferences (Bruce, 2016). Matters came to a head by the end of 2005, but poor performances – which some attributed to the influence of alcohol – at the launch of the party's manifesto in the 2005 campaign, and poorly delivered speeches and cancelled appearances peppered the post-2005 electoral period. Newby succinctly explains why Kennedy did elicit the support and patience he did from those around him:

The question is why did we keep him upright, the truth is because he was so bloody good when he was. (Newby, 2016)

Contrastingly there was unrest amongst a number of MPs around what they saw as a lack of direction from the leadership. One outlet of this was the publication of a collection of essays under the title '*The Orange Book*' in 2004. Edited by David Laws and Paul Marshall the book caused a level of controversy rarely seen around the publication of a collection of political essays. The foreword sets out an aim to "reunite the key strands of Liberal tradition...and shows how they can be built into a coherent whole" (Laws, 2004:16-7). The contributors, including Clegg and Huhne, aim to address a range of policy areas adopting an 'economically liberal' approach. In places it pushed or conflicted with existing party policy – Laws' chapter on the NHS gaining something resembling notoriety.



Whilst some ideas are controversial they are all attempting to reach goals that would be common to most Liberal Democrats. It was perhaps the most developed attempt to set out what ‘economic liberalism’ was as a philosophy in modern times. The traditions of social and economic liberalism are not zero-sum, the relationship being much more dialectical, and about achieving a balance, as Ashdown was keen to point out,

There is a balance in liberalism, and it’s a living balance which is what makes liberalism so powerful, because it changes...economic liberalism is part of liberalism (Ashdown, 2011)

Steve Webb, who contributed to both *The Orange Book* and *Reinventing the State* meanwhile argued:

All liberals don’t trust the state; social liberals don’t trust the market either and that’s my distinction. We are united in our liberalism of suspicion of a big centralised unaccountable state but how you deal with that: economic liberals would say, “therefore you use market based solutions”, social liberals would say “yeah but market based solutions can be worse and therefore the state for all its flaws has to have more of a role”, and that is a spectrum. It is an issue by issue basis and not a fault line as such. (Webb, 2011)

The backlash from some, however, was fierce:

Said Turks, mainly David Laws and Mark Oaten, have been mouthing off for months about wanting to shift the party towards an economic liberal agenda in Laws’ case and to something like right-wing populism in Oaten’s. The public scepticism of such an establishment figure as Campbell must signal concern on high that the Young Turks have been allowed to get out of control. (Liberator Collective, 2004:4)

And Titley in his review stated:

*The Orange Book* should be judged not merely as an intellectual work, but also as an exercise in power. The Liberal Democrats are in the middle of an attempted putsch, of which the book is an integral part. The curious thing about this right wing plotting is that it enjoys little or no grassroots support in the party, and has not attempted to win any. (Titley, 2004:8)

The criticism from within the party to the book ranged then from those who argued it was the product of an economic liberal/right-wing attempt to take over the party, those who saw it as a shallow offering (Titley’s review challenges most essays on intellectual grounds), or a combination of the two.

None of this is to say it was just ‘economic liberals’ who were expressing concern at Kennedy’s approach. *Reinventing the State* - seen as a direct ‘social liberal’ response to *The Orange Book* was to follow. Similarly, criticism from people such as Duncan Brack who were

seen as more ‘socially liberal’ was at times more scathing of Kennedy’s approach than anything Laws et al were to produce, for example stating:

He had no agenda for his leadership; he did not manage the party; his communication skills largely deserted him; and he did not appear to believe in his own capacity to lead.

His alcoholism, suspected by many but not finally confirmed until his resignation in 2006, was not the underlying problem, though of course it made everything worse. Kennedy's underlying problem was that he was a poor leader, drunk or sober. (Brack, 2007:85)

Even Tittley opened his review of the work agreeing with the premise of a work to set out an intellectual basis for the party:

I have long bemoaned the lack of intellectual life in the party and yearned for it to publish something a tad weightier than a yellow baseball cap. (Tittley, 2004)

The essence was that at this time there was perhaps a more concerted effort from those outside of leadership roles to produce new ideas and policies than under Ashdown. Gurling, offers a contrasting view of how Kennedy viewed the ‘thousand flowers’ of policy that were blooming

he felt that some of the things people were saying and doing in terms of policy development, was simply to basically provoke a response. They still weren't comfortable with the fact that, yeah, this was a different style of leadership. And they were goading, on provoking with whichever way they could some sort of leaderly response to telling the party how it's going to be (Gurling, 2019)

Regardless, the approach of the years preceding the 2005 election were to continue, with the party adopting a ‘decapitation strategy’ aimed at removing top Conservatives and securing the party’s role as ‘the real opposition’ whilst picking off gains in Labour areas with a strong opposition to the Iraq war. This was partly problematised a policy agenda had, in some way, moved economically to the left of Labour. This had come off the back of a sensational by election victory in Brent East in 2003, where Sarah Teather was elected on a 28.5% swing. This was built on in 2004 with the party increasing their vote share by 17.7% to win Leicester South. Opposition to the Iraq war was placed at the heart of the Liberal Democrat General Election campaign, alongside a ‘shopping list’ of ten aims. Ashdown typified the critique of the campaign and this time saying:

The party just became lazy, in policy terms. Some of that was to do with the leader... I think that the party fell back on opportunism... we became defined by the Iraq war. (Ashdown, 2011)

Ashdown's assertion that the Liberal Democrats were increasingly more defined by what they did not stand for is something that typifies the end of the Kennedy-era. The 2005 manifesto was similar to 2001's, with very few clear developments in headline policies.

The manifesto's introduction outlined Labour policies that the party opposed, It mentions only three policies not defined by these; to introduce free elderly care, replace council tax with a local income tax, and to reform the pension system (Liberal Democrats, 2005:2) Sanderson Nash argues this tactic –which saw only a small increase in Liberal Democrat MPs to 62 – was perhaps the result of hitting the limit on what a Chris Rennard-inspired targeting strategy could achieve:

The relentless vote-maximising tactics employed in the build-up to the party's high-water-mark of 2005 appears to have been at the cost of a cohesive and coherent ideological framework. Instead the party were encouraged to be all things to all voters. (2011:98-99)

Rennard saw Kennedy as a key performer in the campaign – arguing that despite the dip in popularity following the launch of the manifesto the Question Time performance in the week ahead of poll was significant:

Charles was masterful. He worked the audience, he came out first, when it was cool in the room. He would grab the audience, and say “oh you have come a long way, haven't you?” - they liked him. He endeared himself to them, he got applause. Also, he had the skill that when David Dimbleby was being, aggressive and rude to people in the audience Charles could intervene on behalf of the person in the audience against David Dimbleby so then the audience thought ‘good for you for sticking up for the person in the audience’, not just Dave Dimbleby saying he knows it most.(Rennard, 2017)

Following the election Kennedy set about seeking to wipe the slate clean on the party's policy book – Hurst recounts various ‘wacky’ policies had been thrown at him during the campaign and Kennedy argued:

We must reconsider whether it should be possible to commit the party to specific and controversial policies on the basis of a brief, desultory debate in a largely empty hall. (Hurst, 2006:219)

What transpired was Kennedy establishing a new policy review Meeting the Challenge with an aim of developing a narrative into the next election. There was dissatisfaction amongst some of the newer MPs at the length of time it took for them to be given office and general organisation of the party which was stoked by spokespeople addressing issues way beyond their brief; it was becoming a free-for all (Hurst, 2006:224).

There was a brief respite for Kennedy with the successful defence of Cheadle in the autumn by-election – it became the first seat the party successfully defended in a by-election since the merger<sup>6</sup>.

Tim Razzall penned a note to Kennedy in the autumn of 2005 setting out the strategic challenges as he saw them, which included bolstering Kennedy’s reputation as a strong leader and as an alternative Prime Minister. As it was, what he saw as the start of a four-year project was to be curtailed by Kennedy’s removal as leader early the following year.

### ***Policy***

The policy development through this period was varied. There is an almost universal opinion that Kennedy did not take much interest in policy development, Dick Newby reflecting

Charles himself was not going to be innovative in a policy sense because he couldn’t do it given everything else he was doing (Newby, 2016)

Duncan Brack was even more critical:

His Reformer allies hoped that he would take on an agenda based on social justice and active government, but no major policy or campaigning initiatives followed... the party's policy stance remained largely unchanged until after Kennedy's departure. (Brack, 2007:85)

The attempts to flesh out a philosophy to his leadership, as discussed, in the ‘Future of Politics’ largely failed with Hurst noting there was a “startling lack of original thinking on policy or a strand of political thought” (Hurst, 2006:118). This in part would be because the process was not driven by Kennedy himself but by Richard Grayson (Newby, 2016), though whether that was the full aim of the work is disputed (Gurling, 2019; Grayson, 2017).

Even within the party it was not viewed as especially substantive, Duncan Brack’s review for the *Journal of Liberal History* noting:

it contains almost no new ideas. It is an explanation, mostly coherent and lucid, of the party’s existing policy position; indeed, those of us more familiar than we would like to be with party policy papers will recognise many proposals and even, on occasion, entire paragraphs lifted verbatim from other sources.

There’s nothing necessarily wrong with [it] but it would be nice to find the occasional new idea. (Brack, 2000)

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<sup>6</sup> With the peculiar exception of Winchester in 1997

It was a view supported by others (McAnulla, 2009:40), though some argued that it

Offered a bigger challenge to Liberal thinking than we have yet shown any sign of rising to... ask[ing] us to work afresh for new circumstances, what are and what are not the purposes of the state (quoted in Jones, 2011:181)

Richard Grayson, who worked closely with Charles on the book argues that this was not the aim of the work:

Words I wouldn't use [as to its aim] are 'weight' and 'gravitas', I would talk about political compass, values, and it was partly about Charles... it tried to capture Charles' political narrative...I think it did [set out original thought] it was an updating of social Liberalism...it was about introducing curious electors to him more fully.(Grayson, 2017)

Importantly too, those who were to become the future leadership of the party also saw a lack of focus on policy. Nick Clegg, for example, reflects:

I saw Charles as what he was, a wonderful communicator, there was a lovely common touch about him, an ease about him but he self-evidently wasn't as interested in ideas and policy (Clegg, 2016a)

Brack's assessment that the policy agenda would remain largely unchanged is fair to an extent, though Kennedy did make waves early on in restating the party policy for a Royal Commission on Drugs – though in far more enthusiastic terms than Ashdown (McSmith, 1999). At the same time there was a distancing of the new leadership from the wide ranging policy review commissioned by Ashdown 'Moving Ahead', which those around Kennedy were reported to consider having a "libertarian, sub-Thatcherite agenda" (Hurst, 2006:131). This review, interestingly, had been authored by David Laws and Mark Oaten – who would go on to hold important roles under Kennedy and in Laws' case be at the heart of the party's direction into Coalition Government.

Of some significance was a toughening in language and stance on funding higher education, with calls for tuition to be paid for from public funds (as opposed to the hybrid system previously advanced of Individual Learning Accounts), and that students should have access to housing benefit and entitlement to Income Support (Liberal Democrats, 1999).

The 2000 Autumn Conference saw the party back introducing civil partnerships for same sex couples – the first British party to do so as well as moving to oppose the government on restricting trial by jury and reasserting calls for 6,000 new police officers and opposition to

The New Deal<sup>7</sup> (Glover, 2000b). There was a firm commitment to oppose RIPA<sup>8</sup>, though this was more a contemporary expression of the long-held commitment to scepticism about more authoritarian methods of monitoring of communications. Significant policy was developed to increase income tax on those earning over £100,000 to 50p in the pound to fund an increase in the state pension, and 1p on the basic rate for education – maintaining the policy introduced by Ashdown. Interestingly, given he would come to advocate the policy, Steve Webb opposed restoring the earnings link to the rate of pensions and the leadership had to come out in force against a grassroots move to bring back the link (White, 2000b). Whilst Michael White dubbed Kennedy ‘inaction man’ (White, 2000a) for the lack of strategy and impetus through his first year, Julian Glover warned the party needed definition:

There are several scenarios. The rosier is that Kennedy comes to thrive... appealing to voters sick of Tony Blair's apparent arrogance and unconvinced by William Hague...[the other] is of Kennedy leading a party of unfocussed protest, driven by the special interest groups (Glover, 2000a)

The outcome of this process was a 2001 manifesto (Freedom, Justice, Honesty) that promised to raise £9.5bn through the tax policies adopted in 2000 to fund 7,500 more nurses and midwives, an extra 2,500 training places for doctors, 5,000 secondary teachers and 6,000 police officers. Further plans to cut class sizes to 25, abolish tuition fees, increase the state pension by £5 a week as well as holding a referendum on joining the Euro were also given prominent billing. There was also a significantly costly commitment to introduce free care for the elderly.

The manifesto dropped a distinct section on the environment, instead weaving policy through every other area – a symbol of its integrity to the party’s overall agenda, a move repeated with policies on civil liberties. The extent of change, then, was limited. However, the repetition of approach was credited by some as tackling the key challenges facing the party – namely what they were for, and where they stood in the political landscape:

They have redefined their role so that in 2001 they were often portrayed as the party of radical policies and political integrity. With distinctive policies such as hypothecated taxation for education, the party has gone some way to overcoming the 'no-one knows what they stand for' syndrome that has plagued the party for years (Holme & Holmes, 1998). The abandonment of equidistance redefined the Liberal Democrats as part of an anti-Conservative coalition that has survived the overthrow of the Conservative government in 1997. In the devolved parliament in Scotland and the Welsh Assembly they

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<sup>7</sup> Flagship Labour workfare programme – meant that those refusing ‘reasonable employment’ could lose access to welfare support.

<sup>8</sup> Regulation of Investigatory Powers

share power with Labour, and they continue to be a strong voice in local government in Britain. In 2001 the anti-Conservative stance of the party enabled the Liberal Democrats to increase both their popular vote share and their number of elected representatives. The test is to refine and repeat this strategy. (Russell et al., 2001:225-226)

The conference after the 2001 election saw a plethora of spending commitments adopted - The party also called for wage increase for NHS workers, the freeing up for councils to borrow to build housing stock and allowing councils and regions to borrow money for investment where they felt public sector financing was a better option than what could be secured on the private market. Combined with plans for free bus passes for the elderly, half price travel for students as well as some replacement model for tuition fees, restoring grants and in the longer term allowing students to access social security, this was a series of proposals that carried a considerable price tag (Liberal Democrats, 2001) and (Plomin, 2001). Requiring the private health sector to fund training for NHS staff the most prominent contrast to this being a rare policy from the week that would raise money (Parker, 2001), with other revenue raisers found in expansion of green taxation.

From 2002 onwards, the party adopted policy opposed to military action in Iraq, this developed from the initial motion which called for a UN resolution and more intelligence if action were to be taken, through to clear opposition to the intervention in 2003, through to criticising the Butler Review in the aftermath of the war and calling for an inquiry (Liberal Democrats, 2002a; Liberal Democrats, 2002b; Liberal Democrats, 2003; Liberal Democrats, 2004). The 2002 conferences also saw the party set out radical, liberal policies to decriminalise personal drug possession and use (Liberal Democrats, 2002a), the foundation of opposition to Identity Cards<sup>9</sup>, and a move to an ‘opt out’ system for organ donations (Liberal Democrats, 2002b). These sat alongside plans to abolish the child support agency (Liberal Democrats, 2002a). Each of these positions was a development in line with existing policy, but there was more detail given in relation to each than under Ashdown. In the case of drug law reform in particular, he was keen to keep the issue from being a prominent part of the party’s policy platform. The party rejected amendments to motions on defence that would have seen a policy of reducing the number of nuclear warheads (Liberal Democrats, 2002a) and significantly debated the delivery of public services. As well as earmarking NICs for the NHS, the party proposed abolishing council tax and replacing it with a local income tax, allowing regional variation above the delivering of basic guaranteed national standards, devolution of budgets and powers. Measures such as “giving public sector employers greater freedom to pay above

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<sup>9</sup> Though interestingly the conference rejected an amendment to reiterate total opposition to government-sponsored national identity cards

national scales”, and leaving it to local authorities and individual schools to determine how to deliver a reduced core curriculum were ambitious in the decentralisation of power. Measures to give patients control of their treatment plans, so they could be treated at any UK hospital, and Education Passports to give young people more flexibility in where they sought training were two clear examples of devolving some budgetary choices to the individual (Liberal Democrats, 2002b:18-21). The ‘Quality Innovation Choice’ motion which introduced these measures had been the result of the Huhne Commission which had seen the parliamentary party split on its approach to the issue of public services – the movement that was achieved in this motion was significant.

In 2003, ideas to increase the carers allowance as well as abolishing personal care costs were set alongside the first revision to the party’s macroeconomic policy since 1998 (Liberal Democrats, 2003). The party once again had a strong environmental suite of policies, with calls for strong energy efficiency targets and measures though ruled out backing nuclear energy, a move towards a zero-waste economy through increasing recycling and changing production methods. Also of note were policies to abolish the Department for Trade and Industry and establishing a Department of Justice, the merging of Health and Social Care and the revision of Higher Education funding to remove plans to let students claim social security (Liberal Democrats, 2003).

The autumn 2004 conference was the penultimate before the election, and mainly brought together the existing policy strands had been established. Significant policies highlighted or introduced included the offering of citizenship to the Gurkhas and plans for a green card style points based immigration system for non-EU migrant (Liberal Democrats, 2004:1 and 4). There were plans to scrap fuel and vehicle duty and replace it with a distance based road charge for drivers, a levy on the use of plastic bags and a general move to ‘green taxation’(Liberal Democrats, 2004:14 and 29). There were also significant reforms planned for pensions to increase the value of the state pension and give more freedoms to occupational packages – a package devised by Steve Webb. The party also proposed cutting class sizes in schools and expanding childcare offerings by scrapping child trust funds.

The culmination of this period was the 2005 manifesto, which was notable for several high spending commitments. Compared to the 2004 Pre-Manifesto paper, two of the top 10 priorities had changed: an offer of free off-peak local transport for pensioners, and 10,000 more police on the streets (Liberal Democrats, 2004) were substituted for opposition to ID cards, and opposition to hidden tax increases (Liberal Democrats, 2005). The manifesto’s introduction lay out a clear tax and spend offering – three priorities paid for by a new 50p tax rate for the highest earners: abolition of tuition fees, free personal care for the elderly and a



move to local income tax in place of council tax. This was alongside three other savings-abolishing DTI, scrapping Child Trust Funds and stopping ID cards.

The manifesto had a mixed reception and was reviewed by *The Times* critically:

The Lib Dems may succeed in attracting some "disillusioned 'old Labour' voters", but, it "makes for a poor long-term strategy". The Lib Dems will need a "more centrist, disciplined formula in 2009-10 if they are to be serious players" (quoted in Bell, 2005)

Compared to 2001, 1997 and 1992, this was the most criticism the party had faced on publishing the manifesto.

Following the campaign, where the party grew to 62 MPs but was considered to have been a missed breakthrough, Kennedy established 'Meeting the Challenge' – a policy review that would report the following year. It had little impact as it came at the back end of Kennedy's leadership, and was described by Sanderson Nash as "too little too late"(2011:92).

### ***The drivers of change***

#### ***Leader***

The opportunity for Kennedy to shape the face of the party in the middle of a parliament was difficult. He did, however, drive several important changes after his election. Firstly, his reshuffle in 1999 saw Simon Hughes and Matthew Taylor elevated to the shadow 'great offices'. But aside from the change in personnel was the change in the appearance of how the decisions were taken, where he made the decision to extend an:

unusual invitation to MPs to name the posts they would like to be considered for in his shadow cabinet—a very visible departure from Ashdown's more autocratic style (Alderman and Carter, 2000:326)

It is important to see this as a change in portrayal, Dick Newby reflects it was likely in his view to be "mainly a consensus building exercise - I think he wanted to give a sense of a new approach" (Newby, 2016). Alongside this, his reduction in the Shadow Cabinet to 18 MPs, which contrasted from Ashdown's move to give all MPs a role, was a move to a more hierarchical system.

The reshuffles carried out after the 2001 election were all because of the Leader and his Office, even in 2001 and 2005 which were also in the backdrop of an election. The 2003 reshuffle was the moment of greatest change. Newby suggests that this reshuffle was greater than some previous as Kennedy was keen to give people a period of time to prove themselves:

firstly he thought people should be given a reasonable time and secondly... we were then, in retrospect in a funny kind of way, in a comfortable place .In the polls we were doing alright, it was clear Blair was there for the long term and a sense of "what is to be gained by endlessly tinkering", and that wasn't his style anyway - I think it was only after people had had enough chance to prove or disprove themselves and what always happens is some people do less well than others and dissatisfaction grows (Newby, 2016)

The most significant shift driven by Kennedy before 2001– albeit with the support of large swathes of the party – was the shift away from forging a closer relationship with Labour. This was a journey of change that Kennedy himself had undertaken:

Much later in Paddy Ashdown's leadership, Kennedy was portrayed as hostile to collaboration between the two parties but his position was a pragmatic one (Hurst, 2006)

Put simply, in 1992, through to Blair's election as leader and right up to the general election in 1997 Kennedy was broadly supportive of moves to position the Liberal Democrats as part of a movement of change – albeit having concerns about Labour's popularity in his own seat. Any suggestion he was hostile to Ashdown's strategy doesn't hold water – for one he chaired the 'Reformer' editorial advisory board, which had the professed mission statement to elect "another radical reforming government of the centre-left" (quoted in Hurst, 2006:85-86)

It was later, however, that the key changes driven by Kennedy's leadership would occur with the party's response to Britain's involvement in Afghanistan and then Iraq. Far moreso than specific policy considerations – though there were aspects of that – the response to these issues defined the party's approach in this period and it was crucial that Kennedy was the leader in explaining what those were. Firstly, in relation to Afghanistan, Kennedy took a view that was predominantly supportive of the Government, though a notable number of MPs were less convinced including Tonge, Carmichael, Webb, Allen and Younger-Ross (Hurst, 2006:148) – something backed by Ming Campbell and many others, Newby recalls:

The overwhelming mood was to back the Government at that point. But the thing that people don't remember now, when we went into Afghanistan we only went in to get Bin Laden, it was not regime change. It was a classic example mission creep, which is one of the reasons we became slowly more critical of it.(Newby, 2016)

This was not unconditional however – Campbell said that America should not be given 'blank cheques' of support and Kennedy's initial support was tempered with similar language aimed at keeping his parliamentary party united. The position adopted at party conference was a product of this, and the consensus sought by Kennedy in contrast to those strongly supportive or opposed to intervention saw the party adopt a formal position of cautious and qualified support (Hurst, 2006:148). The following year, Kennedy's response to Iraq would come to

define his leadership and the public's perception of the party. Throughout the build-up to the intervention, through to calls for an inquiry Kennedy's personal preferences are important. A different leader may have backed the government – as was Ashdown's view (Hurst, 2006:163) – or being entirely opposed to intervention, as many members were.

Instead, a pragmatic opposition emerged – Hurst covers the intricacies of the decision well (Hurst, 2006:152-169), but the key part of this lay in Kennedy's caution. Whilst he was cautious – famously – in accepting the government's case, he was also cautious in his opposition. He was unsure about addressing the Stop the War rally (Newby, 2016), and when he did so did not argue an 'anti-war' case so much as a 'pro UN' one – calling for a resolution ahead of any military action. This was a position he restated time and time again. His decision to attend the march was something colleagues such as Campbell opposed, but would become a symbolic moment of his leadership. Ahead of the vote in parliament he displayed what his biographer Hurst describes as “one of the rare periods in which Charles Kennedy showed genuine leadership to his Parliamentary Party” (Hurst, 2006:164), and held them together. The personal abuse Kennedy received, in Parliament and in the media, was intense. A contrasting view of this time is held by David Laws, who feels that the sentiment amongst the party membership, combined with the government's weak case meant that although Kennedy made the right call, Kennedy was more driven by circumstance than driving his position:

I don't think he found that position easy and it was the inevitable outcome of the weakness of the government's case and the strong views of the party and his views to some extent but I wouldn't... sometimes there has been a redefinition of history that he led the party strongly in that particular direction at a time it was particularly difficult or whatever (Laws, 2016b)

Gurling though believes Kennedy's position was crucial in explaining this period:

I think the Iraq thing could have been very different for a more mainstream leader. Charles was popular, but I don't think he was mainstream and he wasn't keen to roll over and do what people expected. He was at heart a natural, nonconformist, and didn't take very kindly to be told what his views ought to be (Gurling, 2019)

Whilst this may be the case, the combination of pressures on Kennedy and his response to them makes his leadership a key aspect of what would be a crucial decision for the party.

Somewhat hardened by the experience his dealings with Blair over the Butler Review and other post-conflict and inquiry details was also important. His decision to reject the Review as inadequate came from him directly – not the product of a committee discussion. Again, the way he took these decisions clearly meant they were leader led. The product of his decisions on Iraq directly drove other changes in this period. The by-election win in Brent owed a huge

part to that decision, and the subsequent campaign to replace the Conservatives as the real opposition to Labour was borne out of the success of that campaign, the distinctive stance the party had taken on Iraq – and other issues like tuition fees – in opposition to the Labour government. Had Ashdown – for example – or another politician led the party those decisions may well have been different. This is also the clearest example of global political context impacting the development of policy and strategy within the Liberal Democrats. It is highly unlikely that the speed and intensity of opposition to the Labour Government would have occurred without the Iraq War, which in turn also informed the strategy of targeting high profile Conservatives as well as Labour MPs under the banner of providing “the Real Alternative”. This is a particularly clear example in support of Bale’s argument that global political factors can, and are, a driver of change amongst political parties. In terms of his departure as leader, that was driven by his own illness – alcoholism. Codifying such an aspect in academic terms is reductive, and it was others’ response to the issue that also drove the change in leadership, but it cannot be ignored.

In respects to policy, the driving force through this period was more the party spokespeople than the leader. Where he did champion policies they were often in broad terms, or as a quick way of differentiation – such as his decision to push for a Royal Commission on the legalisation of cannabis, though *The Observer’s* McSmith noted:

Kennedy’s willingness to tackle such a highly contentious issue is an early sign that the Liberal Democrats are in for a different style of leadership. (McSmith, 1999)

More broadly, scrapping ‘Moving Ahead’ – a body of work commissioned under Ashdown – was a symbolic shift in terms of leadership direction, though probably driven more by those around Kennedy than he himself. Steve Webb recalls:

I once said to him, notoriously in a Parliamentary Party Meeting, nobody knows what gets you out of bed in the morning. We like you, you are good with the public but what do you actually believe in, and you know the week after he came back and set out a vision thing... as a frontbencher you kind of liked that – you got a lot of latitude from Charles (Webb, 2016)

One leader-driven decision that was key was to the move of the manifesto writing task from a committee and staff to the Chair of the Parliamentary Party, Matthew Taylor which:

meant whereas in the 2001 process Taylor had received drafts and commented on them, in the 2005 process he was far more involved in writing drafts himself. This added more of a campaigning ‘eye’ to even the first draft of this manifesto, and created a process that was less ‘staff-led’ (Bentham, 2007:60)

In juxtaposition to this clear impact Kennedy made on the process, Bentham also records:

The reflection that Charles Kennedy behaved more as a chairman than a leader was certainly true at these times [when a committee needed a steer], when he showed himself reluctant to provide a strong vision. (Bentham, 2007:64)

Kennedy's interest in policy was broad stroke; whilst spokespeople drove policy development more so than under Ashdown or Clegg, it would nonetheless move in line with preferences Kennedy had – proposals on increasing tax on higher earners is one such example of a policy not proposed by Kennedy, but entirely in keeping with his world view. James Gurling challenges the assertion that Kennedy's leadership style was in some way passive:

If having made that case it didn't come out his way, he didn't make a huge, big thing about it. He didn't thrive on confrontation in the way that a lot of leaders do, and I think that came across in the way in which he led the party as well. Now, it's a criticism of the last people make that he wasn't leading because he didn't challenge. But basically, when the decision is made, he wouldn't challenge but when the decision was being made he was actively involved. But that didn't go with the nature of the narrative that people want to make about him. (Gurling, 2019)

Put simply, Kennedy focussed on the big picture. He didn't like to tinker with shadow cabinets, or the minutiae of policy but in doing so perhaps developed a clearer story to the electorate than he otherwise could have. Insofar that colleagues and others criticise this period for his lack of drive and leadership, there are several examples of decisions taken that form something of Kennedy's fingerprint over this chapter in the party's history – and in that shows he was an important driver of change.

### *Electoral performance*

The opportunity for electoral performances to drive the party's developments in the initial period of Kennedy's leadership were limited. The only elections were held in May 2000 and saw the party lose overall control of one council, and a small decrease in councillors.

Where electoral performance was significant was the Romsey by-election in 2000 which allowed the Liberal Democrats to road test what would become the basis of their 2001 campaign – criticism for Labour for not going far enough in investing money and an attack on the underinvestment that had come before by the Conservatives. Alongside this, a favourable contrast between Kennedy and Hague, as well as a range of local issues helped the party increase their vote share by over 20% and win the seat from the Conservatives. This was an important test run for what would play out in Conservative facing target seats in the general election. It helped fuel the move to the party's self-described position as the 'effective opposition'. The final significant change driven by the electoral performance of the party was, the 1997 election had led to more MPs and thus more of the newly created 'Short Money'.

The level of staffing this could fund was significant – the funding totalled around £1 million; this would fund around a dozen senior parliamentary researchers – a significant uplift.

The 2001 election gave Kennedy the opportunity to add depth to his frontbench team and introduce newly elected MPs to the frontbench team, a similar situation to 2005 where a larger number of MPs being elected gives greater flexibility to the leader, but also drives the need to respond to the composition of the Parliamentary Party. The remarkable victory in the Brent by-election drove the party towards a clearer stance of seeking to replace the Conservatives as Labour's opposition. Lastly, the perception that the 2005 election result was in some respects not as successful as it may have been was certainly an issue that drove parliamentarians towards considering Kennedy's removal necessary

### *Factions*

The complexity around policy development under Kennedy was that he was relaxed about ideas and proposals – his style meant that several opposing ideas could be playing out at any one time, and spokespeople could drive forward policy development in their own areas with what could be termed the leader's blessing, or at least ambivalence.

This – if anything – actively encouraged diverse views to be brought forward, Dick Newby also reflected:

I think his view, he saw new policy coming in part from colleagues, spokesman wrote their own papers - I know Don Foster did a very good paper on regionalism - so he was happy for people to develop ideas and then funnel it through the formal policy making process of the party. (Newby, 2016)

Whilst the clashes of some of these views would not occur until the next Parliament, the basis of them was actively sown by the leader here. Similarly, to the electoral considerations, however, in the short time that followed his leadership election the extent to which coherent blocs emerged is limited. Where significant change was driven was a coherence amongst the party members that led to uncontested Presidential campaigns, and the cooling of relations with Labour through the JCC. The role in who appointed the Short Money funded staff is also important – as Hurst notes, Kennedy sat in on recruitment interviews but:

in an example of the limited power of a Liberal Democrat leader, the party's MPs decided that ownership of the research team should lie with the parliamentary party as a whole and not be run by a figure [Grayson] so close to Charles Kennedy. (Hurst, 2006)

Clearly, with such a move being forced upon Kennedy, it is a process that is being driven by those outside of the leadership.

*The Orange Book's* publication in 2004 was a clear example of a group of new MPs seeking to challenge the party's position and approach. The remarkable aspect of the book is perhaps the fact some of its authors were serving in Kennedy's Shadow Cabinet, though Newby suggests Kennedy was relaxed about this:

He wrote a forward saying it was all jolly interesting but whether he'd read it, I don't know. He himself was not going to be innovative in a policy sense because he couldn't do it given everything else he was doing - he was reasonably relaxed but not very sympathetic to, as it were, the extremes of *The Orange Book*, he sort of tolerated it. (Newby, 2016)

Consideration of *The Orange Book* has to be separated into three strands – the motivations for it being written; the arguments it sought to make; and its reception and subsequent reputation.

Regarding these first two points - why the book was written and the role it sought to play- the fact is it was meant to provoke a response and debate within the party. This is clear when asking the authors of their reasoning, David Laws who edited the book recalls,

We definitely intended that it would spark some debate and provoke people with some of the criticisms of some areas of party policy that had lost contact with liberalism, but it was also designed to showcase the up and coming talent in the party in a way that wasn't as exclusive as people made out... but it was designed to be a showcase of talent and a shaking up of policy thing, although the clarity about shaking things up was probably more a wide part of Paul [Marshall's] and Vince's and so forth rather than all of the authors. (Laws, 2016b)

This is something Nick Clegg agreed with saying:

It's not surprising. You have a bunch of very bright, accomplished MPs... in a party which was clearly going places but was almost deliberately comfortable in not trying to delineate where the boundaries were. It is entirely predictable that that new generation of MPs don't just sit around patiently - as you do when you are young and think you are going places...the slight arrogance of youth I remember we thought 'we must now define it' and as you know these things were misremembered in an apocryphal fashion

My contribution could be accepted by any wing of the party, it was all about accountability in Europe and so on but there was that mood around, and [the publication of *The Orange Book*] was representative of the mood." (Clegg, 2016a)

With such a rationale, it was clear that this was a driver of force that related a grouping within the party, rather than its leader, though as Denham and Dorey state, "the intra-party ideological and policy differences allegedly symbolised by *The Orange Book* are mainly differences of degree and emphasis, rather than representing a fundamental divergence of beliefs and values amongst Liberal Democrat parliamentarians" (Denham and Dorey, 2007)

Even then, the views of the of authors is complex – Steve Webb contributed to *The Orange Book* though is someone more usually recognised as a prominent advocate of social liberalism. His reflection illustrates the third aspect of *The Orange Book* – how it was received. Whilst the Book itself is often referenced, Webb said that any shift in what was seen as the dominant philosophical faction in the party was perhaps less to do with the publication, and more:

Because it tended to be the economic liberal – for shorthand – folk who were having the lunches with the journalists and the comment pieces and that kind of thing, it became that this is the respectable mainstream, who are now wresting the party from the Luddites (Webb, 2016)

This is probably the case. The changes that were driven in subsequent periods began with a grouping of, largely newer MPs seeking to make an impact on their party and politics more widely. This was a notable change from the previous dynamics within the party and clearly a significant driver of change in this period. Linked to this was the importance of others aside from Kennedy's leadership in influencing the manifesto and policy developments. As noted, Cable felt he could pursue development in his Treasury brief pretty much unguided, however this led to:

He had me trying to be Mr Gladstone, working with David Laws on being tough on numbers but at the same time he had Matthew [Taylor] writing the manifesto which was free things for everybody...[the 2005 manifesto pledges] came out of that contradiction (Cable, 2017)

The important distinction here is perhaps that the formal writing process was led by Taylor supported by Grayson from a staff perspective. That being said, the policy that they had to draw on would be, naturally, influenced by spokespeople throughout the parliament. Given Kennedy's willingness to allow spokespeople more autonomy than Ashdown some of the developments in this regard would be driven moreso by them, than the leadership or those he had tasked with producing the manifesto document.

This doesn't mean that the outcomes contradicted Kennedy's wishes, merely that in these some of these instances they were driven by people than him, or his closest team. It is clear that in Kennedy's leadership, there was firstly greater division and variety in philosophical views than there had been under Ashdown, secondly the size of the parliamentary party created a frontbench and a backbench, allowing some more freedom to express diverging views than amongst a smaller grouping and lastly Kennedy himself had a thoroughly more relaxed approach to policy than Ashdown allowing divergent ideas to be voiced and developed more. So, whilst factions played a larger role under Kennedy's leadership than Ashdown, this was not all down to an erosion in the power for the leadership – moreso that the leader was happier for such an environment to exist.



## Summary

**Table 6- Changes and Drivers of Change 2001-2006**

Arena of change	Change identified	Primary driver of change	Extent of the change
Public Face	1999 Reshuffle	Leader	High
Public Face	2000 mini reshuffle	Leader	Low
The Public Face	2001 Reshuffle	Leader Electoral Performance	Low
The Public Face	2002 Reshuffle	Leader	Low
The Public Face	2003 Reshuffle	Leader	High
The Public Face	2005 Reshuffle	Leader Electoral Performance	Medium-High
The Public Face	Party presidents – Dholakia and Hughes	Factions	Low-medium
The Public Face	Kennedy's resignation	Electoral performance Factions	High
Approach and organisation	Cooling relations with Labour – ending of JCC	Leader and factions	Medium
Approach and organisation	Staffing reconfigured to support Shadow Cabinet	Product of a review set up by Leadership Electoral performance Factions	Medium
Approach and organisation	<i>The Future of Politics</i>	Leader	Low- Medium
Approach and organisation	Replacing Conservatives as the 'effective opposition'	Leader and Electoral Result	Medium
Approach and organisation	Party's response to 9/11 and Iraq	Leader World events	High
Approach and organisation	By-election victories	Leader Electoral Performance Outside Factors	High
Approach and organisation	Leader's health	Leader Factions	High
Approach and organisation	Publication of <i>The Orange Book</i>	Factions	Medium-High
Policy	Calls for a Royal Commission on Drugs	Leader	Low
Policy	Scrapping 'Moving Ahead'	Leader and leadership team	Medium
Policy	Opposition to welfare reforms and charges for higher education	Leader and frontbench team	Low
Policy	Introduce 50p rate for those on £100,000 and above	Leader and frontbench team	Medium

Policy	2001 Manifesto	Leader Factions	Medium
Policy	Plans to shift taxation from wealth to polluters; abolishing council tax and replacing with a local income tax	Spokespeople Factions	Low
Policy	Opposition to Iraq and calls for inquiry	Leader Party Membership	High
Policy	Proposals to legalise cannabis, opt out system for organ donation, opposition to ID cards – a range of ‘Liberal’ policies	Leader Factions	Medium
Policy	Opposition to Tuition Fees	Leader Factions	Medium-High
Policy	Proposals for education passport and personal budgets – moving spending decisions to the user.	Spokespeople Factions	Low
Policy	2005 Manifesto and the ten key policies; drafting moved from staff to parliamentarian	Leader Factions	Medium
Policy	Meeting the Challenge policy review	Electoral Performance	Low

## **Ming Campbell 2006-2007**

### *The extent of change*

#### *The Public Face*

Campbell's period of leadership was briefer than that of any other leader, and the changes to the public face of the party were similarly limited, though notable.

Nick Clegg was brought into the role of Home Secretary, displacing Mark Oaten who had withdrawn from the 2006 leadership contest and was subsequently caught up in a scandal involving his personal life. Michael Moore was promoted to the Foreign Affairs brief – he had in the past served in a junior role under Campbell in this policy area so was not an entirely surprising appointment. Vince Cable meanwhile continued to hold the Treasury brief and Simon Hughes remained party president for the duration of Campbell's tenure. Other changes saw Sarah Teather made Education spokesperson, seen as promotion from her role previously shadowing DCLG, and Jo Swinson was made Scotland spokesperson. Ed Davey took over the Trade and Industry brief and Alistair Carmichael transport seeing demotions for Norman Lamb and Tom Brake respectively. The overall shift was significant – it brought a number of younger and newer MPs to the forefront of the party.

#### *Approach and strategy*

Campbell himself saw three key objectives for his leadership. Against a backdrop of a party that had become divided and undisciplined in the months following the election, these were:

Stability, greater degree of professionalism and to prepare the party for a general election (Campbell, 2011)

There would be little disagreement that these were all the correct priorities for Campbell as he came into office. With the transition from Blair to Brown the third aspect in particular would become more important. What they were, however, was all organisational (Jones, 2011); there was nothing in the way of reappraising how the party fought elections, or how the party should approach the main parties or political landscape. In terms of his approach, he sought to professionalise the manner in which the party operated. One of his first moves was to reappraise the interactions between the Leader's Office and the rest of the party. Tim Farron, who was at this time Campbell's PPS noted:

[Under Kennedy] the Leader's Office was just disconnected from everything. Its job was basically to provide a nice bunker to protect their man...what

Ming did was make sure there was a proper Leader's Office, and that it connected with Cowley Street (Farron 2011)

The characterisation of the Kennedy operation seems fair, and certainly one his Chief of Staff agreed with (Newby, 2016).

Clegg said:

There was quite a cliquey feel about it. A feeling that Chris Rennard ran the professional party and everyone deferred to him. Tim Razzall ran everything close to Charles and then there was a small configuration of people who were very close to Charles who we now know with a greater hindsight somewhat tragically not only protected him but hid from public view and party view 'things'(Clegg, 2016a)

David Laws considered Campbell to have made a good job of moving the party's agenda forward, his failings being limited more to his personal breakthrough with the public:

I think he did well in terms of navigating the party away from this left wing oppositionism, the problem was he just wasn't really successful as a leader (Laws, 2016b)

It is fair to say that in respect to these areas the party's approach significantly developed from before. Others however felt there was a lack of real purpose to the new found discipline and structure, Clegg saying:

it became quite obvious quite quickly, that Ming didn't really quite know what he wanted to do with the leadership of the party (Clegg, 2016a)

Cook contrastingly reported at the time that the economic and environmental reforms of the 2006 autumn conference as moving the party in a 'defined direction' (Cook, 2010:287), where he also saw Campbell's strong criticism of the Conservatives in his closing address, as a desire to "place the party to the left of Labour" (BBC 2006e). It is indicative to an extent of this that Tudor Jones devotes five pages on the policy discussion at this time in his analysis of the party, of which only two paragraphs relate to Campbell. The role and influence on the various aspects to the debate of Brack, Grayson, Laws and Holmes in contrast dominate this section. Aside from the issue of the media's perception which is covered elsewhere Laws also argues Campbell's failure to immediately rule out Liberal Democrats joining Brown's Labour Cabinet (Guardian staff reporter, 2007) was a significant mistake:

it was the kind of thing which you just needed to kill immediately in that position. By not killing it, and Brown being stupid enough to leak it all out, was hugely damaging to [Campbell's] credibility (Laws, 2016b)

What was less excusable was the briefing by a senior Liberal Democrat official on what the terms could be for a future Coalition with either party and playing down the importance of PR

and setting ‘five tests.’ The spectacle was described by the BBC as ‘chaos’ (BBC News, 2007), and something Chris Rennard points to as typifying as the ‘early mistakes’ of this period (Rennard, 2017).

### *Policy*

Policy development under Campbell was more limited than other leaders, partly due to the length of his tenure but partly too for the context in which he led.

Early moves in his inaugural conference saw plans to introduce private investment into the Royal Mail supported, namely that there should be:

a shared ownership model for Royal Mail with a 51% majority of shares divided equally between the government and a Trust for Royal Mail staff with half of the remaining 49% of shares sold directly to staff and small investors and the remaining shares being offered for sale to the market. (Liberal Democrats, 2006b:8)

Though the privatisation in this context is controlled and limited it is a clear development in policy in bringing private investment into the delivery of public services. Significant changes to the party’s economic platform were passed at the autumn conference with the dropping of plans for a 50p tax band, shifting instead to increases in taxation on polluters and wealth (Liberal Democrats, 2006a). *The Guardian* reported Cable, who additionally wanted to identify £15bn of cuts in public spending, telling the conference:

We are asking you to choose substance and seriousness over symbols and sentiment. This is a coherent and progressive and radical set of tax proposals and it will be popular. (quoted in Branigan, 2006)

There was opposition from Evan Harris, an influential MP identified with the socially liberal wing of the party, and Shirley Williams expressed her disappointment at the move (Branigan, 2006) but Campbell successfully won the vote and the policy was dropped. There were also progressive moves, a scrapping of the 10p tax rate would be accompanied by a significant lift in the National Insurance allowance, helping low earners alongside a cut in the basic rate of income tax by 2p and increases in capital gains tax for wealthier people. The changes were significant – the dropping of plans for a 50p rate was bold, even though various other measures maintained a progressive package of measure. It was, however, clearly a shift from the policy under Kennedy with a lot of ‘under the bonnet’ detail being required to raise chunks of money to replace what was expected to be raised under the 50p band.

Other motions to repeal illiberal Labour laws, such as on ID cards and aspects of DNA retention by police, were largely marks of continuity or development on existing policy rather

than revolutionary. Also of significance was policy to introduce individual budgets for those with disabilities, giving greater power to individuals to make decisions around aspects of their own care (Liberal Democrats, 2006a:10). A review of family policy proposed increases to maternity leave pay, the promotion of flexible working, an expansion of affordable childcare and increase training for early years professionals – this was the first step towards the focus on early years that would become a signature policy for the party in the coalition government (Liberal Democrats, 2006a:18).

Spring 2007 saw Campbell face down critics of his policy on Trident, speaking unexpectedly in a debate on whether the party should drop a unilateralist stance which he opposed, though supportive of an immediate reduction in the number of warheads. The motion was narrowly carried by 454 votes to 414, Campbell describing himself as “relieved” (BBC News, 2007). It is important to recognise that whilst the party did not adopt a unilateralist position, party policy developed to back the immediate decommissioning of half the warheads Britain held – this was clearly a development in policy terms. As well as policy to promote civil liberties, invest in new energy supplies and there was extensive policy development on crime prevention. In particular there was moves for a greater emphasis on local crime prevention initiatives, rehabilitation of offenders and sentencing (Liberal Democrats, 2007a:9).

In autumn, there were what would become well known plans for an ‘earned pathway to citizenship’ – or amnesty – for some illegal immigrants alongside the introduction of exit checks at borders (Liberal Democrats, 2007b:11). Plans for free dental checks were maintained, though alongside proposals for personalized checkup plans – another example of a general push towards devolving powers and money to individuals (Liberal Democrats, 2007b:5). There were further important developments on policy to tackle poverty and inequality, in particular the introduction of the Pupil Premium, reform of Job Centre Plus and the introduction of a new Single Working Age benefit. It also set out proposals for providing better access to social and low-cost housing (Liberal Democrats, 2007b:9). Importantly, tax policy also developed further from the spring conference with plans to make taxation simpler, fairer and greener. In practice plans to cut the basic rate of income tax by 4p in the pound and replacing council tax with local income tax were set alongside reforms to capital gains tax, limits to tax reliefs and environmental taxes (Liberal Democrats, 2007b:18). The most important consideration underpinning Campbell’s leadership was the prospect of Tony Blair standing down and the calling of a snap election with Gordon Brown seeking a mandate for his premiership. Campbell himself said:

I had spent [time] with the Parliamentary Party and then the Policy Committee, agreeing the terms of the manifesto....75% of my programme was drafted...Then Brown said no. (Campbell 2011)

This manifesto was largely an evolved version of the 2005 offering. Steve Webb led the writing of the document:

It got signed off by the FPC at a Saturday meeting, that retained quite a lot of tax and spend at that point...it was largely a continuity document (Webb, 2016)

What this clearly shows is that whilst there were two or three important, notable policy debates and changes in this time, there had not been a complete ripping up of the Kennedy programme – far from it; in the event of an election there would be a huge reliance upon it.

### *The drivers of change*

#### *Leader*

The change in the public face of the party was entirely in Campbell's gift in this period – there was no change in President or forced resignations. The shift in personnel was driven by Campbell partly as a way of uniting the party and a recognition of the ideas and drive that some of the newer members – across the party spectrum – had. Campbell himself argues:

[Kennedy] was under a lot of pressure and a lot of that pressure had come from this set of smart young people who said 'right...sleeves up' and were waiting for direction, and it didn't come for the reasons [that] have now become more public. (Campbell, 2011)

Whilst there is clearly an element that this was driven in part by the emerging strength of the newer MPs, it was Campbell's recognition of this that was the primary driver. It is not absolute – Kennedy had promoted a number of new MPs in his 2003 reshuffle, but there was a clear shift with top offices going to Clegg and Huhne, alongside a raft of more junior appointments.

In terms of his approach and aim to stabilise and professionalise the party, again these were priorities he set out in his leadership campaign, and is perhaps the clearest example of the change being driven by the leader; Kennedy's own competencies framed the desire for these values, the salience of them in the leadership election, and Campbell's focus on them. The decision to prepare for a General Election too was Campbell's – in part. The main reason for this was the electoral landscape and the transition of Prime Minister from Blair to Brown, but Campbell prepared a manifesto and chaired hours of internal meetings to develop a signed off document (Campbell, 2011). The confusion that was created over whether Liberal Democrats may join a Brown led cabinet was an issue of Campbell's own making.

In policy terms, Campbell's unusual decision to write to members ahead of a nuclear deterrent debate was significant, as well as brave; the issue was divisive amongst members and an early defeat on such an issue would have been damaging for his leadership. Taking such a strong public stance carried risk, but he argued:

I believe it would be unwise at this time for Britain to abandon its nuclear weapons altogether. But neither should we spend tens of billions of pounds in the meantime.

A deterrent of approximately half the current size, and extending the life of the current submarine system, would be sufficient to provide for Britain's ultimate security until we have more certainty about proliferation.(Campbell, 2006b)

This, alongside his even more unusual choice to address the spring 2007 conference on the issue was clearly important (Wheeler, 2007). Similarly, with something as totemic as a 50p tax band policy, it was important that Campbell supported this policy development, and was a clear policy shift that was less likely to occur under Kennedy, who had brought in the policy in the first place. The wider importance of this policy debate was the rest of the motion saw the party move away from a 'tax and spend' led agenda, with questions of where money was raised – or where taxes could be cut – playing a larger role. Whilst Campbell was far from the most 'right wing' economic liberal, such a move could not have – and did not – happen under Kennedy. Lastly, whilst the Royal Mail policy had been put to conference before, the fact it was brought back again, and passed was testament to the fact Campbell, as Chair of the FPC, had once again sought to have it adopted – something which is significant and was largely in his gift.

The only other observation that is worth noting is that one of the largest developments driven by Campbell was the end of his own tenure. Though covered more comprehensively in Chapter One, it was his performance at PMQs and in the media, alongside his own judgement that led to him resigning when he did; as with Ashdown he was not forced out, and it was clearly a change driven in part by himself. Laws reflects:

He didn't really make the breakthrough from senior party spokesman to leader, and I think he had some early public disasters in the House of Commons and elsewhere which he never really recovered confidence from. (Laws, 2016b)

### ***Electoral performance***

Campbell's brief leadership meant that there was little impact in terms of the party's electoral performance on the changes that were seen in this period. What did have an impact was polling. The party averaged 19% in polls carried out through Campbell's leadership (Pack,



2017), though over 2007 this fell to 16.7%. The trend was clearer, in that polls from July 2007 to his resignation in October saw this average figure stand at 15.2%, with the final poll before Campbell's resignation standing at 11%.

In terms of other factors, the electoral landscape – the prospect of a general election with the handover from Blair to Brown clearly drove the drafting of the 2007 manifesto, Campbell himself says this (Campbell, 2011; Campbell, 2019)

### ***Faction***

The factions within the party, particularly the parliamentary party, perhaps explain the predominant policy developments of this time, though do touch other aspects too.

Firstly, in terms of the 2006 reshuffle, whilst there is little to suggest that Campbell had much restricting him in terms of appointments, the manner of Kennedy's departure – led in some ways by Davey and Teather, was a reminder that there was a number of new MPs who were seeking a change in direction which was more than the personal issues Kennedy had.

The response from some of this group, though not exclusively, to Campbell's failure to instantly rule out some Lib Dems serving in a Labour Cabinet was also important in crystallising the approach in opposition to the Brown Government. In terms of the policy agenda, whilst Campbell backed dropping plans for a 50p tax rate, it was the fact that Vince Cable and others such as David Laws who had been moved into frontbench positions that drove it up the agenda and won the crucial votes at the party conference as part of a wider shift in economic policy. This was not a united move, with MPs and Shirley Williams – a conference favourite – speaking out against dropping the plans. It was clearly a victory on factional lines too as well as opposed to a policy driven by the leader that ultimately the party backed – when senior figures divide on such issues, one side clearly does 'win' out. Similarly, plans to introduce private capital into the Royal Mail had been proposed by Norman Lamb previously, and devised by Malcolm Bruce – both associated more with the 'economic liberals' sphere of the party. The fact that conference had previously rejected the policy proposal, but this time supported it again reflected a victory for those more comfortable with the use of markets in delivering funding for public services.

## Summary

**Table 7- Changes and Drivers of Change 2006-2007**

<b>Arena of change</b>	<b>Change identified</b>	<b>Primary driver of change</b>	<b>Extent of the change</b>
The Public Face	2006 Reshuffle	Leader Factions	Low- Medium
Approach and organisation	Stabilise the party	Leader	High
Approach and organisation	Professionalise the party	Leader Factions	Medium
Approach and organisation	Prepare for General Election	Leader Other parties – Blair/Brown transition and Labour poll lead	Low - Medium
Approach and organisation	Dalliance with whether to serve in Cabinet with Brown and subsequent decision not to/pouring cold water on it	Leader Factions	Medium - High
Policy	Drop policy for 50p tax band and other measures that moved away from 'tax and spend'	Leader/Faction	High
Policy	Maintain policy for multilateralism, rather than change to unilateralism	Leader –prevented change	Low
Policy	Plans to introduce private investment to the Royal Mail	Leader Factions	Medium
Policy	2007 Manifesto Draft	Electoral Landscape	Low

## **Nick Clegg 2007-2015**

### **2007-2010 – ‘*The Orange Bookers*’**

#### *The extent of change*

#### *The public face*

On becoming leader Clegg made a series of more extensive changes than Campbell sought to when he took office.

Firstly, whilst he maintained Vince Cable as Shadow Chancellor –partly due to his high profile and popularity he had gained as acting leader – he made changes to the other Great Office roles in his shadow team with Chris Huhne filling his vacated role in Home Affairs and Ed Davey, who had run his leadership campaign, was promoted to shadow the Foreign Office. The appointment of Huhne was described as “brave” (Wintour, 2007) though given the closeness of the leadership election there was realistically little question of his not securing a major role, only which one it may be. As it was the two argued when Clegg offered him the Foreign Affairs role, which Huhne saw as inferior, ultimately Clegg gave way, moving Davey to Foreign Affairs (Laws, 2016a:20)

Other important changes were David Laws, a close friend and ally of Clegg, becoming Children, Schools and Families spokesperson (the renamed education brief), Norman Lamb being brought into the Health spokesperson role and Danny Alexander, another close friend, to DWP. Jeremy Browne took on the role of shadowing Chief Secretary to the Treasury. What is perhaps of most note is that whilst there was a degree of moving shadow ministers to portfolios of similar prominence, those seen as economic liberals were now in some of the departments with the highest salience to the party’s agenda or the highest spending: Alexander at DWP, Browne as Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Lamb at Health, Laws covering the Education brief. In contrast those who were perhaps seen as more socially liberal were kept in the frontbench team, but moved to less high profile, lower budget departments – Webb to Defra, Baker at transport, and Hughes to shadow leader of the house. The exception to this was Cable, who was pretty much immovable as one of the party’s best-known faces – even more so than the new leader. The Party President was initially Simon Hughes, succeeded in 2009 by Ros Scott.

#### *Approach and strategy*

There were two developments under Clegg in this period, one organisational, one strategic.

Organisationally, Clegg established ‘The Bones Commission’, which sought to review the structure, and internal operations of the party. It is considered by Sanderson-Nash to be, “the most wide-ranging and significant internal review in the party’s history” (Sanderson-Nash, 2011:16). The recommendations varied in how widely they were implemented and aspects drew strong criticism from some quarters, such as Titley at Liberator who argued that whilst much of the report was reasonable, it missed the point:

The assumption seemed to be that the solutions to the party’s problems are essentially managerial. Bones was asked to devise a structure for implementing a strategy without there being an obvious political strategy in the first place. The stated target of winning 150 seats is just that; a target, not a strategy (Titley, 2008:10)

One of the key changes in parallel to this process was the streamlining of party staff – with a greater focus on recruitment of people from outside the party’s activist base:

In the very simplest terms, the professionalisation of the party can be seen with an increase in the trend to recruit senior staff from outside the party ranks, the use of headhunters and professional search and selection companies. (Sanderson-Nash, 2011:143)

There was also the proposal to centralise and professionalise more decision making and power – something that is always a contentious and controversial issue within the party. Whilst the Chief Officers Group was set up – a group led by the leader and unelected with the task of executing a strategy agreed on by the elected Federal Executive – it met sporadically.

Strategically, Clegg wanted to widen the party’s appeal to “to the electorate on liberal values, rather than on ‘the popular mood of the day’” (Jones, 2011:215). This aim to appeal beyond the party and its existing supporter base was very much part of Clegg’s persona:

it is where my instincts, and my strengths and weaknesses lie. I am the first to concede ... I never led the party because I wanted to lead ‘the party’, I always wanted to lead as I wanted to effect change (Clegg, 2016a)

He recognised that this was a shift from what the party had pursued under Kennedy, Clegg commented

I inherited the closest thing the Liberal Democrats have ever had to a core vote, they are broadsheet reading, well-educated, public-sector employees. The public sector educated salariat - the surgeons, the dons the teachers the etc etc - and then weighed down with middle class guilt, they can readily weep about people they have never met and picking up the baton for people they would cross the street to not talk to, slightly ... there you go it’s a very great strand in British political thinking (Clegg, 2016a)

As such, the policy agenda from 2007 onwards, as well as the electoral approach, should keep in mind this overarching aim of Clegg's, to change- and widen- the party's appeal.

Lastly, Clegg moved the party back to a position of equidistance into the 2010 election. Against the backdrop of the financial crisis, and then the 2009 MPs expenses scandal the opportunity emerged to become the party with a strong 'change' message. This strategy marked a progression from the position the party had held under Kennedy and Campbell from being stylising as the real opposition to Labour, to one of potential 'king maker'.

### ***Policy***

Whilst Clegg's leadership into the 2010 election was only one year longer than Campbell's tenure, the policy development in this period was notably more developed, wider ranging and quicker. Jonny Oates would reflect:

I think he did more to shape the thinking of the party than any leader since Paddy had done (Oates, 2017)

Most significant was the 'Make it Happen' policy review. Introduced at the 2008 autumn conference, the review saw Clegg place tax cuts for low and middle earners at the heart of this policy agenda. If Campbell had begun to move away from the more tax and spend policies of Kennedy, this was a continuation of that apace as the party passed policy that would mean up to 6p been knocked off income tax. Importantly this would involve finding £20bn of public spending reductions, rather than been entirely funded by tax rises on the wealthier (Summers, 2008).

Clegg, Cable and other front benchers argued for conference to trust the leadership that they would set out a progressive agenda, Cable saying:

I am asking you to give us freedom of scope - don't bind our hands - to set out an agenda which is genuinely progressive, committed to public services but involves significant tax cuts. (Watt, 2008)

The debate was one of the most lively held at any conference, with over 100 speakers wishing to be called. Those in favour of the move notably included Vince Cable, Chris Huhne, Tim Farron, Danny Alexander and Jo Swinson – MPs from across the political spectrum (Tall, 2008). Similarly broad voices were heard in favour of an amendment which was widely seen as softening the move, these included Duncan Brack and Richard Grayson – both former Policy Directors – Paul Holmes and Evan Harris (Tall, 2008). Alongside this significant shift in economic policy, Clegg called for patients to be allowed to 'top up' NHS funded treatments to allow them to purchase drugs not available on the service (Sparrow, 2008). This built on

spring conference reforms which significantly reformed policy – moving the previously universal offer of free elderly care to a targeted version, the right to individual budgets for patients to have control over some treatments and elected local health boards to bring accountability to the system (Liberal Democrats, 2008). Importantly, a longstanding commitment to supporting Britain joining the euro was dropped.

In 2009 there were significant revisions to early years policy- the guarantee of income for those on maternity leave was dropped in favour of policy to introduce shared parental leave for mothers and fathers to use interchangeably alongside 20 hours of free childcare per week for those under 5 (Liberal Democrats, 2009a:1-2). Whilst still a significant cost, it is important to recognise the shift from a policy focussed more on cash transfers to one with targeted money and a societal ‘nudge’. The same conference reaffirmed the party’s commitment to abolishing tuition fees – including now for part time students (Liberal Democrats, 2009a:8-10). The most significant motion in 2009 set the policy framework for the party’s manifesto priorities. The motion put job creation, particularly through green initiatives, a new approach to banking, fairer and lower taxation, investment in education and political reform at the heart of the party’s programme (Liberal Democrats, 2009b). The spring 2010 conference largely set out the same main strands that would feature in the party manifesto – notable new policy was the commitment to end the detention of children in immigration centres and around young people, with a package of measures aimed to tackle youth unemployment, strengthen young people’s rights and freedoms and tackle negative stereotyping of them (Liberal Democrats, 2010a). The culmination of this period of leadership was the 2010 manifesto. The front cover, in contrast to the ten-point list of 2005, set out four key policy areas: fair taxes; a fair chance; a fair future; a fair deal. Respectively, these related to policies to: lower taxation for low and middle earners, investment in education, make Britain greener alongside broader commitments to encouraging businesses, and clean up politics (Liberal Democrats, 2010d). The manifesto was warmly received in general, notably by *The Guardian* – whilst emphasising the main reason for its support was the party’s advocacy of political reform – endorsing the party’s agenda, noting: “they are less tied to reactionary and sectional class interests than either of the other parties.” (Guardian Editorial, 2010).

**Figure 13- Liberal Democrat priorities in 2010 manifesto (Liberal Democrats, 2010d)**

our first priorities:

### 4 steps to a fairer Britain

#### fair taxes

that put money back in your pocket

- The first £10,000 you earn tax-free: a tax cut of £700 for most people
- 3.6 million low earners and pensioners freed from income tax completely
- Paid for in full by closing loopholes that unfairly benefit the wealthy and polluters

#### a fair future

creating jobs by making Britain greener

- Break up the banks and get them lending again to protect real businesses
- Honesty about the tough choices needed to cut the deficit
- Green growth and jobs that last by investing in infrastructure

#### a fair chance

for every child

- Ensure children get the individual attention they need by cutting class sizes
- Made possible by investing £2.5 billion in schools targeted to help struggling pupils
- Give schools the freedom to make the right choices for their pupils

#### a fair deal

by cleaning up politics

- Put trust back into politics by giving you the right to sack corrupt MPs
- Restore and protect hard-won British civil liberties with a Freedom Bill
- Overhaul Westminster completely: fair votes, an elected House of Lords, all politicians to pay full British taxes

As well as being a tighter focus than the previous election manifesto, the priorities had clearly developed from a number of tax and spend measures, to a more fundamental reform to taxation and targeted, specific measures.

Ultimately, there was a period of significant policy development in this time, which led to a manifesto which had a number of important differences in emphasis and detail from the party's previous two campaigns.

### *The drivers of change*

#### *Leader*

Nick Clegg was responsible for driving several of the changes discussed. Following the 2008 leadership contents, appointing Huhne as Home Affairs spokesperson can be seen as part of efforts to unite the party after a bruising leadership contest. The decision of Clegg to move people more closely seen as being part of the party's economic wing into key departments is significant – moving Webb, Moore, Teather and Goldsworthy from key roles and departments in favour of Laws, Lamb, Browne and Davey does seem to reflect a change of approach. These were also posts that were prominent in political debate – health, education and the economy

are key roles and aside from Cable's continuity as Shadow Chancellor the decision to reshuffle these positions is important <sup>10</sup>.

Jonny Oates noted that amongst the party's newer MPs, there was a change in attitude and aim – this is particularly significant when considering who made up the front bench positions with many of them fitting Oates' description entirely:

One of the most significant shifts that happened from 97 onwards was you had in 97 a) significantly more people who got elected and also quite a number of people who were younger who hadn't come from a local councillor background, who had come from ... I think the one thing was that they all wanted, and saw it as a realistic prospect that it should be the objective to become part of government. They didn't get elected because they wanted to be a constituency MP forever. (Oates, 2017)

Ruth Fox also sees this change as important,

There was a younger generation-the 'Orange Book' Liberals... who did not instinctively loathe the Conservative Party... and who were just as likely to be suspicious of a Labour Party that they perceived to be the purveyor of big state solutions and instinctively illiberal on issues such as civil liberties.(Fox, 2010)

Whilst Fox is wrong to conflate the 'younger generation' with "'Orange Book 'Liberals'", she does highlight the important change in the party's leadership and those in the shadow cabinet-growing numbers of MPs now held Labour and the Conservatives in similar regard. Alongside changes to the parliamentary front bench, the establishment of the Bones Commission is important. This was largely due to Clegg and his team's perception of the challenges the party was facing, alongside a stated aim of his leadership contest of aiming to position the party to appeal to a wider swathe of the electorate who saw themselves as 'small L' liberals (Jones, 2011:215-6).

the combination, Charles with his particular gifts and preference, and Chris [Rennard], and how he saw elections as in a sense tactical ducking and weaving to whatever extent was required to win, they catalyse to create a certain feeling that we were like a receptacle for almost anybody who was dissatisfied with the status quo and the powers at be. (Clegg, 2016a)

Clegg had been clear in his intention to build a party for government and the Bones Commission was part of reviewing how the mechanics of the party worked to deliver that. Oates noted of his style:

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<sup>10</sup> And even in this, Jeremy Browne replaced Julia Goldsworthy as Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury



When he came in I was impressed that he immediately had an idea of what he was about. I remember we had a one-day policy conference in London in that January... where he really stepped out in front of the party, and that was one of the differences between him and say Charles and Ming. He was a leader who was one step ahead, sometimes people might say too many steps ahead. (Oates, 2017)

The principle of the Bones Commission, and its aims were clearly driven by Clegg and his team; Campbell had sought to professionalise the party but not carried out such an exercise and nor had Kennedy. The Medium-Term Review carried out 10 years prior was the last comparable exercise, and thus has to be considered a decision driven by the leadership. The outcome would, however, prompt a factional response with those who did not agree with Clegg's agenda organising in a way not really seen in the party previously.

Alongside this, Clegg was determined to displace one of the other parties as a next step in building the party for government:

For a long time I harboured a view privately and at times publicly that you can displace one of the other parties. (Clegg, 2016a)

This in 2010 was for Clegg the Labour party. This approach differs from Kennedy's plans to be the Real Alternative to the Labour government and displacing the Conservative Party, and the decision to see this as an aim rather than to seek to be a kingmaker is leader driven decision, though as clearly was the case, this changed in the face of the 2010 election result.

Policy development was probably the most controversial development under Clegg, and one he and his team were crucial in driving. Regardless of how fair it was – and some felt it was not (for example (Grayson, 2017))- Clegg believed there had to be significant changes to the party's policy prospectus to win power, and came forward with a number of radical reforms. He was not entirely dismissive of Kennedy's platform

It was effective opposition politics. It was opposition politics which was premised on the idea that the party would continue in opposition. (Clegg, 2016a)

Yet in this consideration, it is clear that he did not view it as a platform for government. As such the 'Make it Happen' paper and the key developments we see in policy are driven by Clegg and his team.

Nick Clegg believed that policy by 2010 had developed, and largely in a manner he wished:

Did [the policy platform] move to where I wanted in policy terms by 2010?  
By and large, yes. Very much so.

Making the tax allowance the centrepiece was probably the biggest shift and my emphasis on education and the pupil premium was my personal stamp. (Clegg, 2016a)

The main reform he wanted to make but had not – though this may be clouded by hindsight – was to tuition fees:

The well documented struggles to try and get off this [tuition fee] hook was much, much, much, tougher and acrimonious than I could have anticipated and my crashing error in judgement was it wasn't as if I didn't know that something was in the manifesto that I thought was only wrong. (Clegg, 2016a)

Similarly, Laws reflects on the policy agenda, saying:

It changed a lot in not being knee-jerk and tax and spend and finding savings in public spending and being disciplined about the deficit and so forth but it hadn't got us off the hook of tuition fees, which turned out to be quite an important hook for us to be impaled on. (Laws, 2016b)

The development of policy though is inseparable from the rise in organised factions that occurred at this time. David Hall Matthews and Richard Grayson both point to specifically the moves to prioritise tax cuts as the main driver behind the creation of the Social Liberal Forum (Grayson, 2017; Hall-Matthews, 2011).

One of the most significant policy non-developments was that around tuition fees. The leadership clearly wanted the policy to be dropped. As early as the September 2008 conference the Universities spokespersons Stephen Williams was saying the policy was “not sustainable” (Huzzey, 2008). The attempts to drive through this change are well documented in Laws' book (Laws, 2016a:50-61), and are the main party policy change Clegg did not achieve that he wanted to (Clegg, 2016a). The reason for this failure lay in the totemic nature the policy took on, Grayson points to the fact that many policy changes that those less associated with economic liberalism disliked happened in 2008, and the tuition fees policy became a symbol and rallying point for the Social Liberal Forum and others as the last change to resist (Grayson, 2017).

The 2010 manifesto was largely in line with Clegg's agenda (Clegg, 2016a), and was evolved from the 2005 version. Whilst there was a respectable degree of continuity, the flagship policy of tax cuts for lower earners was clearly a huge development and given the prominence it was given in the campaign it can only be considered to be a significant change driven by the leadership. In short, whilst in 2010 there was a 10-point list of priorities, this had been streamlined to 4. Whilst the 2005 platform had a number of policies that would cost significant sums of money, 2010 in comparison focussed on tax cuts, a pupil premium and pledges to

clean up politics and invest in the environment. Whilst some of this is driven by a post-crash landscape, it is incredible difficult to believe that had the party been led by Charles Kennedy, or even Ming Campbell, that the agenda would have been comparable.

### *Electoral performance*

Through this period, the electoral results of parties in the local elections would shape the external pressures on the party. In the 2008 round of local government elections the Conservatives gained vote share, 256 Councillors and 12 Councils, whilst Labour lost over 300 Councillors and nine Councils. The Liberal Democrat gains were modest, 34 Councillors and 1 Council. In 2009, similar movement was seen with the Conservatives gaining Councils and Councillors with Labour losing 291 Councillors and four Councils.

This sat alongside polling that showed the Conservatives comfortably polling above 40% and Labour trailing around 30%. The Liberal Democrats had recovered to upper teens, with some polls in the lower 20s (Pack, 2017).

Clegg held the view that in the medium term the party should seek to replace the Labour Party. With Cameron's ascension to leadership of the Conservatives the proposition facing the electorate had changed significantly from the Howard, Duncan-Smith and Hague era. Though it was partly through the change of leadership of the Liberal Democrats, it was this electoral context that also drove change within the party. Indeed, Clegg recognised the importance of Cameron's election:

When Cameron got elected, I do remember vividly thinking "fuck." I remember thinking "he's got there first", not got there first in terms of him, but everything he was saying was just like, it felt at the time there was a desperate need to be the first young person to say "turning the page", in much the same way there will be a "turning the page" in the next few years in Westminster again. But getting there first, the first young leader was a massive advantage for Cameron. Because he was able to appeal to a sense of freshness. (Clegg, 2016a)

Alongside this the key issue facing the country was the economy and deficit. Whilst this in some ways could have been seen to be stronger ground for the Conservatives, the nature of the financial crisis – being rooted in failure of the banks – perhaps left doubts in voters' minds as to whether the party more closely associated with big business would be the broom needed to reform the system. The party's plans to break up Banks between investment and retail wings are driven partly by the prominence and salience of financial services as an electoral issue.

The 2010 campaign would see the party refuse to rule out potential coalition with either party, and this approach was seen through the 2009 period also. Put simply, the electoral landscape

and prospects made a more equidistance approach appealing than any form of alignment. Whilst this development is influenced by the leader also, it is driven in large part by the electoral performance and context of other parties.

### ***Faction***

The emergence of a semi-formalised faction in the Social Liberal Forum is the first, and most important change driven by factions within the party. The move to create an organised entity to advance a particular cause was a development from the less formal groupings seen previously.

The emergence of the Social Liberal Forum was rooted in the policy development under Clegg, in particular as a reaction to the 2008 vote on tax changes. As Grayson reflects:

Our reaction to the 2008 conference was not to leave but to organise, in two particular ways... we knew that if the leadership continued to control the Federal Policy Committee (FPC) which produced policy papers then it could get pretty much anything it wanted through a conference which had recently lost two leaders and was not minded to give a bloody nose to a third. Consequently, a number of people who overtly identified as social liberals stood for the FPC... At the same time as electing people to the policy committee, social liberals established a new internal pressure group, the Social Liberal Forum (Grayson, 2013:9)

The mobilisation of those who would come to be associated with the SLF to stand for positions on the FPC is crucial in explaining the blocking of reform to the policy on tuition fees, which became a crucial decision in the early part of the Coalition. The ‘counter-driver’ from those on FPC elected from this slate are thus very significant in explaining that policy. Indeed, the Committee voted 13-5 against Clegg’s plans (Gerard, 2011:131)

For his part, Clegg noted of this period where there were changes to the party policy agenda that:

What I misread and my failing in this was I was not part of the schisms and tensions in the party about Paddy’s dalliance with Blair so people like David Howarth and others whose whole political identity was based on the idea that they were *The Guardians* of the soul, they were the high priests of the flame of the liberal democracy and they were not going to have it sullied.(Clegg, 2016a)

The emergence of an organised grouping at this stage was to prove significant in the years ahead though from the 2009 Autumn Conference onwards, disputes would be fewer and further between (Grayson, 2013:10) ahead of the General Election.

Had the SLF been formed sooner it is likely that other policy reforms would have also been challenged in a more organised manner. As it was tuition fees would become the one clear policy with a price tag that remained almost unchanged from the 2005 manifesto list of ten priorities- though Clegg did succeed in making the proposed abolition a phased process.

In regard to the other priorities from 2005, plans for free personal care were dropped and a promise for 10,000 extra police officers reduced to 3,000.

The inclusion of the tuition fees pledge in the manifesto was also partly the result of the social liberal faction, with Clegg at one stage suggesting that it may not be in the final document.

The policy had become a rallying point – Steve Webb notes:

The failure of the social liberals was we had a set of totemic tax and spend things – we had free long term care, pension hikes, abolishing tuition fees and it was almost like you were standing there on the beach and the tide comes in and takes one, so you retreat a bit more and the tide takes another one, there was never a front foot agenda, it was trying to defend the last bastion. The reason we got so hung up on tuition fees was that it was the last one. (Webb, 2016)

Grayson similarly talks about the change in approach on tax and spend from when Matthew Taylor was shadow chancellor:

Our approach had been ‘we want to get rid of tuition fees, we find savings in budgets and spend it on that’. The idea of looking at making tax cuts if savings could be made seemed to threaten both other policy things that we wanted to do, like scrap tuition fees – I knew where it would go, it just seemed obvious – it seemed to suggest that we think public spending is too high, and we had spent the previous decade pressing Labour to spend more in certain areas (Grayson, 2017)

In short, whilst the impact on policy limited, the organisation of the SLF is hugely significant and would be in Coalition. The one policy Clegg believes he did not succeed in reforming, tuition fees, was also maintained in part because of this organised grouping. This ultimately set up a dilemma for the party leadership in government, which would have a very visible – arguably critical – impact.

## Summary

**Table 8- Changes and Drivers of Change 2007-2010**

Arena of change	Change identified	Primary driver of change	Extent of change
The Public Face	2008 Reshuffle	Leader	Medium
The Public Face	Party President – election of Ros Scott to succeed Simon Hughes	Factions	Low
Approach and organisation	The Bones Commission	Leader	Medium-High
Approach and organisation	More professionalisation within party staff	Bones Commission/Leadership/HQ Leadership	Medium
Approach and organisation	Seek to widen support to those with liberal values who were not Liberal Democrats – emphasis on reforming agenda to appeal to this group	Leader Electoral Performance	Medium-High
Approach and organisation	Establishment of the Social Liberal Forum	Faction	High
Approach and organisation	Restoration of ‘equidistance’ into 2010 election	Leader Electoral landscape (banking crisis, expenses scandal)	High
Policy	‘Make it Happen’ Policy Agenda	Leader	High
Policy	Making the increase in the personal tax allowance to cut taxes for lower earners a priority.	Leader Factions	High

Policy	Increased use of advocating personal budgets – e.g. in care, health, education	Leader	Low
Policy	Banking Reform – breaking up large banks and increased regulation	Electoral landscape Contemporary Issues	Medium
Policy	Failure to drop tuition fees as a party policy	Factions Leader	High
Policy	Reforms to family and early years’ policy – significant rebalance from cash guarantees to support for policy initiatives	Spokespeople	Medium
Policy	2010 Manifesto	Leader Electoral Landscape Factions	Medium

## 2010-2015 – Coalition

### *The extent of change*

#### *The Public Face*

The Coalition Government in 2010 saw the party secure five Cabinet posts and 14 other ministerial portfolios. Nick Clegg took the role of Deputy Prime Minister and was joined in Cabinet by Vince Cable at Business Innovation and Skills, Chris Huhne at Energy and Climate Change, Danny Alexander in the Scotland Office and David Laws as Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

The decision as to what departments the party would have run was significant but actually clearer cut than may be considered. In 2010 party had a manifesto with four clear areas of priority on the front<sup>11</sup> and Clegg was keen to secure departments and roles which would support areas in which he felt the party was distinctive. At the same time there were a number of senior party figures expecting roles which also limited the flexibility in allocating departments.

Firstly, Clegg decided to take on the role of Deputy Prime Minister for himself. Ashdown had advised that he should remove himself from Government and focus on leading the party, something he had intended to do had he ever led the party into a coalition (Ashdown, 2011), whilst Clegg doesn't recall the specific advice, he did consider this:

I looked at this very closely because it is what the Dutch did<sup>12</sup> but I just came to the practical view that given that our fate and fortunes would be so intimately wound up by how we conducted ourselves in government and what we delivered and so on that it was just wholly unrealistic (Clegg, 2016a)

Another option would have been for Clegg to take on a Great Office, this is an idea he was even quicker to pour cold water on, and his rationale holds up even better with hindsight:

No I am absolutely clear on that. It would have been even more stuff, we would have been so overwhelmed.

On that I am very firmly of the view in the asymmetric - you know a smaller party- has to work with a larger party in a very hierarchical pyramid structure of Whitehall, you have to keep your hands free to be able to usurp and trump

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<sup>11</sup> The four were 'Fair Taxes' (tax reform), 'Fair chance' (education), 'Fair future' (environment), 'Fair deal' (political reform)

<sup>12</sup> The reference is to Bolkstein's leadership of VVD in the Netherlands, where he remained leader of the party without taking on a government role.



vested interests and portfolio interests within Whitehall. To that extent you need to keep your hands free (Clegg, 2016a)

The Deputy Prime Minister role would afford such a position, and alongside this he took significant chairmanship of the highly powerful Home Affairs Cabinet.

In terms of other personnel, the most senior figure was Vince Cable would not work with George Osborne at the Treasury, a feeling reciprocated, so BIS being the other economic department was a natural fit. With the Conservatives having only one MP in Scotland that portfolio too was fairly straightforward to allocate with Alexander. Clegg had promised Huhne a cabinet position in the event of the party entering Government, and with Energy and Climate Change a clear Liberal Democrat priority it was an obvious department that Huhne was pleased to accept (Laws, 2016a:20). Clegg had initially been minded to offer Laws the Transport department, but Laws argued it was more important that the party was represented in the Treasury. Ultimately he was successful, and became Chief Secretary to the Treasury, a role that gave the party involvement in the economic direction and decision of the government (Laws, 2016a:21). It was an important, and wise, move. There was one other candidate for the job, who would be offered it upon Laws' resignation – that being Chris Huhne, who had wanted the Shadow Chancellorship in opposition but he declined on advice of his then-wife Vicky Pryce, who was former joint head of the Government Economic Service (Huhne, 2017). Huhne reflects that Laws' resignation was “a tragedy for the party” (Huhne, 2017).

The significant change from the frontbench team announced in 2007 was Ed Davey's omission and Danny Alexander's promotion - especially after David Laws' swift resignation - which saw him take over the Treasury role and Michael Moore enter the vacant Scotland Office post. Davey would return to the top of the party as Secretary of State for DECC in 2013, after Huhne's resignation from Government and prosecution for perverting the course of justice. The move would also allow Norman Lamb to be appointed as a PUSS in BIS. The allocation of Junior Ministers saw Clegg appoint ministers across most departments (See Appendix 2), though it transpired he had fewer positions than he had realised with Tim Farron, Jo Swinson and Norman Lamb, all of whom had been earmarked for PUSS roles all initially losing out (Laws, 2016a:21). Of the more junior ministerial appointments, notable roles went to Jeremy Browne at the Foreign Office, Lynne Featherstone as a PUSS at the Home Office, Paul Burstow at Health and Sarah Teather at Education.

Clegg carried out only one full reshuffle over the Parliament on 4 September 2012. The most significant change was David Laws return to government in a joint role as Minister in the Department for Education and the Cabinet Office. Clegg also took the opportunity to remove ministerial positions in the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office, with a rationale that

Danny Alexander would cover the most contentious issues in those two portfolios which did little to raise the party's profile in government (Laws, 2016a). Instead, the party took seats in Defra and International Development. Nick Harvey, Sarah Teather and Paul Burstow left government in the reshuffle with Norman Lamb significantly being appointed as a Health Minister – a portfolio he would define in the remainder of Coalition.

The following year a smaller, but also significant, reshuffle saw Michael Moore removed from the Scotland Office to be replaced by Alistair Carmichael and Jeremy Browne from the Home Office. Norman Baker replaced Browne – a move notable for the contrast in outlooks of the two. Other appointments included Susan Kramer replacing Baker at Transport and Dan Rogerson and Stephen Williams gaining roles at Defra and DCLG respectively.

The last significant change in the front bench team was the General Election Cabinet – appointed in January of 2015. This saw Danny Alexander take on the role of lead economics spokesman, Tim Farron brought into the Foreign Affairs brief and Lynne Featherstone covering the Home Affairs role.

The Party President role also changed in this period, becoming more prominent. Tim Farron was elected in 2011 and served until 2014, with the role gaining more importance as a figurehead within the party outside of the Government ministers. At the end of Farron's second term, Baroness Sal Brinton was elected his successor, serving from January 2015.

### *Approach and strategy*

Clearly the biggest shift in the party's strategic direction was the entry into Coalition Government. In doing so the party's prospectus and position moved from one of opposition to one of power.

This judgement was made against a backdrop of economic turmoil (Fox, 2010:618) and a real concern that failure to do so may result in a second general election where the Conservatives could capitalise on the need for a clear mandate to begin the recovery. Since the leadership contest in 2007, Clegg had maintained that he would negotiate with whichever party gained the most votes and seats, this was an approach he maintained (BBC, 2007b).

The morning after the election Clegg stated this position again:

Whichever party gets the most votes and the most seats, if not an absolute majority, has the first right to seek to govern, either on its own or by reaching out to other parties...it is for the Conservative party to prove it is capable of seeking to govern in the national interest (Boulton and Jones, 2010:131)

Over five days an agreement was reached. There was early progress on a number of areas, with both parties finding a degree of commons ground (Laws 2010, Wilson 2010, Campbell 2011, (Fox, 2010)). Laws recounted,

Alexander summed up the position by saying that with the exception of voting reform it looked possible that we could agree sensible positions with the Conservatives (Laws, 2010:2053-67)

The choices of negotiating figures was important, Clegg had chosen Laws, Alexander, Stunell and Huhne, mirrored by Osborne, Letwin, Hague and Llewellyn, who Laws described as, "senior, serious but also courteous, open and direct." (Laws, 2010:1,007-92) In contrast Fox notes that, "the first set of talks with Labour were chilly, and generally unproductive" (Fox, 2010:30). Campbell observed:

the way in which our negotiating team interpreted it were Adonis and Mandelson were up for it, Harman was on the fence, and Balls and Miliband didn't really want it... Brown was out of touch with what his negotiators were saying (Campbell, 2011).

The importance of personality cannot be ignored. Added to an electoral result which aside from being inconclusive was anything but an endorsement of his premiership, Brown was an issue. He had always been dismissive of the Liberal Democrats, reflected by his habit of calling the party 'the Liberals' and there was little personal bond between Clegg and Brown. Clegg felt their exchanges during the negotiation period resembled more of a lecture from Brown, than a conversation, Mandelson confided he "was a little worried that Gordon might

have come across a bit too heavily, telling Nick what he should think rather than asking him what he thought” (2010:545) Contrastingly when it came to Cameron, Kavanagh and Cowley note that, “Clegg had previously found Brown difficult to deal with, whereas he struck up an easy relationship with David Cameron” (2010:209). Added to this the combination of parties formed the minimum winning coalition, something Bale points to as being particularly important (Bale, 2011).

Entering government was a significant moment in Clegg’s strategy to appeal to a wider group of liberal supporters:

I was careless, unforgivably careless with our interests but part of the reasons I was willing to take those risks which in hindsight didn’t pay off was I genuinely thought we had to go for bust - it was shit or bust.

We couldn’t be all things to all people, what we could do is do a really bold appeal to that young, educated broadly urban liberal constituency which is massive in this country (Clegg, 2016a)

The calculation was that whilst the party would lose some voters by going into Coalition with the Conservatives, they could gain support from a wider section of society. At the heart of this was showing the party to be capable of delivering the economic recovery – something that would underpin much of the next five years (Laws, 2016a:79)

Another important aspect to the Agreement, however, is the almost entire focus in it on policy rather than the practicalities of governing, something recognised by Clegg and critics alike, Greaves even described the initial announcement as a ‘triumph’ but went on to say:

The concentration on the detail in the policy agreements masked two basic things about the way that government works in this country. The first is that secretaries of state have an enormous leeway in the policies in their departments...The second is that government is a matter of day-by-day, week-by-week and month-by-month reaction to events, and policy ‘launches’, and in this environment a pushy minister can create his own agenda. (Greaves, 2010:6)

The clearest example of how this had been – catastrophically – overlooked is set out in Clegg’s book, where he recounts his first day in government, noting

While the 200 or so staff in Downing Street leapt into action to support the new Prime Minister, I was given just a single civil servant...the civil service had no real idea how to serve a coalition government. (Clegg, 2016b:53)

Speaking to the Institute for Government he expanded on what this meant:

The consequences were very human ones. Just being wildly overstretched, under-slept, under-resourced. It didn’t do my health much good, I don’t think. It meant politically that I was invisible, and it meant that in Whitehall I simply

wasn't in a position to really anticipate a lot of the things that were being thrown at me. (Clegg, 2018)

It was a view shared by others, David Laws recounting the lack of real preparation he had had to be a Minister

I think not formally well prepared at all, because firstly nobody had really talked to us about what being a minister meant in any structured way and of course our party had low expectations about being in government because of our size in the House of Commons.

So I think our preparations were defective in two ways: one, how, simply, do you operate as a minister? I remember turning up at the Treasury on the first or second day in the job and just sitting in the office and being given various briefing papers by officials and sensing things going into my diary, but actually being conscious that nobody was saying, 'Well, what do you want us to do and how do you want us to run this?' And I remember thinking, 'If I just don't impose any order on this at all, will the Civil Service just run me?' They'll fill up my box with various things and probably fill my diary with various other things, but nobody was asking me what my priorities were or what I wanted to do or how to run things. (Laws, 2016c)

The loss of Short Money also partly led to a sizeable reduction in staffing. LibDemVoice reported that over 20 positions were cut in the media team, Leader's Office and policy unit (Duffett, 2010). Another round of redundancies followed with the decimation of the campaigns team in 2011 with as many staff facing redundancy.

The party strategy for government was in its broadest explained by Rachel Sylvester in a piece for *The Times* setting out the plan the party had for the five years:

Richard Reeves<sup>[13]</sup>, Mr Clegg's political adviser, draws a graph that plots 'Government unity and strength' against 'Lib Dem identity' as two lines, one going down and the other up, between 2010 and 2015. The lines cross in 2012. 'Every minute of every day between now and the election we will turn up the dial on differentiation,' says a strategist. (Sylvester, 2012)

The most primary colour example of this early unity was found in the rose garden press conference held in May 2010 which showed Cameron and Clegg laughing and joking together. Gary O'Donoghue of the BBC said "it was like the Dave and Nick show" and that it was "hard to think that these two men were tearing strips off one another as recently as last week" (O'Donoghue, 2010). Alongside such events, were joint newspaper op-eds from ministers from each party. The two went further an in early 2011 with both weaving references to 'muscular liberalism' into speeches (Watson et al., 2011) (Clegg, 2011).

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<sup>13</sup> Director of Strategy from 2010-2012

In the opening section to the Localism Bill Clegg implied that the ‘Big Society’ – a policy that Cameron emphasised in the early stages of government – was the same as liberalism, writing:

The prime minister has coined the phrase big society while the Liberal Democrats tend to talk about community politics or just liberalism. But whatever the words we use, we are clear and united in our ambition to decentralise and disperse power in our society and that shared ambition is one of the of the bonds that will keep our coalition strong.

This earned the headline “Nick Clegg says 'big society' same as liberalism” in *The Guardian* (Wintour and Curtis, 2010).

Clegg now believes this was a mistake:

That was wrong. That was my mistake. They’re not synonymous. The Steve Hilton-esque idea of the big society is not the same as Tony Greaves’ community politics. (Clegg, 2016a)

Regardless of hindsight, it encapsulates well the early approach of the Liberal Democrats to Coalition – to show that Coalition Government works and emphasise its strength. There was widespread expectation that the Coalition would not last its full term but it problematised the pivot to attract new support that Clegg sought to do. Alongside signing up to earlier cuts than outlined in the Liberal Democrats election campaign, the early narrative was set that the party was weak and had ‘sold out’ with an emblematic u-turn on tuition fees, where the party split three ways with some MPs supporting, others opposing, and some abstaining on plans to increase university tuition fees.

2011 saw the party fail to secure a change in the electoral system as the referendum result roundly rejected the move. The conservative and Conservative opposition to the reform had attacks focused on Clegg personally, straining Coalition relations (Laws, 2016a: 89-90). It was also a time of pressure on the government as the economic recovery stagnated. 2012 was the clearest shift towards the second phase of Reeves’ strategy – differentiation. This was demonstrated clearly following Laws’ suggestion that the party push for a faster increase in the personal tax allowance, but to do so publicly. Whilst Alexander did not agree, Clegg pursued this strategy with an aim of securing credit for the move (Laws, 2016a). Another good example of the introduction of more assertiveness and differentiation was the NHS Bill – aside from the policy detail which was not acceptable to the Liberal Democrats – it was an opportunity, which Clegg took, to intervene and force the government to halt the progress of the Bill and rewrite it (*The Telegraph*, 2012). It was a clear and important change in the strategy that had been pursued up until this point, and unlike the call for increases in the tax

allowance a public example of the Liberal Democrats putting their foot down and actively, openly blocking proposals. In reality the effectiveness was more limited.

Conversely, around the same time David Laws has subsequently revealed Nick Clegg and Danny Alexander had privately blocked attempts by the Conservatives to cut the NHS budget in 2012 and 2013 (Laws, 2016a). The balance in strategy – between public disputes and private resolutions was one that ebbed and flowed, but on something as totemic as this the decision not to go public with the move is significant.

Following a bruising set of elections, with another loss of Liberal Democrat councillors, Clegg called a meeting with Laws, Reeves, Oates, Lena Pietsch and his wife Miriam at their home in Putney. He raised the prospect of his resigning to improve the party's fortune. All spoke out against that, though each emphasised that he and the party needed clearer 'wins' and definition, and believe the public simply did not see the achievements that were being made behind the scenes (Laws, 2016a:142-143). Clearly, the decision for the leader not to resign is one which delivered continuity – a resignation against the backdrop as it would be seen as nothing short of a total strategic shift.

The strategy of differentiation came more to a head when House of Lords reform was met with strong opposition on the Conservative backbenches and lacked support from the Labour frontbench. With a recognition that it had failed, the Liberal Democrats hit back by blocking plans to redraw constituency boundaries. Laws devotes a whole chapter of his blow by blow account of the five years, *Coalition*, reflecting the importance of this move and the Conservatives threat to end the whole coalition if boundary reforms were blocked (Laws, 2016a:152), Cameron suggesting "If we lose boundaries, I will lose the next election and Labour will be back in" (Laws, 2016a:156). This disagreement fell against a backdrop of Laws rejecting on behalf of the party the offer of a 'coupon election' in 2015 with Conservatives standing aside in a number of Liberal Democrat areas to allow both parties to fight on a joint record in government (Laws, 2016a:134) This would, of course, have ended any prospect of equidistance for several election cycles at least and would have impacted the Liberal Democrats more significantly than the Conservatives.

As the Parliament progressed into 2014, rows in Cabinet became more common, and a number of serious running arguments were particularly noted in the Department for Education between Gove and Laws (Laws, 2016a:293-303). Cameron himself started raising the prospect of a second Coalition with Clegg and some aspects of potential future agreements on policy sticking points were undoubtedly discussed (Laws, 2016a:395)

Following the reduction to just one MEP in the 2014 European Elections, John Pugh and others attempted to stage a coup, but there was not wide enough enthusiasm for this to succeed.

There was also a continuing shift to more public disagreements and challenges – perhaps most notably from Norman Lamb who was the Liberal Democrat Health Minister. In a move that arguably could have led to resignation or sacking in a single party government he called for extra funding for the NHS ahead of the 2014 autumn statement and revealed the Liberal Democrats were fighting to deliver it – the implication being if it didn't happen the Conservatives had blocked it (Pym, 2014).

The Coalition lasted its full term and delivered a further budget in the Spring of 2015. After this, the parties moved onto general election footing and the strategy shifted once more.

In January 2015, Coetzee wrote a note setting out the political challenges going into the election

Bluntly and simply: Labour is midway through a slow-motion implosion because they lack credibility on the economy, lack a credible candidate for No. 10 and lack a consistent and credible message. They will shed many seats to the SNP and win fewer seats off the Tories than expected, thanks to the Greens and their own ineffectiveness. In contrast, the Tories are in a much stronger position, their UKIP problem notwithstanding, because they have a credible candidate for PM with a credible pitch – only the Tories can be trusted to finish the job on the economy. Given all this, the biggest risk we face is a significant shift of voters towards the Tories as Election Day approaches (quoted in Laws, 2016a)

The Liberal Democrats moved to present themselves as the guarantors of the recovery and a moderating force to either of the main parties. This was stylised in several ways – from the slogan that the party was the only one that could deliver a 'Stronger Economy and Fairer Society' through to other illustrations of the dangers of electing a government that would swerve right or left ((Liberal Democrats, 2015a) and (Liberal Democrats, 2015b)).

This was the culmination of the differentiation strategy, where the party returned to a position of equidistance for the 2015 General Election. The campaign is discussed in the third chapter of this thesis, but clearly with only 8 Liberal Democrat MPs retaining their seats – diminished from the 57 elected in 2010 the electoral strategy in this period was far from a success.

Clegg's strategy to use the party's time in government to appeal to a broader part of the electorate and secure votes had failed.

I don't want to overstate it, but I was acutely aware that those easy pickings that saying anything that any nurse or teacher wanted to hear were over. I think we then, with hindsight, gratuitously offended them:



Pay, Pensions, Fees.

Pay - freeze them

Pensions - dick around with them

Fees- and saying to your kids they are going to be indebted

It just could not have been more gratuitous... my naivety was that you could pivot from letting down one group of people and then somehow, not least because they overlap.”(Clegg, 2016a)

### ***Policy***

The biggest policy development was clearly the party’s entrance into Coalition Government. For the first-time party policies could be delivered by Liberal Democrat ministers.

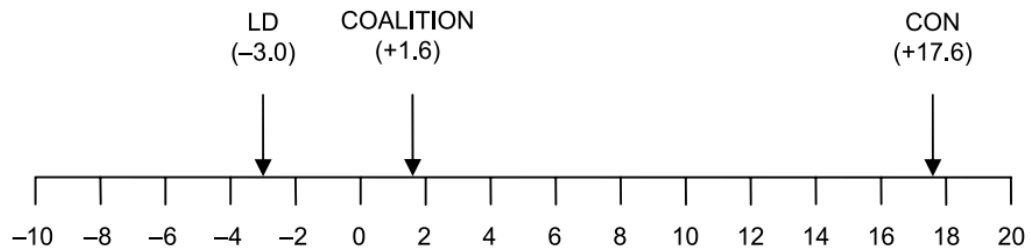
It also meant that party policy took a new role sitting somewhere between being official party policy but not a mandated position that the party had to deliver in government – not least because agreement would not always be secured with the Conservatives.

my perception is that the FPC did weaken quite a lot. When were in government the overrides of being in government are stronger... I think that it wasn’t over powerful in the run up to the 2015 manifesto and was probably weaker in the coalition period than prior to 2010. I think partly because the feeling, in a sense it felt like the party leadership were a bit more independent in government and just able to get on with things whereas when you are in opposition everything revolves around the party machine. (Laws, 2016b)

The first real development of policy was the Coalition Agreement (Cabinet Office, 2010), which was endorsed by conference (Liberal Democrats, 2010b). The UCL constitution unit initially considered 75% of the Programme for Government to be Liberal Democrat policy, though this was revised to 40% when they revised their metrics (quoted in Tall, 2012). In passing approval for the document, the party conference endorsed its contents which changed some policy areas, notably on the deficit reduction timetable. David Laws considered the agreement to contain 75%-80% of what the Liberal Democrat team had wished for (Quinn et al., 2011:301) and LibDemVoice found 86% of their readers moderately or very happy with it(Tall, 2012).

Quinn et al note that the agreement was closer to the Liberal Democrats’ than Conservatives’ programme in respect to the ‘RILE’ score on the Left-Right spectrum

**Figure 14- Right-left positions of the coalition parties' manifestos and the coalition (Quinn et al., 2011:303)**



Deficit reduction was at the heart of the Agreement as the Government's priority, with the Conservatives' preference for fastest reduction winning out, a significant change in Liberal Democrat policy and an issue that was at the heart of the entire Government's tenure.

Some issues had clearly been put aside, such as the renewal of Trident, some moderated between the party's two viewpoints, such as allowing new nuclear power stations but not with public subsidy, and others left for the parties to disagree on, as with tuition fees and electoral reform. For some, they argue the fate for the party in the 2015 election was sealed upon its signing (Cutts and Russell, 2015). Clear Liberal Democrat 'wins' lay in plans for increases to the tax threshold, the introduction of a pupil premium, support for green industry and a referendum on the alternative vote. How much the agreement mattered is debatable, some of the most significant and contentious reforms that were brought forward by the Coalition were not contained in the agreement, and Clegg's assessment looking back is that:

Osborne would frankly have put fucking anything into that Agreement because he realised - in hindsight rightly - 'whatever. whatever it takes' just to get your arse into office. (Clegg, 2016a)

Through the Liberal Democrats period in office, the most significant development is arguably in economic policy. This was at the heart of the government's agenda, and the deficit was clearly a key issue at the 2010 election. Indeed, the economy in general was consistently seen as one of, usually the, most important issues by voters (see for example (YouGov, 2010) (YouGov, 2013) (YouGov, 2014)). The first development in Liberal Democrat economic policy was the decision to back quicker initial reduction in the Coalition Agreement, with cuts of around £6bn earmarked for the 2010/11 fiscal year and a commitment to abolish the deficit by the end of the Parliament. This would underpin many other decisions and arguments over cuts and investment over the coming five years. This contrasted with Nick Clegg's assertion in an interview in March 2010 that:

We think that merrily slashing now is an act of economic masochism. If anyone had to rely on our support, and we were involved in government, of course we would say no. (Merrick, 2010)

It is worth noting though that the manifesto did state that the party would “put in place cuts which could be realised within the financial year” (Liberal Democrats, 2010d:98), though also that “Our working assumption is that the economy will be in a stable enough condition to bear cuts from the beginning of 2011–12” (Liberal Democrats, 2010d:15). The economic impact of the decision to reposition economic policy in line with the Conservatives’ plans were cuts in the 2010-11 financial year and £80bn of cuts earmarked between the emergency budget and autumn statement (Cole, 2016:7). Significantly, this early tightening included capital spending, something which sowed the seeds of Cable’s concerns and future differentiation from the government’s position. Cable argued this

undoubtedly hindered the recovery, since capital projects have rich multiplier effects...[it] also became increasingly absurd as the cost of borrowing fell close to zero in real terms (Cable, 2016:11).

This was something Clegg would also come to argue (BBC Politics, 2013).

Through 2011 and 2012 the party fought to deliver more progress in tax cuts for low and middle earners, and vetoed initial attempts to cut the 50p tax rate and demanded the establishment of the Green Investment Bank in 2011. The 2012 budget was a great contrast to the subdued affair of the previous year. It would be christened the ‘Omnishambles Budget’. This budget saw the party back a cut in the 50p rate to 45p, and faster movement towards lifting the tax allowance to £10,000 – it was also the start of a new phase of ‘differentiation’ whereby the demands the party were making were set out in public (Laws, 2016a:124). Laws reports that Clegg almost vetoed the entire budget over the issue of additional rate tax cuts, but withdrew this threat at the last moment. A senior Liberal Democrat familiar with the dynamics was of the view that Quad meetings had become in some ways “too chummy” and “too close” where the desire to arrive at a compromise agreement sometimes usurped politically sensible decision making. Specifically, in regard to this budget, Danny Alexander was said to have been reluctant to push for faster cuts in tax for low and middle earners on the grounds of affordability, but was in favour of the reduction in the 50p rate – a position distinct to party policy and his colleagues (Laws, 2016a:124 & 126).

Through this period, the main economic debates held at the party conferences had pertained to reform of the banking industry. Totemic of the financial crisis and an area that Cable had managed to secure joint responsibility for alongside the Treasury, the party passed motions on the Vickers’ Commission and its recommendations for the sector (Liberal Democrats, 2011),

which would be enacted in government. At the Autumn 2012 conference policies that would allow councils to borrow to build more council housing was passed – the first in a series of overt challenges to the government’s economic policy, though not opposed by the party leadership (Liberal Democrats, 2012). Amendments that would have committed the party to oppose the fiscal mandate were easily defeated (Hanney, 2015).

The key development in 2012 was the abandoning of the original target to abolish the deficit by 2015, instead moving to a pace closer to that set out by the Liberal Democrats, but as Howarth notes,

instead of claiming the change of direction as a win for the party’s manifesto policy, [the Liberal Democrats] joined with the Conservatives to obscure it...Labour joined the deception. It suited Labour to continue to complain about austerity rather than admit the government had adopted its own timetable. This was an important lost opportunity for the Liberal Democrats (Howarth, 2016)

2013 saw the first major splits in the party in public on the economy. The backdrop was a stagnating economy – smaller in Q1 of 2013 than in Q3 2011. The turnaround had failed to progress into a period of stronger growth as per the Coalition’s plan, and even the IMF arguing for a reappraising of the austerity agenda. Clegg met with Cable in early 2013 where the latter backed the Liberal Democrat attempts to review Bank of England monetary policies, increases to the tax threshold and other cost of living measures but wanted to see the removal of the protection of NHS and Schools’ budgets and more investment in capital projects – he was of the view that Alexander along with the Chancellor were too rigid in their approach to borrowing for capital projects, (Laws, 2016a:262). The differences were acute. Clegg argued there were not enough ‘shovel ready’ projects, and that it was politically undeliverable – he point blank refused to consider cutting the NHS or schools’ budgets – and at this stage considered removing Cable from BIS and handing the Department to Alexander with Laws regaining his old position in the Treasury (Laws, 2016a:263). The risk of huge party division should this be done was the main reason the change did not happen. Ahead of the budget Vince Cable upped the pressure for a change in approach –questioning the rationale for ring-fenced departments (Forsyth, 2013), suggesting the Liberal Democrats would back a Labour motion to introduce a mansion tax (Groves, 2013), and more provocatively published an essay in the *New Statesman* pointedly titled ‘When the facts change, should I change my mind?’ (Cable, 2013). The ante was upped further as an emergency motion calling for a switch in economic policy was tabled for the party conference – it married up well with Cable’s plans, and was inspired by Matthew Oakeshott, a Peer who was well associated with Cable, as well as the SLF’s paper on the economy. The motion was blocked from debate as the leadership team moved to ensure another motion – on secret courts – topped the ballot, a controversial,

high-stake move (Wintour, 2013). The Budget itself too saw splits in approach between the Coalition partners, alongside desiring additional Departmental cuts, Osborne proposed an income tax cut paid for by reductions in the NHS budget, backed by Cameron – Clegg and Alexander blocked this suggestion in a pre-Budget Quad (Laws, 2016a). Further proposals to add £13bn of cuts to the 2016/7 financial year were blocked too – a crucial move. Had that measure gone ahead the Coalition’s fiscal plans would have taken on an entirely new shape. It was clearly from this point that the party’s economic views in government had become at least bicephalous, with what was being delivered in the Treasury differing from the views of the Business Secretary. It is arguable both differed from the views of Clegg, and clearly the approach was not purely Liberal Democrat or Conservative but a balance of the two. The divide was accentuated further at the 2013 Autumn Conference where Cable was reported to back a loosening of the fiscal mandate and amendments to a motion on the economy what were seen as a test of Clegg’s leadership – the amendments effectively called on the party to oppose the Coalition’s plan (Dominiczak, 2013) and (Liberal Democrats, 2013). This was, however, the last formal challenge to fiscal strategy made through the formal policy making process. Notable in Laws’ account is that even at this late stage of the Parliament he was suggesting that “in future, we need to get there first ourselves” (Laws, 2016a:398). It was plain that the lessons of claiming credit for the hard-won successes was one that was never properly learnt. The 2014 Budget saw clear Lib Dem influence with another increase in the personal allowance, the introduction of an early years pupil premium and the liberalisation of pension annuities. Conservative measure on reductions of tax on savings, and increase in the ISA allowance and cuts to air passenger duties were the counterbalance to these.

2015 saw the most overt development in strategy around the budget with the Liberal Democrats presenting an alternative fiscal pathway in the House of Commons. The poorly attended Commons session – notice to MPs was circulated only a day or so before it was held – saw Danny Alexander deliver an alternative deficit reduction strategy to that in the Budget the day before. This drew criticism from both other parties (Stacey, 2015) but set out the Liberal Democrats election plan, and how it was distinct from a Coalition approach. It clearly set apart the Liberal Democrat economic vision from that of the Coalition more clearly than any other time in Government. The Budget itself was far more detailed than Clegg and the party had intended. Aside from the economy, policy developed over through the Coalition years. At the 2010 autumn conference the party formally adopted policy in favour of same sex marriage and mixed sex civil partnerships (Liberal Democrats, 2010c:7-9). Policy was passed to demand the government consider alternatives to a like for like replacement for Trident – something that would be carried out (Cabinet Office, 2013). There was also the first example of a split between the Parliamentary Party and the membership with a policy criticising the

expansion of the academy school programme passing- crystallising the fact that Liberal Democrat policy had in some ways become abstract – Liberal Democrats in Government could not enact all policies that were passed, and indeed may not always wish to! The conference also saw a shot across the bows from Shirley Williams, who identified NHS reforms as being a potential cause for a coalition split, and warning that a massive reorganisation would be politically, and financially costly (Williams, 2010). The key thread that ran through all of this is that party policy immediately began to refer to the delivering of policies – the mechanics of doing so. Motions would call on ministers to commission papers being a clear example of the party membership being asked – or asking – to shape ministers’ actions in government. Between conferences a hugely significant shift was made in policy on tuition fees. Having continually pledged to abolish fees – having failed to get the party to change its mind – Clegg led the party into a three-way divide on proposals to triple tuition fees. The affair was hugely damaging and defining – and whilst explanation of the new system’s progressive nature, which perhaps in part explained the increase in students from lower income backgrounds subsequently seen, the u-turn for many defined his term in office – as Laws opined “no issue did more damage to the Liberal Democrats” (Laws, 2016a:50). In terms of policy development, the party policy technically remained to abolish fees for some time. Further criticism was to follow at the Spring 2011 conference in regards to access to justice in the face of wide cuts to legal aid where in effect the party and government policies were running on divergent paths (Liberal Democrats, 2011:2-3). Concerns with government policy were compounded with a health motion was passed that demanded significant changes were made to the Health and Social Care Bill – hugely significant and the start of resistance in the party which led to the Bill to be ‘paused’ and rewritten in 2012. Laws attributes this pause as being caused in significant part by that conference vote (Laws, 2016a:75)

As the parliament developed, party policy making – as in previous cycles – moved to set out policies going into the next election. The period from 2013-14 is notable for the number of significant policies that were set out including on the economy, tax and welfare, education, energy, defence and Europe. In many of these areas there were significant moves, which caused some division amongst the membership, in some cases it appeared the development of policy removed potential barriers to future Coalitions or didn’t create new ones. For example the party moved to back nuclear power, albeit without public subsidy ((Mason, 2013) and (Liberal Democrats, 2013)), passed policy that would not support the like for like replacement for Trident, but a reduction in the number of submarines (Liberal Democrats, 2013) and policies on immigration that removed the route to earned citizenship many considered harmed the party’s 2010 election prospects (Liberal Democrats, 2014). Areas that would gain prominence in the 2015 manifesto and campaign built on the party’s record in government:

fair taxes, deficit reduction, opportunities for every child, our environment protected and quality health care for all. Specific red lines were set out for any future coalition deal – further increase to the tax-free allowance, an extra £2.5bn for education, an extra £8bn for the NHS, a pay rise for public sector workers, action for fight climate change and a stability budget to set out the strategy for deficit reduction. The actual setting out of red lines was a development from previous elections, though the priorities themselves are marked by a large degree of continuity.

### *The drivers of change*

#### *Leader*

Clegg became the most powerful Liberal Democrat or Liberal leader in a century when he became Deputy Prime Minister.

His preferences, and ability to drive change were greater than any other leader enjoyed in this period both in respect to what he could seek to deliver in government, and also as it would transpire in how the party membership would – on the whole – back him. The decision to negotiate with both parties and ultimately to reach agreement with the Conservatives was down in part to Clegg and the leadership; some have argued without Clegg such an arrangement would not have been possible (Gerard, 2011:19), indeed Gurling states of Kennedy, for example:

He would not have gone into Coalition with the Conservatives, fullstop.  
(Gurling, 2019)

The appointment of ministers was Clegg's decision, something he insisted on and clearly thus made him the primary driver in not only the selection of ministries but also who filled them (Clegg, 2016b:29) Whilst several of those interviewed believe it was a mistake not to take a department like Education or Health, none of the key individuals interviewed for this work believe that the party should have sought to take a small number of ministries outright. Though some have argued this would have benefited the party (McEnhill, 2015), those familiar with the day to day running of each department, the Quad and the overall agenda believe to do so would have left too many blind spots allowing a Conservative agenda to be pushed unchecked. Given the manner in which some interventions to prevent policy proceeded unchanged, notably in welfare and NHS reforms, it is likely that this is a fairer assessment. Ultimately, if a party is to vote a policy through whether they run the department or not is largely irrelevant, and the cost of giving up any control or insight in many areas in exchange for one or two totemic departments would be sizeable. What may have been possible is something more in line with Hall-Matthews' thoughts of grouping more ministers into fewer departments – a half

way approach – where certain departments were left entirely without Lib Dem involvement (Hall-Matthews, 2011).

The Coalition negotiating team had not got into what roles the party would have, this being left to Clegg and Cameron to agree. This was something that both Laws and Huhne believe was a mistake in hindsight:

The negotiating team did no work on people, portfolios or even the big question on whether you should have people in some departments or the whole lot. (Huhne, 2017)

I think, your maximum point of power is before the deal is done and I think that if doing it again we would, should, have specified exactly what that support should look like.

We were quite focussed on not negotiating for anything that looked like self-interested things, or departmental negotiations that would imply members of the negotiating team were lining up particular posts for themselves.

Actually I think it was a mistake not to be clearer about the SpAd [support we should have] just as I also regret us not taking more time to discuss what ministerial positions and Secretary of State things we should have.”(Laws, 2016b)

Clearly, these were the decisions of Clegg and his team, as were which Departments to take, though the fact that this was not entirely in his gift is important. Agreement over which departments would be run by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats was a negotiation in itself. The allocation of departments has been considered to have favoured the Conservatives by some, in both number and prestige (Bale, 2012a) (Heppell, 2014) (Debus, 2011), with all great offices being run by the Conservatives. Others considered the matter to be more balanced including Dommett:

Indeed, the party had representation in almost every government department, with Nick Clegg taking responsibility for constitutional affairs as part of his deputy prime ministerial role.

The Liberal Democrats also appeared to negotiate what Robert Hazell and Ben Yong have called the ‘unity/distinctiveness’ dilemma well. This is a theory which recognises the need for coalition parties to maintain their own identity (and hence appeal) whilst at the same time forging and pursuing a viable agenda for government (Dommett, 2013)

Clegg’s apparent attempt to appoint Huhne as replacement for Laws in the Treasury ahead of Alexander (Huhne, 2017), was again his choice as were each of his reshuffles. Outside events forced the resignations of Huhne and Laws but this aside the Liberal Democrat reshuffles are notable for being relatively limited, and always seemed Clegg’s choices. The one area this perhaps became more qualified was the appointment of the 2015 Cabinet Team with Tim



Farron making his demand of Foreign Affairs Spokesman clear. As a clear potential leadership candidate, it is arguable that his appointment to this role may have been more obvious to him than to the Liberal Democrat leader at that time. By the same respect, the failure to secure a stronger share of the government machinery lay partly at Clegg's door too. He recognises the failure to secure key symbols of power – the right to photo ops in Downing Street – as well as a properly staffed office from day one were errors (Clegg, 2016b:74-6).

The overall strategy for government, a period of showing Coalition worked followed by a gradual period of differentiation was one advanced by Richard Reeves and supported by Clegg. It is arguably one of the most significant decisions taken and contributed strongly to the issues the party faced in 2015. Of all the decisions taken post 2010 election it is probably this approach to the initial period of government that did the most to suppress Liberal Democrat support in the medium term; the seeming acquiescence to Conservative policies and a failure to secure visible signs of strength combined to build a narrative of a party that had rolled over; Clegg's seating next to Cameron for five years would compound that narrative.

That being said, the subsequent disputes with the Conservatives over NHS legislation, and more and more disagreements coming into the open were also part of this strategy which Clegg and others pursued well, one of the clearest examples being on blocking boundary changes in retaliation for the failure of Lords reform (Jowit, 2012).

Alongside this, the moves to consciously try and build a new voter base whilst in government was something driven by Clegg – there was no real discussion with the membership about such a distinct shift. In terms of overall approach, it was also ultimately his decision not to resign. Whilst some of those interviewed believe a change in leader could have marginally altered the 2015 election result, none believe it would have been significant, though several acknowledge there was a feeling amongst some in the parliamentary party that it was the only possible role of the dice. Hanney raises the prospect of what an earlier change in leader may have done but points out:

I ask myself that a lot. At the time I didn't think it for one second as I didn't think there was anyone who could have done it better. Even now, that is true.

Who is taking over? Chris [Huhne] had gone, what is single biggest problem – fees – so you putting Vince Cable in? I mean that is not going to help. So my view is, yes a new leader may have marginally done better in terms of vote share, would that have made any difference in seats? Probably not. And what would it have done to the party? (Hanney, 2017)

All things considered, it seems unlikely that a change in leader would have substantially altered the electoral outcome for the Liberal Democrats in 2015. The obvious alternative –

Vince Cable – would have had issues with the baggage of the broken pledge on Tuition Fees having brought them in himself, Chris Huhne was no longer in Parliament and there was no obvious alternative Deputy Prime Minister, though some were seeming to be jockeying for a future contest should Clegg leave after the election. There were two significant decisions taken in respect to the 2015 election. The first was to reject the idea of a coupon election, (Laws, 2016a:136-7). Clegg rejected the idea out of hand, as did Laws when it was put to him, as it would result in the party being positioned on the centre-right and could completely destroy the party's identity. This approach was never put to the party membership, nor even the Parliamentary Party and as such is a decision driven by the leadership. The other was the stance into the 2015 general election and pitching the party as the guarantors of the moderate centre ground, this was in many respects the only position the party could adopt whilst not moving away from equidistance. Clegg himself believed a Coalition with Labour would be impossible given the likelihood of the SNP performing well in Scotland (Laws, 2016a:540). This is a very important consideration, as the contrast in his expectation of the outcome was not reflected in the party's approach to the election, where the possibility of a deal with Labour was left open.

In policy terms, the negotiating team for the 2010 election was chosen by Clegg and the Coalition Agreement was something that they backed. The reality is whilst the negotiations themselves were driven by the leader and the negotiating team the use of the triple-lock to ensure Parliamentarians and the Party Membership voted for the agreement meant that this aspect of policy development, though driven by the leadership, had buy-in throughout the party. Indeed, the exercise was a success to the point that a conference centre was booked in case it was needed following the 2015 election to repeat such an exercise.

What was not, however, put to the party was the thought process behind some of the decisions subsequently taken – or the manner in which certain sections were written. Most significant would be the policy on tuition fees. This issue was also driven by factions within the party but the outcome was predominantly in line with the preferences of the leadership so will be considered here. The Coalition Agreement gave the party the right to abstain on plans if they were not agreeable, a curious halfway house that Laws explains thus:

My guess is that four of us on the negotiating team were probably privately assuming we'd end up with some kind of fees increase, that we would then give ourselves an opt out of having to support it, based on how big it was or something, rather than actually thinking and explicitly following through on the idea that it is likely we would be able to veto the fee rise altogether and we didn't really appreciate at that stage just how poisonous politically going back on the fees thing would be. (Laws, 2016b)

It has been reported, and is not contradicted by Laws' account that the party was not going to seek to argue for the full policy of abolition, Alexander writing in a leaked document:

On tuition fees we should seek agreement on part-time students and leave the rest. We will have clear yellow water with the other [parties] on raising the tuition fee cap, so let us not cause ourselves more headaches.(Watt, 2010)

Given the party leadership's previous attempts to ditch the policy of abolishing fees, the Coalition Agreement's ambiguity it seems likely it was never the intention to seek to scrap fees altogether. Why the outcome was not something that did not include a fees rise however, is less clear. In taking the decision some have reported that Osborne either advised Clegg against the increase (D'Ancona, 2013:63) or offered to drop the plans altogether (Seldon and Snowdon, 2015:41). Clegg points to the progressive nature of the new system, arguing it was not affordable to abolish fees and that the university funding situation was acute, whilst accepting the dire situation of funding was not clear and that he should not have signed the NUS pledge given his own views on the matter (Clegg, 2016b:27).

The argument of affordability doesn't stand up; the cost of raising the tax threshold was far greater – ultimately, it was a question of priorities. Laws believes that in hindsight other options were open to them:

It was a £4 or 5 billion type thing, and we were assuming we wouldn't be able to push for it being abolished completely but we would simply veto an increase and that would be where the clear yellow water was. With hindsight that is what we should have done but I wouldn't have actually put that in the Coalition Agreement because then we'd have then have had to have traded something off with the Tories for it. The benefit of hindsight is seeing how Coalitions actually work which is one party simply says 'sorry I am not fucking doing this, what are you going to do about it', I would have put in something fudgey in the Coalition Agreement and then in government said, sorry I am not doing it. (Laws, 2016b)

Huhne, however, believes Cable could have done a better job at devising and presenting the policy, which could have avoided the key issue of the party backing a rise in fees by replacing the mechanism with a graduate tax:

We could have got a way through it if Vince hadn't been so pig-headed about calling it a graduate tax...we should have presented it as a graduate tax. The Tories were delighted we were making a big political mistake. I think they were sitting on their hands with glee (Huhne, 2017)

The sum total of all this is – however- crystal clear. The mess of the tuition fees policy and the driver of change from the manifesto position lay with the leader and leadership. Those offering alternative visions of what could have be done to avert the situation offer solutions that are within the gift of the leader – even those most strongly opposed to the move such as

Richard Grayson, do not advocate more that could have been done outside the leadership (Grayson, 2017). Throughout the Coalition the leadership was crucial in determining the prioritisation of issues and how key issues were resolved – the Quads (Cameron, Clegg, Alexander, Osborne) and bi-laterals (Clegg and Cameron) were crucial in resolving policy disagreements and deals that were cut there clearly made the leadership a key driver in developments. The clearest example of this perhaps was the introduction of universal free school meals for infants. This was a policy favoured by Clegg though not from the Liberal Democrats’ manifesto, and was announced in 2013 as a direct trade-off with Cameron to allow him the money to introduce a married couples’ tax allowance (Watt, 2013).

The overall economic policy of the party, and government, were also largely leadership driven – in particular by Clegg. This was due to disagreements at various stages between Laws, Alexander and Cable, all three of whom were important in shaping the direction of the party’s economic policy. The ultimate position taken by the party lay somewhere between Alexander and Cable’s views, especially in relation to the 2015 proposals (Laws, 2016a:502-504).

In respect to other key developments, the party moved away from opposition to nuclear power, backing it without public subsidy, supported fracking and remained committed to a nuclear deterrent – though importantly not a like for like replacement for Trident. Each of these measures made the prospect of future Coalitions easier and were aligned to the wishes of the leadership, as was the vast majority of policy through the Coalition period. There were, though, occasions when the party’s voting in parliament is better explained by the party leader and leadership rather than the wider party’s wishes as expressed through conference. A good example is on what became called ‘secret courts’, plans to allow more civil courts to examine secret intelligence in private. Despite a string of changes, the Liberal Democrats passed policy to oppose the law, yet all but 7 MPs voted for it (Tall, 2013). Clearly such decisions are leader-driven.

Put simply, through the Coalition years more decisions became leader and leadership driven; the sheer number of decisions taken each day by Nick Clegg that pertained to such array of policy make it impossible to argue otherwise. The success or otherwise of those decisions is more debatable but it is undoubtable that in this period the leader became a more important driver of change than ever previously.

### *Electoral performance*

The electoral performance drove several aspects of the party’s developments at this time. Firstly, the inconclusive outcome of the 2010 election put the Liberal Democrats and Nick

Clegg in a position of power. Axiomatically the entire policy agenda, appointment of ministers and delivery in government was only possible because of the 2010 election result. The changes to staffing structure in this period were driven almost entirely by electoral performance. The appointment of Special Advisors was entirely down to the party's position in government and the additional resource of Departmental machinery was, again, down to the party's movement into government. Similarly, the loss of Short Money hit HQ staffing levels significantly; furthermore, the initial level of government staff support was incredibly small, and it took Clegg years to expand his number of Special Advisors fully, Oates commenting:

It was to rescue us from structural abyss. There was no structure around Nick beyond a handful of civil servants and a handful – a very small handful – of special advisors. So the first 18 months of government was me fighting to have a structure that would allow us to do our job... I think there was a lot of thought in the civil service to policy issues, but very little thought as to how to serve a Deputy Prime Minister in a Coalition government. (Oates, 2017)

The impact of the change in staffing levels also impacted the party in the early months of Coalition significantly. At the same time as trying to make a new sort of government work, fighting for identity and dealing with a number of controversial decisions the level of support in policy, communications and other key areas was reduced. Whilst the political decisions that were taken around issues such as tuition fees and deficit reduction are readily offered as reasons for subsequent electoral failings, this key factor of staffing upheaval and something of a vacuum being left in its place must also be recognised.

The run of Parliamentary by-elections between 2010 and 2015 were poor for the party, with only Eastleigh offering any positive glimmer of hope.

**Table 9 - 2010-2015 Results of Local Elections**

Election	Councillors	Councils
2011	-748	-9
2012	-333	-1
2013	-125	0
2014	-310	-2
2015	-454	-4

**Table 10- Assembly and Parliamentary Elections 2010-2015**

Election	Net change in seats
2011 Welsh Assembly	-1
2011 Scottish Parliament	-12
2012 London Assembly	-1

2014 European Parliament	-10
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As Tables 9 and 10 show the party haemorrhaged support, reflected in large falls in councillors, AMs, MSPs and MEPs. The question of Clegg's leadership was raised after each, *The Guardian* raising the matter clearly in a 2012 Editorial (Guardian Editorial, 2012). But the issue was brought up most seriously in the wake of the 2014 elections, with 310 Councillors losing seats as well as all but one of the party's MEPs. The party was polling around 8% at this time (Pack, 2017). The fact was that the attempted coup was easily seen off, and poorly planned, Nick Robinson remarking "Rarely can a coup attempt have failed so spectacularly" (Robinson, 2014). The accompanying online petition carried just 428 names (LibDems4Change, 2014).

In short, whilst there were a number of key changes, or attempted changes, driven by the party's electoral performance it is perhaps surprising that it was not a bigger driver and did not see a change in the answers to the biggest questions – whether to stay in Coalition and if Nick Clegg should lead the party.

### ***Faction***

The role of factions within the party continued to play an important role, as they had done in the latter part of the previous parliament. The largest influence though would be over policy.

In terms of driving change in the public face of the party, amongst the initial appointments as ministers after the leadership election Huhne was in a strong position to be appointed – given his general loyalty to the leadership since then the extent to which this is a 'factional' drive is more debatable but was an influence nonetheless. Huhne recalls after the aftermath of the 2007 contest:

I said, "I am very happy to be on board, but I want to be part of the team and be consulted on key things, and I want to be on the negotiating team." So that was the deal (Huhne, 2017)

Beyond that, with the number of roles to fill the appointments were driven more by experience and time in parliament than ideological stand points – Steve Webb, Chris Huhne, Simon Hughes, Lynne Featherstone and Jo Swinson all served as Ministers and none were seen as 'Orange Book' – in some cases quite the contrary. This means that whilst there was a factional balance, it was not something that had been planned in that way, though Steve Webb notes:

It certainly would be the case that people who got selected in Shadow Cabinet and so on were from that wing really...it tended to be the economic liberal – for shorthand- folk who were having the lunches with the journalists who

were writing the comment pieces and it became the respectable mainstream rescuing the party from the luddites. (Webb, 2016)

That being said what was more interesting was there was fewer appointments made from the older MPs with more experience, Alan Beith noting:

It is evident in his choice of ministers, with the singular and very necessary exception of Vince Cable, that he did not draw in his senior colleagues who had been around. (Beith, 2017)

Other examples of those who didn't become ministers were Ming Campbell and Annette Brooke and from the Lords people like Paddy Ashdown or Shirley Williams. Alongside the government appointments, Tim Farron's election as Party President gave him the opportunity to become another figurehead within the party but he was largely in line with the leadership on most issues – rebelling notably on tuition fees, the under-occupancy charge and the Justice and Security Bill. The appointment of the 2015 General Election Cabinet is another point where decisions were taken that would please or displease certain groupings within the party – Alexander's appointment as Shadow Chancellor ahead of Cable was the clearest example (Tall, 2014), though aside from this most appointments mirrored the ministerial portfolios already held by individuals. Clearly, the role of factions is important in explaining the attempted coup of Nick Clegg – those involved met and made plans of sorts, albeit that did not play out effectively. The electoral performance provided the moment for a growing clamour amongst this group to push for a change, though the desired outcome was driven and defined as a factional interest. Lastly, in respect of policy development there are a number of important changes driven by those outside the leadership. The most important consideration in regard to this is that Clegg and the leadership cared what Liberal Democrat conference thought, Hanney suggesting:

We spent hours talking about and worrying about [conference votes]... every time conference voted against the leadership, which actually didn't happen very often, and/or every time it said 'can we try and do this' a lot of time was spent trying to take on board at least the sentiment and will of the party, if not the precise policy detail. For a lot of it, it happened. (Hanney, 2017)

That being said, the role of the party machinery in government was seen as weaker, David Laws noting in his view the link between the parliamentary party and the FPC “weakened rather when we went into government” (Laws, 2016b).

Irrespective of this, it is clear that the role of party conference and the wider membership in driving back against the original proposals around the Health and Social Care Act is crucial in explaining the final product and is perhaps the most significant policy change secured in this manner. The Bill faced large opposition within the party and Clegg withdrew his initial

backing as the detail became clearer following a decisive campaign from activists such as former MP Evan Harris, medical professional Charles West and Shirley Williams which culminated in the Spring 2011 motion. Following another flash point at Autumn Conference, the Bill was paused and rewritten – attempts to block party conference backing for this failed as activists failed to win a two-thirds majority to suspend standing orders to force a debate which had not been selected. Laws argues that by this stage, with senior executives having already left posts ahead of the anticipated changes, it was probably impossible to halt the changes entirely and thus the reforms had to proceed (Laws, 2016a:75). Clegg certainly wishes that he had sunk the bill (Laws, 2016a:75) (Clegg, 2016a), though he recalls:

Paul Burstow was a massive advocate of that NHS bill because he and Lansley talked themselves into a lather of technocratic ecstasy that this was a perfect blend of Lib Demmery and Conservativism (Clegg, 2016a)

Another key policy driven by factions was opposition to what were termed ‘secret courts’ – as established the party in Parliament formally backed the plans against the wishes of conference, but the creation of Liberal Democrat policy was driven by factions against the leadership’s wishes. Similarly, over several debates on the economy fundamental challenges to the approach of the government and party were tabled and sometimes discussed. Whilst there was not a defeat for Clegg on this matter, it is likely that the clear support for alternatives being advanced by Cable and others probably informed the position the party ended up, particularly given that dissent at times was coming from those including Nick Clegg’s former Director of Strategy, Richard Reeves (Boffey and Helm, 2012). It also actively heightened the perception of factions, with key players briefing against one another as debates went their way (Boffey, 2013). In terms of policies that were being written for the next manifesto, however, perhaps the most important policy that the leadership failed to reform was opposition to any expansion in airport capacity in the South East and overall in net terms (BBC News Online, 2014). There was a clear desire to change this policy from the leadership and it failed in the face of a well organised grass roots faction.

Put simply, the party conferences and grassroots membership mattered. There were clear developments not only in Liberal Democrat policy, but in government policy too as a result of views driven by those outside of the party leadership. What is perhaps ironic is that whilst in previous periods the power of factions was greater, in this time the attention afforded what some key dissenting activists believed was much greater when the party was in government.



## Summary

**Table 11- Changes and Drivers of Change 2010-2015**

Arena of change	Change identified	Primary driver of change	Extent of change
The Public Face	Decisions as to which Departments to take	Leader	High
The Public Face	Ministerial Appointments 2010	Leader Factions	High
The Public Face	David Laws and Chris Huhne resignations and replacements	Outside events Leader	High
The Public Face	2012 Reshuffle	Leader Factions	Medium-Low
The Public Face	2013 Reshuffle	Leader	Medium
The Public Face	2015 Election Cabinet	Leader Factions	Medium-Low
Approach and organisation	Joining Coalition and Coalition Agreement	Leader Electoral Performance Factions	High
Approach and organisation	Attempt to 'pivot' to a new core vote	Leader Electoral Performance and entering Government	Medium
Approach and organisation	Attempting to show Coalition was stable government/shared ideological ground	Leadership	High

Approach and organisation	Move to differentiation in Coalition – particularly NHS reforms, tax allowance increase	Leadership Factions	Medium
Approach and organisation	Decision for Nick Clegg to not resign	Leadership	Medium
Approach and organisation	Decision to reject idea of a coupon election	Leadership Electoral calculation	Medium
Approach and organisation	Reshuffle – change of departments (2012)	Leadership	Medium
Approach and organisation	Staffing – introduction of SpAds and HQ restructure	Electoral performance	High
Approach and organisation	Attempted ‘coup’ to replace Nick Clegg	Electoral Performance Factions	Medium-High
Approach and organisation	General election equidistance – adding a head to Labour and a heart to the Conservatives.	Leadership Electoral landscape	Medium
Policy	The Coalition Agreement	Leadership	High
Policy	Tuition Fees u-turn	Leadership	High
Policy	Development of economic policy	Leadership Factions	Medium
Policy	Health and Social Care Act – delay and rewrite but passing	Factions	Medium-High
Policy	Development of Trident and nuclear energy policy	Leadership	Medium

Policy	Opposition to expansion at Gatwick	Faction	Low
Policy	Free School Meals	Leadership	Low-Medium
Policy	2015 Manifesto	Leadership Factions	Medium
Policy	Setting of red lines for future Coalition	Leadership	Medium

## The role of equidistance

At this point it is important to consider the role of equidistance– the Liberal Democrats’ treatment of the other two parties. This is particularly important as this approach informs many other strategic and tactical decisions taken over this period. It is an important decision that is defined not only by policy preferences, but also electoral strategy. The prospects for a third party in a first past the post system can either be to dislodge one of the larger two parties as the natural challenger to the government, or to become ‘king makers’ between two larger parties that have fallen short of an overall majority. This section considers how the party’s approach to equidistance changed from 1988-2015, and why.

Through Ashdown’s leadership election he set out a vision that the Liberal Democrats should seek to replace the Labour Party as the alternative to the Conservatives. This was a position maintained through the early parts of his leadership, though Leaman notes that a reforming Labour party under Kinnock made the policy somewhat “still-born and quickly forgotten” (Leaman, 1998:4). The stance was borne partly out of the challenges the Alliance had to face in the 1987 general election where the two leaders failed to agree a common position on how they would react in the event of a balanced parliament. The issue, as Leaman rightly notes, was the Labour party had begun to reposition itself back towards the centre by this stage. Moving towards the 1992 election the party adopted the stance of equidistance – formally set out at the 1991 Spring Conference with Ashdown declaring “they’re as bad as each other” (Leaman, 1998:4). Setting out plans to treat a balanced parliament as an opportunity for the Liberal Democrats to provide ‘strong, stable and reforming government’ the proposition that the Liberal Democrats had no more in common with their policy platform as the Conservatives’ became strained as the election approached, with a narrative emerging that Major’s government was coming to an end and attention drawn to the common areas of Liberal Democrat and Labour policy. The position of equidistance was maintained, with Ashdown and others pointing to Labour’s opposition to electoral reform in particular as a rationale for this (Leaman, 1998:4-5) The logic of these positions was sound; Ashdown’s initial calls for replacement were a lofty ambition which can be expected of a leadership campaign, whilst the adoption of equidistance would allow the party to fend off Conservative attacks that a vote for the Liberal Democrats was a vote for Labour in the 1992 election. Sharing the landscape however with a Labour party that continued to modernise after the 1992 election, especially with the eventual election of Blair as leader would mean that by 1997, a new strategy would emerge.

The Liberal Democrat membership would formally back the ending of equidistance at conference in 1995, but Ashdown and the leadership began working in this vain almost

immediately after the 1992 election. Given the formal shift, as you may expect Liberal Democrat voting against the Conservatives rapidly increased in the 1996-7 Parliament, but this move had begun earlier - moving from voting with the Conservatives 36.5% of the time<sup>14</sup> in 1992 to 18% of the time in 1993, to 10% in 1994-5, to just 3% in 1996-7. Similar the occasions when the party voted with Labour rose from 60% to 66%<sup>15</sup>. These contrasts would have been more stark but for the particular case of Europe, where the Liberal Democrats voted with the Conservatives to pass legislation (Cowley and Stuart, 2016).

The move in 1995 was immediately noted amongst the media, John Humphrys putting to Ashdown:

the impression very, very strongly - and, this is in the minds of many people - not just myself - is that you broadly support the [possibility of a] Labour Government. (BBC On The Record, 1995)

Through the following year this developed to the point that on the same programme a year later, Charles Kennedy openly set out what arrangements may be possible following the general election:

as an independent political Party, we can reach agreements, we can help - perhaps it might be a minority, perhaps it may be a majority Labour Government, I don't know the outcome of the Election, neither does anybody else - but we can be of assistance where the Constitutional reform agenda is concerned. (BBC On The Record, 1996b)

The 1997 election saw the party loosely cooperate with Labour in terms of seat targeting (Brack, 2017), and formally adopt a position of constructive opposition to the incoming Labour government.

Ashdown was happy for the party to be seen as sharing some common ground with Labour – indeed he told BBC's 'On the Record' ahead of Blair's first Queen's speech:

There are five measures in that Queen's Speech that are Liberal Democrat policies - first saw the light of day in Liberal Democrat policy documents: *The Independent* Central Bank, late payment of debt for small businesses, the incorporation of the European Convention, you see. So the influence of Liberal Democrats on this Government - and incidentally many of those measures weren't in the Labour Manifesto - is already very evident. (BBC On The Record, 1997)

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<sup>14</sup> This figure is swelled by Maastricht votes

<sup>15</sup> The figure of 60% is suppressed by Maastricht votes.

Alongside warmer rhetoric, and indeed the claim to be the genesis of large parts of the government's agenda, the stance was backed up in hard votes: in Commons votes, the party voted with Labour in 58% of divisions in 1997-1998 (Table 17), falling slightly in 1998-1999 to 51% (Table 18) as the party opposed reforms to welfare changes and the initial shared values in some of the policy agenda around issues such as the Human Rights Act waned with these measures becoming law. This stance was practical, and predominantly logical. For any criticism of the desirability of the Project – which should be seen as distinct though linked to equidistance – the approach in the 1997 election undoubtedly served the party well with more seats being returned as a result. Had an equidistant approach been adopted, it is hard to see how the Liberal Democrats would have made the gains that they did. The change of leadership to Kennedy did see a growth in hostilities between the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties, notably over Iraq but there was a marked drop in 1998-1999 in Liberal Democrat voting with the Labour Party in the House of Commons *before* Kennedy became leader (Tables 18 and 19). Whilst this doesn't contradict Sanderson Nash's claim (2011:91) that Kennedy took the party from mainly voting with Labour to against, it does challenge the idea that he fundamentally alerted the direction of travel, so much as fuelled it. This accelerated in the 1999-2000 session, with the party now voting with the Conservatives on occasion and with Labour in only 40% of votes (Cowley and Stuart, 2016). It is important too to recognise that Kennedy too was perceived as cooler to cooperation with Labour than Ashdown, in part because of the nature of the 1999 leadership election, but the tone of an interview with John Humphrys ahead of the first Joint Cabinet Committee under his leadership, where Kennedy summed up the Liberal Democrats' role in the political landscape:

the Conservatives are split down the middle over Europe, they can't even agree on a candidate for the Mayor of London, they are in a shambolic state. There is a case, and there is a cause, there is a big opportunity for a constructive coherent united Opposition Party, which can co-operate with the Government where it makes sense, but can actually give the most telling Opposition critique of the Government and an alternative view, where that makes sense as well. That is what we should be doing. (BBC On The Record, 1996a)

Whilst there was openness to working on key issues, the notion of a closer deal – or of coalition – had clearly dissipated.

The 2000-2001 session saw something of an 'artificial spike' in the Liberal Democrats parliamentary voting with Labour – the rise to 56% (Figure 15). Stuart explains this:

Forth's 'Awkward Squad' also led to a guerrilla-style war against previously uncontentious legislation. This meant that although the number of cases when the Liberal Democrats voted with Labour against the Conservatives rose markedly (from 39% in 1999-2000 to 45% in 2000-2001), on 27 occasions,

the Conservative frontbench was actually abstaining as Forth led a small group of diehards against this normally uncontentious legislation. (Cowley and Stuart, 2016)

This being excluded, the trend of the Liberal Democrats voting less often with Labour continued. By 2005, underscored by the Labour Government's decision to back the Iraq War the party adopted a strategy of replacing the Conservative party.

Campbell's tenure is complex. The party continued to vote less frequently with Labour and more frequently with the Conservatives. In contrast, however, Campbell's failure to rule out Liberal Democrats taking seats in a Labour Cabinet counterpoints this. Alongside this, the election of David Cameron as leader of the Conservatives on a modernising agenda, in which he made much of issues such as the environment and public services pulled the Conservatives closer to the Liberal Democrats than they had been under the much more right-wing leaderships of Howard, Duncan Smith and Hague. It is difficult to see why Campbell didn't rule out Cabinet posts immediately; since 1997 on a plethora of issues from Iraq, to ID cards to tuition fees the Labour agenda had moved away from the common ground that did exist between Blair and Ashdown in 1997, furthermore the government was unpopular. With no general election in Campbell's leadership period it is hard to say how the resurgent Conservative Party would have been approached in an election, and the ambiguous nature of some decisions through this period suggest that the party's approach to others was evolving.

In the 2010 election Clegg ruthlessly stuck to the line that he would negotiate with the largest party in the event of a balanced parliament – refusing to set out a preference for either of the main two. Entering Coalition ended equidistance and unsurprisingly the vast majority of votes in the 2010-5 parliament saw the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives vote together on whipped legislation. The nature of Coalition politics led to the most rebellious parliament on record:

Taken as a whole, from 2010 to 2015, Coalition MPs rebelled in 35% of divisions. That easily beats the previous record of 28%, held by the Blair/Brown government from 2005-2010. (Cowley, 2015)

The more interesting question was where the parties' votes were not the same, in 2013 Cowley and Stuart highlight ten from the first 3 years of the Coalition (Cowley and Stuart, 2013). The largest rebellion in the Liberal Democrats history on tuition fees, would be a significant example where a sizeable portion of the Liberal Democrat party did not vote with the Conservatives. Other breaks from a united government position were to come on boundary reforms – the Liberal Democrats voting against the changes after reforms to the House of Lords were blocked by Conservative back benchers. Furthermore in an unprecedented step

Nick Clegg and David Cameron made separate responses to the Leveson Report in the House of Commons. There were further splits over the approach to Europe, most significantly with the Conservatives attempting to bring in legislation to hold a referendum using a Private Members' Bill. By 2015 and the presentation of an alternative fiscal framework by Danny Alexander in the House of Commons chamber the party had moved back to a position of equidistance ahead of the election campaign, which was at pains to offer no hint of favour towards either of the two largest parties – indeed the campaign was notable for highlighting what each of the other parties didn't offer that the Liberal Democrats would in Coalition. This was largely in line with the strategy initially set out by Richard Reeves – that the party should begin the Parliament showing a strong degree of unity and differentiate as it went on, returning to equidistance. Setting aside whether this was the correct approach, it goes a long way to explaining the broad direction of travel. The sharpest departure would coincide with Ryan Coetzee's incoming as Director of Strategy where he noted the need for a stronger Liberal Democrat identity and differentiation sooner:

Just after I arrived in the Deputy Prime Minister's office in October 2012, David Cameron called a meeting of all Special Advisors at which he exhorted us not to allow the government to become "transactional". At a breakaway meeting of Liberal Democrat Special Advisors immediately afterwards I forcefully made the point that "transactional" was exactly how the government needed to be perceived... suggested to Nick that the voters needed to be exposed to the negotiations that went on behind closed doors, lest they concluded, understandably, that all the government's outcomes were all Conservative ones. (Coetzee, 2015)

From 2010 to 2015 then, Clegg's approach had moved from a 'long march' to make inroads and replace the Labour Party as the dominant anti-Conservative party to being one of 'kingmaker' – yet for differing reasons equidistance was pursued in each campaign.

Following the 2015 election result Coetzee reflected on the role of equidistance and what it meant for the Liberal Democrats:

My tentative conclusion, then, which is offered as a spur to debate in the hope I can be convinced otherwise, is that it is probably not possible to succeed electorally in coalition government under a First Past the Post system while remaining equidistant from the two big parties. If we can't win the fight for a proportional representation system, it may be that we have either to stay in opposition or pick a side. (Coetzee, 2015)

On this point, importantly, there was a significant shift from the strategy Rennard says he had pursued – albeit without formal approval from the Federal Board or leaders:

my strategy was what I called incremental targeting: targeting more and more seats in each election, which Nick Clegg was very, very impatient about and



dismissive of. He thought we could appeal to be the government of the country and become the government of the country or similarly big. The problem is and the electoral system is that even if you get a third of the vote, you're still only get a tiny fraction of the seats ... on the strategy, incremental targeting...once you've actually got the position where you are the centre, and you've got enough seats, so you could do a deal with either or the other parties, then PR is the bottom line.(Rennard, 2017)

In short, the adoption of equidistance as a policy has been a feature that is more dominant in periods where the electoral outcome is less clear – 1992, 2010 and 2015. In the cases of 1997, 2001 and 2005 the party adopted a more ‘anti-Conservative’ stance, though it is important to recognise that in 2005 the approach was more even handed as the Liberal Democrats sought to replace the Conservatives as the real alternative to the Labour government. Within each of these periods there was fluctuations in how equidistant the party was: this was demonstrated in the 1992-7 period with a move from formal equidistance to something of progressive commonality; from 1997-2010 this eroded gradually from a period of constructive opposition, to seeking to replace the Conservatives to a return to equidistance, in 2015 equidistance was restored, but the 2010-5 period was defined by the party working with the Conservatives in government – which is about as far from equidistance as possible. Importantly though, the approach the party adopted coincides more with the performance and policies of other parties than the leadership of the Liberal Democrats. Aside from Kennedy’s cooling of relations with Labour in 1999-2001 there is less correlation between the party’s formal strategy in respect to equidistance and the leadership, though the likelihood of Kennedy or Campbell leading the Liberal Democrats into a Conservative-led Coalition is debateable, which should serve as a reminder of the importance of the leader in how the formal stance of the party is implemented in practice.

## **Extent and drivers of change in the Liberal Democrats 1988-2015**

The driver of change over the history of the Liberal Democrats has predominantly been the party leader. The complexities in what caused a leader to hold certain preferences cannot be understated – pressure from differing factions, the electoral reality the party faced – all form an important backdrop to these preferences and at times offer more explanatory power than the wishes of the leader, but nonetheless key developments between 1988 and 2015 can mostly be explained by considering the leader’s views and actions.

Between 1988 and 1992, the opening chapter of Ashdown’s leadership, it is clear the overwhelming number of significant changes in this period were driven by the leader. Whilst changes and advances in policy were significant, their number should not overstate the

importance of Ashdown's ability in responding to external events that presented themselves. Similarly, changes to approach were the most important. The manner – and success – in squeezing continuity-SDP support was vital in ensuring the party's existence and also allowed for significant by-election wins which made the party credible going into the 1992 election. Against the reality that at one stage there was a real risk of the party becoming the '5<sup>th</sup> UK party', behind the continuity-SDP and the Greens, this cannot be ignored. In comparison, changes to the public face of the party were more limited – the biggest being the initial merger. In policy terms there were clear, important developments which would continue in the following years. The 1992-1997 Parliament, a period in which there was a lower level of change to the public face of the party. The most significant changes in this regard were from defections to the party and the overall growth in the size of the parliamentary party. Reshuffles were not as significant in this period and did not improve the party's gender balance or BAME representation significantly. There was a higher level of change in approach and organisation through this time, however, with important decisions taken on equidistance which influenced the successes in target seats at the 1997 election and the approach to relations with Labour. These were all significant and whilst some were driven by the electoral landscape and performance, most were down to the party leadership. Party policy developed in a similar manner to the period before it with change being limited, though conference showed itself more willing to vote through controversial measures against the wishes of the leadership. The key policy decisions and developments in this time were linked to abandoning equidistance. Policy developments were driven strongly by the leader, though this became less the case in the latter stages of Ashdown's leadership and the introduction in 1999 of a triple lock was a huge change driven by others to limit the power of the leader. The key driver of change through this period, however, was the party leader with electoral performances also providing explanatory power to some key developments. The role of factions was generally more limited, though grew in the latter stages of Ashdown's tenure.

The extent of party change through Kennedy's leadership is more limited than at other times. His own leadership became impactful in changing the public face of the party, but the decisions he took in terms of reshuffles did not really drive huge change, with the exception of the 2003 reshuffle which saw wider changes made to the lead figures in the party. The manner of his resignation in 2006 was also a huge driver of change in perceptions of this. In terms of approach, the Iraq war was the defining decision of Kennedy's leadership and effectively led to the 2005 strategy of replacing the Conservatives as the Real Alternative to Labour. This alongside a string of by-election wins maintained a medium to high level of change in approach from what the party had pursued under the latter parts of Ashdown's leadership. The start of a more factional approach from some in the party which followed the

publication of *The Orange Book* is also something that has to be recognised as an important element to this period. The development of policy in this time is less wide ranging, with much policy having been in place by the 2001 election and what policy was developed was driven predominantly by spokespeople and factions rather than the leader. There was, however, a greater emphasis on retail offers – often with sizeable price tags than before. Where Kennedy did drive change in this area, it was in relation to areas that particularly interested him and on the key issues of the day, but in this regard the key policies whilst driven by the leadership were more in reaction to outside events than proactively devised.

Campbell's brief time as leader limits the extent of change that he could drive or oversee. In terms of the public face, aside from his own elevation to leadership the other key changes were promoting Huhne and Clegg to the key frontbench roles. He was successful in stabilising the party and avoiding widespread infighting or even potential splits and by some accounts did succeed in professionalising the operation somewhat, though this is hard to measure over the limited period. What is generally accepted is that the party was ready for a general election in 2007 had one been called, which is an impressive position to be in within two years of assuming leadership. The development of the policy agenda too is more extensive than the brevity of time would imply. Policies to introduce private money into the Royal Mail, abolish plans for a 50p tax measure and continuation of multilateralism were in the former cases significant changes and in the latter the aversion of one – each in line with Campbell's preferences. The role of factions played a role in some decisions in this period and in the latter stages of his leadership the media focus on potential successors increased the importance of this driver of change.

The start of Nick Clegg's leadership of the party is defined by sizeable change ahead of the 2010 election. The public face of the party did not significantly change through this period – his appointments to top office not being revolutionary in this regard, though the elevation of more economic liberals into key roles reflected the policy developments of this time. His decision to set up the Bones Commission and try and overhaul the party's mechanics alongside the restoration of equidistance into the 2010 election were hugely significant, however. The setting up of the Social Liberal Forum in reaction to the policy agenda he pursued is also a significant change seen in the party in this time. The highest development, however, is policy with really significant changes to taxation measures, approach to public services and deficit reduction plans that it is hard to imagine Kennedy arguing for in similar circumstances. Throughout this period most change was driven by the leadership and significant failures to do so – in relation to tuition fees – were as a direct result of his agenda too. The bulk of the party backed his decisions, but it is easier to explain developments in relation to the leader's

preferences in this period than in others as the changes driven by factions were predominantly in relation to Clegg's wishes. This is partly because of proximity to the election but in looking at the changes undertaken in 2008-autumn 2009 when the pre-manifesto was agreed it is remarkable the pace at which this agenda was defined and agreed by the party conference. Entering government changed everything for the Liberal Democrats. The impact on the public face of the party was high in this period. The appointment of Liberal Democrat Cabinet Ministers meant that for the first time more than just the party leader, and maybe Vince Cable, were to some degree recognised by at least some of the public. The resignations of David Laws and Chris Huhne, again, had a large impact on the party whilst the reshuffles Clegg carried out were less important in regard to public perception. The decision to join the Coalition, the agreement itself, the ministries chosen, and other key choices lay in the hands of Clegg and his team and they approved the strategy to start in government showing Coalition's worked before differentiating. The leadership drove all these key decisions. The electoral performance was more significant in this period than any other in that it allowed the party to enter government, but also limited the options on the table – a rainbow Coalition being hard to seriously advocate. It also had an impact of funding and staffing levels which would limit the choices and ability of the party particularly in the earlier stages of government. In policy terms, most changes were – again – leadership driven, with controversial policies being passed with relative ease at party conferences willing to support Clegg's leadership in government. There were limited examples of change in this regard being driven by factions – the NHS reforms being the most important in that it changed government policy. Whilst for the most part the actual positions taken are best explained by the leadership's preferences, factions played an important role throughout this period too. Dissenting views and voices were listened to – or won out- and policies changed as a result. In some cases, faction's drove entire changes in policy or explain key events, for example the attempted coup of Nick Clegg. In short, the party changed the most in this period, with much change being driven by the leader.

**Table 12- Extent and drivers of change in the Liberal Democrats 1988-2015, and the role of equidistance**

<b>Period</b>	<b>Public Face</b>	<b>Approach and Organisation</b>	<b>Policy</b>	<b>Overall</b>	<b>Main Driver</b>	<b>Equidistance</b>
<b>1988-1992 (Ashdown)</b>	Medium-High	Medium-High	Medium-High	Medium-High	Leader	Equidistant
<b>1992-1999 (Ashdown)</b>	Low-Medium	Medium-High	Low-Medium (though Medium-High in 1997-9)	Medium	Leader, though increased importance of electoral performance and factions post-1997	Abolished equidistance in this period – positioned as anti-Conservative party
<b>1999-2006 (Kennedy)</b>	Low-Medium	Medium-High	Low-Medium	Medium	Leader, though factions grew in significance, and more change explained by other actors	Still anti-Conservative; ‘the real alternative’ to Labour
<b>2006-2007 (Campbell)</b>	Low-Medium	Medium	Low	Low-Medium	Leader, though factions also significant	Start of a return to equidistance
<b>2007-2010 (Clegg)</b>	Low-Medium	Medium-High	Medium-High	Medium-High	Leader	Equidistance restored
<b>2010-2015 (Clegg)</b>	High	Medium-High	Medium-High	High	Leader  Electoral Performance	In Coalition with Conservatives; Equidistant in 2015 GE Campaign
<b>Overall</b>	Medium	Medium-High	Medium	Medium-High	Leader	

## Chapter Two Appendices

### Appendix 1- Liberal Democrat voting patterns

**Table 13 a & b - Liberal Democrat Whipped Votes 1992-1993 (Cowley and Stuart, 2016)**

	<i>With Labour</i>		<i>Against Labour</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>With Cons</i>	10	3	106	33	116	36.5
<i>Against Cons</i>	179	56	23	7	202	63.5
<i>Total</i>	189	59.5	129	40.5	318	100

*Note:* Excludes free votes and votes where the Lib Dem line was to abstain.

### Liberal Democrat Whipped Votes on Maastricht, 1992-1993

	<i>With Labour</i>		<i>Against Labour</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>With Cons</i>	5	7	62	84	67	90.5
<i>Against Cons</i>	3	4	4	5	7	9.5
<i>Total</i>	8	11	66	89	74	100

**Table 14 - Liberal Democrat Whipped Votes 1993-4 (Cowley and Stuart, 2016)**

	<i>With Labour</i>		<i>Against Labour</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>With Cons</i>	1	trace	48	17.5	49	18
<i>Against Cons</i>	215	78.5	10	4.5	225	82
<i>Total</i>	216	79	58	21	274	100

*Note:* Excludes free votes and votes where the Lib Dem line was to abstain.

**Table 15 - Liberal Democrat Whipped Votes 1994-5 (Cowley and Stuart, 2016)**

	<i>With Labour</i>		<i>Against Labour</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>With Cons</i>	0	0	18	10	18	10
<i>Against Cons</i>	156	83	14	7	170	90
<i>Total</i>	156	83	32	17	188	100

*Note:* Excludes free votes and votes where the Lib Dem line was to abstain.

**Table 16 - Liberal Democrat Whipped Votes 1995-6 (Cowley and Stuart, 2016)**

	<i>With Labour</i>		<i>Against Labour</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>With Cons</i>	3	2	12	7	15	9
<i>Against Cons</i>	133	80	18	11	151	91
<i>Total</i>	136	82	30	18	166	100

*Note:* Excludes free votes and votes where the Lib Dem line was to abstain.

**Table 17 - Liberal Democrat Whipped Votes 1996-7 (Cowley and Stuart, 2016)**

	<i>With Labour</i>		<i>Against Labour</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>With Cons</i>	0	0	3	3	3	3
<i>Against Cons</i>	58	66	27	31	85	97
<i>Total</i>	58	66	30	34	88	100

*Note:* Excludes free votes and votes where the Lib Dem line was to abstain.

**Table 18 - Liberal Democrat Whipped Votes 1997-8 (Cowley and Stuart, 2016)**

	<i>With Labour</i>		<i>Against Labour</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>With Cons</i>	8	2	82	24	90	27
<i>Against Cons</i>	184	56	56	16	240	73
<i>Total</i>	192	58	138	42	330	100

*Note:* Excludes free votes and votes where the Lib Dem line was to abstain.

**Table 19 - Liberal Democrat Whipped Votes 1998-9 (Cowley and Stuart, 2016)**

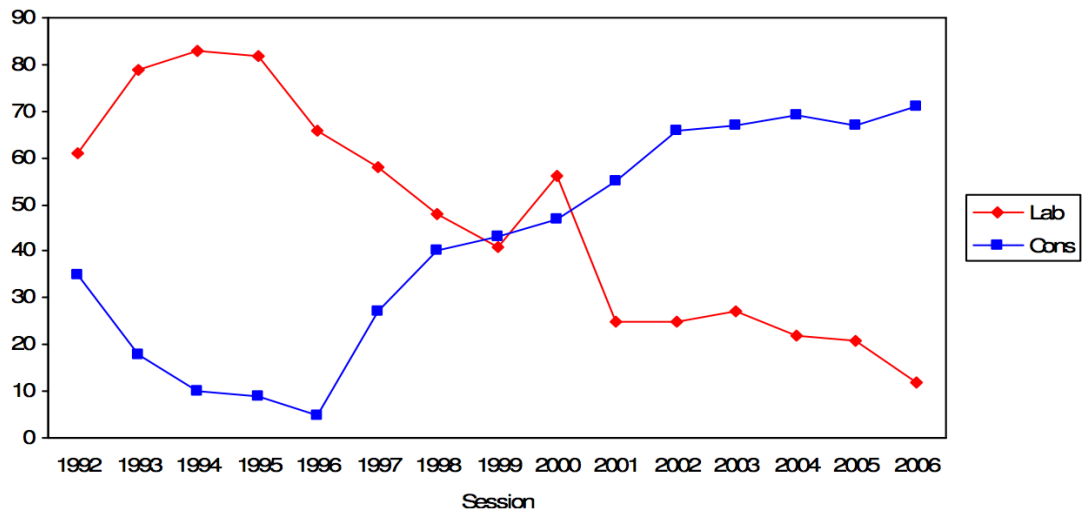
	<i>With Labour</i>		<i>Against Labour</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>With Cons</i>	0	0	89	37	89	37
<i>Against Cons</i>	122	51	30	12	152	63
<i>Total</i>	122	51	119	49	241	100

**Table 20 - Liberal Democrat Whipped Votes 1999-2000 (Cowley and Stuart, 2016)**

	<i>With Labour</i>		<i>Against Labour</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>With Cons</i>	4	1	137	43	141	44
<i>Against Cons</i>	123	39	54	17	177	56
<i>Total</i>	127	40	191	60	318	100

*Note:* Excludes free votes and votes where the Lib Dem line was to abstain.

**Figure 15- Liberal Democrat voting in the House of Commons 1992-2007 (voting ‘with’ X’) (Cowley and Stuart, 2007)**





## Appendix 2 - Liberal Democrat Frontbench Teams 1988-2015

	<b>1988</b>	<b>1992 reshuffle</b>	<b>1994 reshuffle</b>	<b>1997 post election</b>	<b>1999 Post Leadership Election</b>	<b>2001 post election</b>	<b>2002 reshuffle</b>
<b>Leader</b>	Paddy Ashdown	Paddy Ashdown	Paddy Ashdown	Paddy Ashdown	Charles Kennedy	Charles Kennedy	Charles Kennedy
<b>President</b>	Ian Wigglesworth (until Dec 1990) Charles Kennedy (From Jan 1991)	Charles Kennedy	Charles Kennedy (Until Dec 1994)	Robert Maclellan (from Jan 1995 until Dec 1998)	Dianna Maddock (From Jan 1999 until Dec 2000)	Navnit Dholakia (from Jan 2000)	Navnit Dholakia
<b>Treasury/Shadow Chancellor</b>	Alan Beith	Alan Beith	Malcolm Bruce	Malcolm Bruce	Matthew Taylor	Matthew Taylor	Matthew Taylor
<b>Foreign Affairs</b>	Russell Johnston (David Steel)	David Steel	Ming Campbell	Ming Campbell	Ming Campbell	Ming Campbell	Ming Campbell
<b>Home Affairs</b>	Robert Maclellan	Robert Maclellan	Alan Beith	Alan Beith	Simon Hughes	Simon Hughes	Simon Hughes

	<b>2003 reshuffle</b>	<b>2005 post election</b>	<b>2006 Post Leadership Election</b>	<b>2008 Post Leadership Election</b>	<b>2010 post-election (in Coalition Government)</b>	<b>2012 reshuffle (in Coalition Government)</b>	<b>2015 Election Cabinet</b>
<b>Leader</b>	Charles Kennedy	Charles Kennedy	Ming Campbell	Nick Clegg	Nick Clegg	Nick Clegg	Nick Clegg
<b>President</b>	Navnit Dholakia (Until Dec 2004)	Simon Hughes (From Jan 2005)	Simon Hughes	Simon Hughes (Until Dec 2008)	Ros Scott (From Jan 2009 until Dec 2010)	Tim Farron (From Jan 2011 until Dec 2014) Sal Brinton (From Jan 2015)	Sal Brinton
<b>Treasury/Shadow Chancellor</b>	Vince Cable	Vince Cable	Vince Cable	Vince Cable	Danny Alexander	Danny Alexander	Danny Alexander
<b>Foreign Affairs</b>	Ming Campbell	Ming Campbell	Michael Moore	Ed Davey	Jeremy Browne	None in government	Tim Farron
<b>Home Affairs</b>	Mark Oaten	Mark Oaten	Nick Clegg	Chris Huhne	Lynne Featherstone (as PUSS)	Jeremy Browne (2012-2013) Norman Baker (2013-14) Lynne Featherstone (2014- 2015)	Lynne Featherstone

	2003 reshuffle	2005 post election	2006 Post Leadership Election	2008 Post Leadership Election	2010 post-election (in Coalition Government)	2012 reshuffle (in Coalition Government)	2015 Election Cabinet
<b>Other notable posts</b>					Chris Huhne (SoS, DECC) Vince Cable (SOS BIS), Michael Moore (SOS Scotland)	Ed Davey (SoS, DECC) Vince Cable (BIS), Michael Moore (Scotland) David Laws (Minister, Education and Cabinet Office) Norman Lamb (Health)	Vince Cable (BIS) Norman Lamb (Health) Ed Davey (DECC) David Laws (Education)

## CHAPTER THREE: LEADERS AND ELECTIONS

The final substantive chapter of this thesis considers the role of Liberal Democrat leaders in general election campaigns, specifically whether there has been a greater personalisation of the campaigns under different leaders, and whether this corresponded to wider trends in British politics.

As noted by Langer, “although there have been plenty of studies about the coverage of campaigns, only a few have systematically explored the role played by leaders” (Langer, 2007:371). Notable exceptions to this include Mughan (2000) and Crewe and King (1994). Langer also notes that broader literature, outside of campaigns is also lacking. This is something that has begun to develop – aside from Langer’s (2007), there are other works seeking to develop the literature around the personalisation of political leadership (Boumans et al., 2013; Van Aelst et al., 2011; Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014). In terms of why attention on the personalisation of politics matters, there are several arguments advanced by these authors. Firstly, there is generally recognition that campaigns and parties’ communications have become more leader focussed (Van Aelst et al., 2011; Adam and Maier, 2010):

Political personalities nowadays appear to be at the centre of party images, including in terms of communication practices affecting news coverage (Boumans et al., 2013)

That conclusion is drawn on the back of a growing body of empirical studies (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007; Langer, 2007; Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014) which variously look at personalisation in respect to election campaigns (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014), Prime Ministerships (Langer, 2007), international politics and diplomacy (Balmas and Sheaffer, 2014). Mughan argues

The cumulation of evidence confirms that the that recent general elections have indeed presidentialized in terms of both presentation and impact (Mughan, 2000:129)

There are exceptions, notably Karvonen (2010) who concludes the evidence is more mixed, and Kriesi concludes little evidence of an increase in personalisation, though even he notes the British system “does focus its attention more than other parliamentary systems on the top two candidates in national elections” (2012). However, in general whilst there are important differences, and conclusions vary there is a general consensus that personalisation has increased. The impact of this personalisation too has been considered – Langer argues there are questions around accountability, the decreasing role of parties as aggregators of opinion

and a disproportionate importance of voters' 'fickleness' as individual leader's popularities wax and wane (Langer, 2007:372). Mughan too had previously raised the prospect that such a shift in focus had led to a reduced focus in campaigns on the substance of policy in favour of personalised attributes (Mughan, 2000:142). The idea that the role of leaders in British elections has increased is one advanced by Foley, whose work on the rise of the British 'presidency' and in particular Tony Blair's performance argues that leaders are crucial in explaining electoral performance (Foley, 2000), though he had also pointed to Thatcher in earlier works as an example of the phenomenon (Foley, 1993). Foley though, points to earlier works and authors who too had emphasised the importance of Prime Ministers in explaining their governments,

Crossman sought to press the point home in his celebrated introduction to the 1963 edition of Walter Bagehot's *The English Constitution*...the change towards 'prime ministerial government' had been so dramatic that Crossman felt there was no alternative but to resort to presidential allusions, in order to convey the magnitude of power that was now lodged in the prime minister's position."(Foley, 1993:9)

In short, this chapter will establish:

- To what extent have the general elections campaigns, and the subsequent coverage, of the Liberal Democrats been personalised?
- Has this increased or decreased over time?
- Why this development – where there is one – has occurred?

### **Framework for assessing the personalisation and role of leaders**

In establishing a suitable framework for this analysis, it is important to consider how to approach a number of distinctions that have become more established within the relevant literature. Firstly, analysis to make a proper distinction between personalisation of campaigns in relation to a leader's qualities – for example their competencies and policy preferences – and the attention given to the personal aspects of a leader – their private lives and characteristics. This is a recurring element in the relevant literature (Van Aelst et al., 2011; Langer, 2009; Langer, 2007). In his essay on Clinton, Hitchens emphasises the role of personalisation, as well as defining the separation between personal matters that have an impact on public life, and the private:

The task of reviewing the Clinton regime, then, involves the retracing of a frontier between "private" and "public"....It also involves the humbler task of tracing and nailing a series of public lies about secret – not private- matters (Hitchens, 1999:4-5)

Secondly, it is important to define the locus of study. As set out by Van Aelst et al, there are broadly four areas in which to judge the extent of personalisation: the electoral choices of voters, the behaviour of politicians themselves, the parties' use of leaders in communication and the media's representation of politics as a confrontation more of individuals than collectives (2011:204), a view shared by others too (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014), though Langer's conception rightly identifies the 'presidentialisation' of power as another aspect that could be considered (Langer, 2007). Within this is also the consideration of what is emphasised as well as what is covered – a specific example may be a hypothetical move towards coverage of candidates more than parties, but it is also what aspects of candidates are covered – a hypothetical move from coverage of leaders' political preferences to their personal characteristics or personal lives would not reflect a change in subject, but is undoubtedly a significant form of personalisation. This distinction has sometimes being described as 'privatisation', in contrast to 'individualisation' which is the move in focus towards individuals. Some authors use other terms – Langer refers to the 'politicisation of the private persona', but in essence they are similar things. Finally, it is important to define the period being analysed. Whilst in much of her work Langer has avoided election periods and the time after party leaders were elected in her study of British Prime Ministers (Langer, 2007) as they are atypical, a comparative study of the UK and Germany (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014) focussed specifically on an election campaign from each country. In doing so each acknowledged that there are periods of time where media coverage, which is the primary focus of the studies, may differ. Boumans et al. (2013) point to their decision to analyse both campaigns and general political coverage as a strength of their research – it is. This chapter, however, focuses specifically on general election campaigns.

For the purposes of this work, consideration will primarily follow a similar approach to Holtz-Bacha et al. (2014) and Langer (2007) in analysing the media coverage of Liberal Democrat leaders. Where it will differ is consideration will also be given to the leader/party's attempts to communicate. This is because whilst media coverage is clearly an important measure, for the purposes of this work the intention and aims of the leader are also important – indeed Langer notes that “the media and politicians are co-producers in the phenomenon” (Langer, 2009:61) For example, Nick Clegg was subjected to intense personal scrutiny and attack in the 2010 election campaign from some parts of the media (Parry and Richardson, 2011) but this was not the communication plan of him or the Liberal Democrats (Drake and Higgins, 2012:379). In some cases, the coverage of a campaign will reflect the intention of the party, but in others it will not, which needs to be acknowledged – though obviously a campaign covered in a way completely averse to the intention of the party could reflect a failure of that campaign in some regards. The 2010 election is also a campaign that has some literature

specifically focussed on Clegg's campaign, of which some is centred on the personalisation of the campaign (Parry and Richardson, 2011; Drake and Higgins, 2012).

This work will specifically focus on the short campaigns ahead of each general election from 1988 to 2015. This allows consideration of the period most influential to the electoral outcomes achieved in this period and also reflects the fact that party has historically risen in the polls in these periods, which some argue is because of increased coverage. This approach means the period analysed is almost certain to have a higher level of coverage than non-election periods but also arguably is coverage that has more relevance to the final outcome than other periods, which is reflected in the Liberal Democrats increase in vote share through most general election campaigns, where greater coverage is received. It is also logical that the impact of coverage secured closer to election day has to only remain relevant for a shorter period of time to form part of voters' considerations than coverage secured some time before polling day. The weakness in terms of drawing broader conclusions is that these periods are by definition atypical in that there is an imminent election. Furthermore, Ming Campbell was not leader at a general election, and is thus excluded from direct comparison. The methodology adopted for this work is an adaptation of that deployed by Langer (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014; Langer, 2007) by studying a sample of articles drawn from the three weeks preceding each general election. The analysis will focus on articles retrieved through LexisNexis from *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Independent* and their Sunday sister publications (*The Sunday Times*, *The Observer*, *Independent on Sunday*). The search terms used draws on those utilised in other work (Langer and Sagarzazu, 2017), by searching the party name ('Liberal Democrats' and 'Lib Dems') and the name of the leader ('First Name', 'Surname'). From the articles retrieved, a manual check was carried out to remove duplications, incorrect retrievals, and irrelevant articles. Articles that simply include a mention of the party in relation to headline poll ratings – a daily tracker poll for example – were removed, though mentions of the party in relation to polling within a broader piece were counted. Constituency profile pieces were also excluded, unless clear reference was made to the wider campaign – the mention of a candidate standing does not warrant inclusion. A sample of one article in every four from each publication was then taken for analysis and coding. These articles were coded to assess the extent to which the personalisation of Liberal Democrat leaders increased, or decreased, and which forms of personalisation were present. Results are presented in terms of ratio between leader and party mentions, as well as in raw numbers, to avoid issues around which articles have been archived digitally, a possible issue identified in respect to pre-1999 articles from *The Times* by Boumans et al(2013). This approach was adopted by others (Langer and Sagarzazu, 2017; Mughan, 2000). Establishing the degree of concentrated visibility of the leader – the ratio of references of the leader to references to the party - allowed for some

conclusions as to the extent of individualisation over the time period. Articles were coded to assess the extent of the privatisation of the coverage of leaders. This utilised the coding framework set out by Van Aeslt et al. (2012) with the addition of coding for personal qualities, in line with Langer's approach. This is because the frame proposed by Aeslt et al. (2012) does not properly account for this aspect. Langer notes, importantly, that:

The distinction between personal and leadership or political qualities is not clear-cut...these categories are better thought of not as discrete or in binary opposition, but as situated on a scale (Langer, 2011:9)

The decision to focus on newspaper coverage is a limitation, but allows for fair comparison across the period, and qualitative examples of personalisation from television and other sources will be used to illustrate examples. It should also be noted, that whilst television “forms a perfect marriage with personalisation” (Boumans et al., 2013:214), notable examples will often be covered in newspapers too – so whilst the methodology presented here is not exhaustive, the limitations should not be exaggerated. Finally, the distinction between the extent and types of personalisation - that is individualisation and privatisation - will follow a similar approach to Langer ((2007) (2011), though more in keeping with the subsequent work of Van Aelst et al. (2011) who have attempted to establish a coding frame based on those deployed in existing literature (see Appendix 1). Specifically, the coding frame for this work focuses on measuring the concentrated visibility of leaders- the primary category, the coverage of leaders vs parties. This coverage is coded for the presence of the characteristics of politicians; and the personal life of politicians as set out in Van Aelst et al. (2011). It excludes consideration of what they term ‘general visibility’ of individuals, as the focus here is specifically leaders. Further it considers the personal qualities of leaders, as set out by Langer, which was not incorporated into Van Aelst et al. (2011). This is because there is an importance to this aspect of coverage that should be considered distinctly to characteristics directly related to leadership characteristics. The distinction between personal qualities and the characteristics of leaders is that the former relates to the human qualities of a leader – for example being ‘likeable’ or ‘funny’- whilst the latter relates to an exercise of action in office – for example being ‘competent’ or possessing ‘rhetorical skill’. Or to put it another way, the former relates to who a leader is as a person, the latter as who they are as an officeholder. The frame used can be seen in Appendix 1.



## Paddy Ashdown

### An overview of the 1992 Campaign

In some respects Michael Heseltine's jibe that Ashdown was "a leader without a party" (Castle et al., 1992) is the best indicator of the nature of the Liberal Democrats 1992 Election campaign, which focussed heavily on Ashdown's leadership, something which was amplified by the prospects of a balanced parliament and the enhanced focus this gave to both him and his choices in such circumstances. The early parts of 1992 saw the party struggle to cut through in media coverage – the two main parties dominating press interest, the exception being the revelation of Ashdown's affair in February (Butler and Kavanagh, 1992:72), which was clearly not a focus that he or the campaign would have desired. What did emerge from the saga, however, was an upturn in his popularity and also perceived competencies as leader (Ashdown, 2000:143);(Butler and Kavanagh, 1992:72), which accompanied polls putting the party on around 15% as it entered the General Election campaign. The campaign was noted by some for the increase in the role of leaders in all parties, Foley stating:

The 1992 general election as dominated by leaders and pervaded by the issue of leadership. The conduct of the campaigns, the selection of themes, the organisation of events and travel schedules, and the media coverage of the election were all geared to the presentation and promotion of leaders. The Labour party had been expected to use Neil Kinnock as the centrepiece of a presidential campaign, but in the event the strategy was surpassed by the Conservatives' deployment of John Major. Together with Paddy Ashdown, all three leaders ensured their individual campaigns would collectively intensify the trend towards a leadership-centred general election. (Foley, 2002:46-47)

The Liberal Democrats' campaign formally began on 13<sup>th</sup> March 1992, with press conferences led by Ashdown in London, Edinburgh and Cardiff (Ashdown, 2000:149) marking the start of a month of intense campaigning from the leader. *The Guardian* concluded on the eve of poll that "Ashdown himself has indefatigably carried so much of the fight on his own shoulders" (Guardian Leader, 1992). Peter Riddell contrastingly had warned that "the party is thin on talent at the top", and that "the Paddy personality cult could backfire" (Riddell, 1992). Prior to the campaign launch Ashdown had spent considerable time working on the manifesto, culminating in agreeing that the party should propose a 1p increase to income tax to fund education – a signature policy of the election campaign (Ashdown, 2000:148). Ashdown's chairing of the Federal Policy Committee and push for this policy, as well as a more pro-market liberal approach (Jones, 2011:152), were crucial in explaining the document and thus the policy cornerstones of the campaign. This is a view contemporaneously advanced by *The Guardian*:

We do not hear enough about Paddy Ashdown's role in recreating his party from the utter, dispirited shambles of 1987. The first two years of leadership were unremitting gloom, riven by splits and bitterness. They would have engulfed many ordinary politicians. The span in perception from there to here is a testament to Mr Ashdown's personal determination. But, beyond that, there are also the big choices of policy and direction. Here again, he has got it right.

Today's Liberal Democrats are not the Liberals of old. They now possess - the only boon from the severed Alliance - a structure of serious decision-making. They are a proper party. And this, for 1992, has produced a proper manifesto. (Guardian Leader, 1992)

The party's coverage in the campaign grew increasingly prominent (Ashdown, 2000:153) with persistent questioning on what he would do in a balanced parliament – speculation on his demands being the front page of *The Times* on the 4<sup>th</sup> April and becoming a recurring centrepiece to broadcast interviews. Ashdown resolutely said the party would respect the orders of the country but made clear that proportional representation was a red line issue, and that he would only consider working with a party willing to promise it (Butler and Kavanagh, 1992:70). The reality was in policy terms the Liberal Democrats were closer to Labour in a number of key areas including Scottish devolution, investment in education and Kinnock suggested he would support a review into electoral reform, but the ongoing focus on Ashdown's preferences is a clear example of individualisation. Ashdown, in hindsight, believes the “overly swaggering” manner in these demands in the final week of the campaign misread the public's fear of Kinnock and instability (Walter, 2003:193),

The party's national campaign was calibrated to make prominent use of Ashdown, where he featured heavily in Party Election Broadcasts, carried out a national tour of target constituencies providing daily images for broadcast media, and staged a number of political rallies and daily press conferences with Ashdown along with a rotation of key spokespeople. The decision was to focus the campaign on Ashdown, as described by Richard Holme:

The decision to focus our campaign in a quasi-Presidential way on Paddy Ashdown...party leaders get 75 per cent or so of television coverage...the strategy was amply justified (Holme, 1995:11)

All of this sought to push focus and attention onto the party leader – he appeared in all of the PEBs and 16 of the 21 morning press conferences (Butler and Kavanagh, 1992:109). The last PEB focussed on a summary of the campaign, with Ashdown warning of the risks on a minority government – clearly accentuating his own possible role in government. Whilst this focus was secured, it was not to say that he was taken as seriously as his Labour or Conservative counterparts, with one journalist commenting:

I can't treat Paddy like I treat Kinnock or Major, as someone who might be Prime Minister with a working majority. I can't with a straight face, press home serious "what would you do?" questions (Butler and Kavanagh, 1992:108)

The result and his campaign was seen as a "personal success" for Ashdown (Brack, 2015:380), and marked the end of the period of 'survival' since the merger. Some argue the result was a "disappointment" and that it "ended the Liberal Democrats' claim to have replaced Labour as the main challenger in Conservative seats." (Crewe et al., 1992:16). On the basis of the progress the party would make in 1997, this contemporary view seems harsh and arguably undervalues the progress made from the party's position following merger.

### **An overview of the 1997 Campaign**

By 1997 the Liberal Democrats had abandoned the policy of equidistance, overhauled the prioritisation of campaign funds to more heavily target individual seats (Rennard, 2017), and had had a strong performance in several by-elections, alongside gaining MPs through defections (see Chapter 2). As noted by Butler and Kavanagh, though, the advent of New Labour was to influence the Liberal Democrats approach to the 1997 election, with the party seizing the opportunity presented by Gordon Brown matching the Conservatives' spending commitments to offer a distinctive position on economic approach – offering a dividing line with Blair's Labour party (Butler and Kavanagh, 1997:69-70). The party, again, struggled to cut through in media terms with coverage dominated by the larger two parties. In contrast to the 1992 election, the question of balanced parliaments was off the table, with widespread expectation of a Labour victory. This shaped the coverage and attention the party received, as well as the campaign itself. Ashdown was noted for being "naturally" the forefront of the campaign having "built up an image as a lively, energetic campaigner" (Butler and Kavanagh, 1997:70).

The campaign was noted for being longer than most recent elections, and the Liberal Democrats entered it polling around 12% - a significant drop from the 1992 result where the party secured 18% of the popular vote, while head-to-head television debates were once again set aside through lack of agreement, Butler and Kavanagh note that "campaign reporting focussed to an overwhelming degree on the utterances and the carefully orchestrated activities of the three main party leaders" (Butler and Kavanagh, 1997:90). Launching the party's manifesto on 4<sup>th</sup> April, Ashdown focussed on the 'CHEESE' issues that had been identified as key to the party's potential support – Crime, Health, Education, Economy, Sleaze and Environment. Subsequent visits through the campaign would see Ashdown regularly in schools pushing the 1p on income tax for education policy, and on hospital wards. The party's

campaign pushed Ashdown as the key messenger as in 1992– one party political broadcast focusing entirely on Ashdown’s personal qualities and characteristics as a leader; indeed, he was the only politician to appear in the Liberal Democrats’ Election Broadcasts. For the duration of the campaign a consistent framing of the Labour and Conservative parties as being ‘Punch and Judy’ of an old politics was deployed through billboard campaigns, ground literature and television broadcasts. The focus on these issues seems to have borne results, with a BBC/NOP poll finding the Liberal Democrats gain trust on making the right decisions on Income Tax and education compared to 1992(Campbell, 2006g).

The party struggled to command media attention, with the party’s coverage on broadcast media remaining at around 25% of key bulletins, as it had in 1992 (Harrison, 1997:139), though Ashdown took a greater portion (57%) of the coverage about his party than Blair (49%) or Major (41%). Whilst this was reflective of the greater attention all leaders received, it underlines the particular focus on third party leaders, and the Liberal Democrats’ strategy in pushing Ashdown to the forefront (Harrison, 1997:144). Coverage in print media was even more sparse with just 2 front page lead stories relating to the Liberal Democrats – or 1% compared to 4% in 1992 (Scammell and Harrop, 1997:176). Similarly the number of editorials focussed on the Liberal Democrats fell from 9% in 1992 to 1% in 1997, and the number of photographs of the party leader from 158 to 59 (Scammell and Harrop, 1997:181) – reflective of the change in perceived likelihood of a balanced parliament (Scammell and Harrop, 1997:176). The more limited coverage that was garnered though was positive – with praise for Ashdown and the party’s manifesto.

Once again, Ashdown was the party’s main figurehead – some would say ‘only figurehead’ with Butler and Kavanagh noting:

Ashdown was the only nationally known Liberal Democrat standing again he fought a well-organised kindly reported campaign, but he sometimes seemed like a lone voice (Butler and Kavanagh, 1997:226).

Ashdown felt the public approached the party at the start of the campaign with “apathy” (Ashdown, 2000:544), and wrestled with how to counter the perception that a vote for the Liberal Democrats was a waste because they would not be in power. The importance of Ashdown, aside from the public campaign, also lay in his relationship with Blair. The two spoke during the campaign, agreeing to turn fire jointly on the Conservatives and avoid criticism of each other (Ashdown, 2000:544), and on polling day were discussing possible arrangements – unrealised – that could bring Liberal Democrats into government (Ashdown, 2000:555).

The result of the campaign with a vindication of the targeting strategy and saw the party's seats increase to 46 on the slightly lower vote share of 16.8%. It also was a vindication of the abandonment of equidistance (Brack, 2015), which saw the Liberal Democrats positioned as part of the narrative of 'change' so forcefully pushed by New Labour and many in the media, which can only have been a benefit.

## **Paddy Ashdown's leadership and the General Elections of 1992 and 1997**

### **Concentrated visibility of the leader**

**Table 21- Concentrated visibility of Paddy Ashdown in general election campaign (mentions within articles)**

source: content analysis by author

	<b>Ratio (Leader to Party)</b>	<b>Ashdown (%)</b>	<b>Liberal Democrats (%)</b>	<b>Ashdown (N)</b>	<b>Liberal Democrats (N)</b>
<b>1992</b>	0.69	41%	59%	395	576
<b>1997</b>	0.57	36%	64%	182	320
<b>Average</b>	0.63	38%	62%	577	896

Analysis of samples from 784 articles collated from the 1992 election, and 527 articles from the 1997 election show that the concentrated visibility of Ashdown fell from 0.69 to 0.57 (Table 21) in respect to the number of mentions made of each, and from 0.71 to 0.57 in relation to the number of articles mentioning each (Table 22). A ratio of < 1 would reflect greater mention of Ashdown than the party. Table 1 serves the most use for comparison as it shows that even within the coverage that was secured for the party, the mention of the leader fell. Langer notes that in her wider work focussing on the visibility of Prime Ministers between 1945 and 2009 that:

given the ratios vary only between 0.57 and 1.27 it is clear that in many regards leaders and parties have always been, and still are, inseparable in British politics (Langer, 2011:76)

Whilst direct comparison to this conclusion should be met with caution – the studies are different in nature with this focussing on three weeks of general election coverage of the third political party in comparison to three years of a Prime Ministership – it is notable that the level of concentrated visibility does fall within that band. Further, Langer's work on Major and Blair suggest the concentrated visibility of their premierships around this period in *The Times* and *The Guardian* were approximately 0.9 (Langer, 2011:77).

**Table 22- Concentrated visibility of Paddy Ashdown in general election campaign (number of articles mentioning)source: content analysis by author**

	Ratio (Leader to Party)	Ashdown (%)	Liberal Democrats (%)	Ashdown (N)	Liberal Democrats (N)
1992	0.71	60%	85%	118	166
1997	0.57	48%	85%	63	111
Average	0.65	56%	85%	181	277

By both measures, the concentrated visibility fell. This is in part because of the change in focus on the party; in 1992 with a balanced parliament looking likely Ashdown's role was crucial, as was that of the Liberal Democrats – this is reflected in Table 23, which shows the drop in some measures of key press coverage felt by the party.

**Table 23-coverage of the Liberal Democrats in front page lead stories and editorials source: adapted from (Scammell and Harrop, 1997:176)**

	1992 (%)	1997 (%)
Front page lead stories	4	1
Editorials	9	1

In respect to what the party could control, Ashdown was used extensively throughout both campaigns. Aside from the outline offered above, his prominence in broadcast media relative to other spokespeople was noted at the time (Cook, 1992), and in academic analysis by Harrison, which noted Ashdown was used more heavily than Kinnock/Blair or Major in key bulletins in both the 1992 and 1997 campaigns (see Table 24). Additionally, there was a move between 1992 to 1997 to include Ashdown in all Party Election Broadcasts, his appearances occupying 100% of all time afforded to spokespeople in 1997 contrast to 60% in 1992.

**Table 24- Politicians quoted in radio and television news (N of items across BBC1, ITV, C4, Radio 4)**

**Source: adapted from (Butler and Kavanagh, 1992:169), (Butler and Kavanagh, 1997:144)**

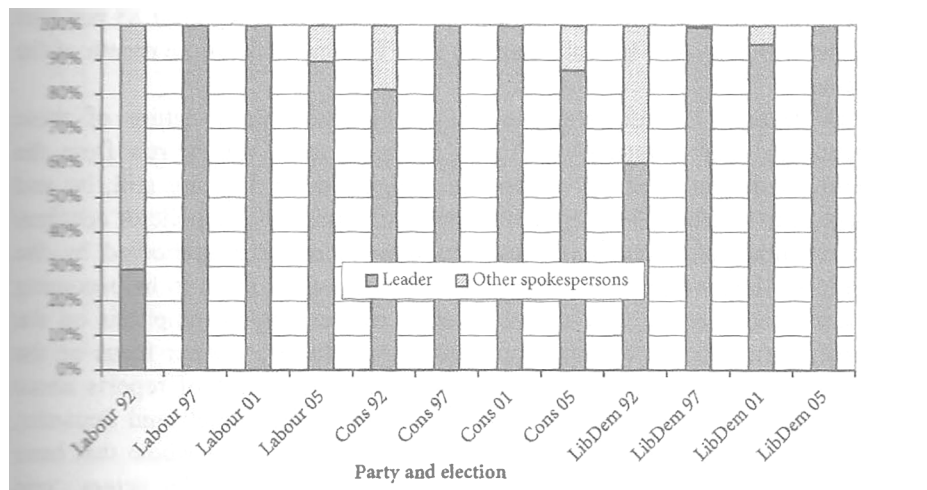
	Ashdown	Other spokespeople	Percentage of Ashdown coverage	Kinnock/Blair % of Labour coverage	Major % of Conservative coverage
1992	419	198	68%	52%	46%
1997	328	251	57%	49%	41%

Put simply, the contrast between 1992 and 1997 was subtle but a clear fall in the concentrated visibility of Ashdown as leader, with the notable exception of his deployment by the party in PEBs. With that exception, this drop was reflected across print and broadcast media by every

measure considered here. The predominant reason was a move in focus away from the Liberal Democrats' role in a balanced parliament to that of a third party in a 'binary choice' election, with the result largely a foregone conclusion. What is notable, however, is that whilst this drop is consistent, Ashdown still appeared more frequently in key news bulletins, and PEBs than other party leaders,

**Figure 16- Percentage of time leaders vs other party spokespersons spoke in Party Election Broadcasts 1992-2005**

Source: (Langer, 2011:33)



### Personalisation of the coverage of the leader

Alongside considering the concentrated visibility of Ashdown as the party leader, it is important to recognise what that visibility pertained to. Table 25 sets out the number of references made to each of the three dimensions of personalisation considered. Whilst there is a small increase in the number of mentions in print coverage related to any of the three aspects, it is important to also note the fall in numeric terms in the level of coverage related to Ashdown in 1997. Whilst the coverage is marginally more personalised, the concentrated visibility is lower. Amongst overall coverage, however, there is a more pronounced rise from a quarter of references relating to an aspect of personalisation to over a third (see Table 25).

**Table 25- Number of references made relating to the personalisation of leader in the 1992 and 1997 elections**

Source: content analysis by author

References	1992 (N)	1997 (N)	1992 (%)	1997 (%)

Concentrated visibility of the leader ( <i>References to the leaders % of total references of party + leader</i> )	395	182	41%	36%
Reference to Characteristics of Politicians / <i>References to Characteristics as % of references to leader</i>	41	25	10%	14%
Reference to Personal Qualities / <i>References to Personal Qualities as % of references to leader</i>	46	33	12%	18%
Reference to Personal Life / <i>References to Personal Life as % of references to leader</i>	11	6	3%	3%
Any aspect / <i>Any aspect as % of combined coverage of party &amp; leader</i>	98	64	10%	13%
Any aspect / <i>Any aspect as % of coverage of leader</i>	98	64	25%	35%



When considering the alternative measure of the number of article making reference to aspects of personalisation a similar pattern is shown though with small variation. Once again it is important to recognised the reduced concentrated visibility in the 1997 contest, but the increase in overall coverage of the leader and party which makes any reference to personalisation increases from 54% to 59% - a smaller increase than the total references seen in Table 25. This suggests that where articles make reference to these qualities they did so for a greater portion of coverage in 1997. Counter intuitively this is seemingly down to the lower attention afforded to Ashdown and the Liberal Democrats in the 1997 contest. When the policy demands of the party were a larger part of the campaign in 1992, the proportion of coverage related to him was marginally lower as policy demands and speculation on the party's role were greater. This contrasts with the coverage of Clegg in 2010 in some ways, but the greater concentrated visibility in each case reflects that the party was seen as more relevant and interesting to journalists.

**Table 26- Articles making reference to which includes personalisation of leader in the 1992 and 1997 campaigns**

**Source: content analysis by author**

References	1992 (N)	1997 (N)	1992 (%)	1997 (%)
Concentrated visibility of the leader <i>(References to the leaders % of total references of party + leader)</i>	118	63	60	48
Reference to Characteristics of Politicians / <i>References to Characteristics as % of references to leader</i>	28	16	24	25
Reference to Personal Qualities / <i>References to Personal Qualities as % of references to leader</i>	27	16	23	25
Reference to Personal Life / <i>References to Personal Life as % of references to leader</i>	9	5	8	8
Any aspect / <i>Any aspect as % of combined coverage of party &amp; leader</i>	64	37	23	21
Any aspect / <i>Any aspect as % of coverage of leader</i>	64	37	54	59

In short, the level and type of personalisation between 1992 and 1997 remained broadly similar. The crucial difference was the scale of the coverage; the visibility of Ashdown was greater in both proportionate and numeric terms in 1992 when the prospect of a balanced

parliament was greater. Nonetheless there was a marginal increase in the focus on personal characteristics and personal qualities in the 1997 contest as a proportion of coverage.

The level of personalisation is notably higher than Langer's analysis of the coverage of Prime Ministers – though this is outside of election periods (Langer, 2011:83-4). The exception to this is the focus on the private life of the leader – whilst in 1992 Ashdown's private life was under greater scrutiny than the comparable figure for Major it has to be considered that he had been revealed to have been having an affair which accounts for this. In 1997, 8% of articles mentioning Ashdown featured an aspect of his private life, exactly the same level as Langer found for Blair. It is not right to draw complete conclusions from this – Langer's analysis is from outside election periods – but it notably similar. The vastly increased focus on the leader's characteristics and qualities in this analysis are likely to be down to the study period being during a general election campaign, and also the nature of the Liberal Democrats campaign which deployed Ashdown more heavily than other parties did their leader.

## **Charles Kennedy**

### **An overview of the 2001 campaign**

The 2001 General Election was something of a foregone conclusion, with most another strong Labour majority. Predictions of the Liberal Democrats own prospects varied from an expectation that seats would be lost, to small increases in vote share (Rumbelow, 2001). A particular challenge for the party was to find distinctions from the Labour government's policy agenda- where Blair had in many cases enacted policies that were similar to the Liberal Democrats' agenda. Butler and Kavanagh point to the public's association of the party to pro-Europeanism and electoral reform, alongside efforts to accentuate environmental policy, and on issues of civil liberties (Butler and Kavanagh, 2001:65). The party once again positioned as an anti-Conservative party but nonetheless as an opponent to Labour – Kennedy declaring the party the 'real opposition', and also followed successes in winning local Councils from Labour in preceding years. The campaign was once again targeted, and saw the poll rating increase from 13% to 19% with broadly positive coverage of Kennedy (Butler and Kavanagh, 2001:103). The role of the party in the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly (and in Coalition administrations) was an added dimension to this campaign, and gave a record of delivery for the party to point to in those nations, though also inevitably positioned the party closer to Labour given the shared record in the devolved administrations.

The coverage of the parties campaign fell in broadcast media from a 25% share of coverage to 21.1% (Harrison, 2001:133), though Harrison also noted that broadcasters "had to produce

comprehensive and balanced coverage of an event that a largely apathetic electorate considered a foregone conclusion” (Harrison, 2001:133), which saw broadcasters cover the election in 2001 less than in 1997. Kennedy accounted for 75% of Liberal Democrat quotes carried in key radio and television bulletins – far outstripping Blair’s and Hague’s share for their parties, and a greater portion than Ashdown had enjoyed in 1997 or 1992 (Harrison, 2001:140). Kennedy was the lead figure in the Party Election Broadcasts too, one of which focussed on ‘Kennedy the man’ – set in his Highlands home, whilst others focussed on public services, and the opportunity the Liberal Democrats offered people to back greater investment. In contrast to the more tempered interest from broadcasters, the print press maintained a comparable level of coverage to 1997 (Scammell and Harrop, 2001:160-161), though there was a notable fall in the prominence some newspapers afforded the election. With *The Guardian* and Independent both calling for an increase in Liberal Democrat MPs – if not a full backing of the party there was an increase from 1% to 3% of editorials covering the party, though not a single front page lead story was dedicated to the campaign – down from 1% in 1997. Coverage of the party’s agenda was mixed – whilst *The Guardian* and Times saw the manifesto and emphasis as filling a space left by the Labour party’s move to the centre, the FT, Telegraph and Independent were critical (Scammell and Harrop, 2001:172-173).

Over the course of the campaign 21% net of voters had raise their approval of Kennedy (Butler and Kavanagh, 2001:248) – something that has to be considered a success, though those believing the party had the best leader had fallen from 9% in 1992 to 5% in 2001; whether this was indicative of greater enthusiasm for Blair is debatable, but there was still a fall in Kennedy’s perceived strength on this measure in comparison to Ashdown in 1997 (Butler and Kavanagh, 2001:243)

The result, and the return of 52 MPs, was seen as a success by the party, though Butler and Kavanagh suggest the adopted strategy may have been incorrect and limiting the party’s success:

Presumably, the gap was on the centre-right of the political spectrum; attacking Labour from the left hardly made sense. Given the widespread complaints about the lack of ideological differences between the main two parties and the widespread dissatisfaction with them, claims that a vote for the Liberal Democrats would be a protest against the two main parties should have been popular. Some Liberal Democrats may look back on 2001 as a wasted opportunity (Butler and Kavanagh, 2001:249)

Whilst the overall assessment may have an element of fairness to it, New Labour’s movement to the centre, apparently leaving little differences between the Conservatives, suggests the space on the ‘centre-right’ may not have been as large as suggested. Indeed, the Conservatives

accentuation of differences to Labour on issues such as law and order suggest so too. The appeal of the Liberal Democrats as being an effective protest to the main two parties, however, is reasonable.

### **An overview of the 2005 campaign**

The campaign in 2005 fell in a different political context to 2001. The Iraq war saw the Liberal Democrats take a lead position in opposition to the government, whilst the Conservatives supported Blair's action. This partly informed the targeting seat strategy in 2005, which was geared more towards Labour seats than in the previous campaign (Butler and Kavanagh, 2005). Furthermore, the party had greater resource at its disposal than in the previous contest. The approach was similar to previous elections in other respects though— a tightly defined list of target seats, similar key figures leading the construction and execution of the campaign. In terms of broad position, the party stated aim was to be 'the real alternative' to the Labour government and seek to displace the Conservatives. The manifesto cover focussed on ten 'reasons to vote Liberal Democrat' – a list criticised by several of those interviewed as being too long , and included bold policies to introduce a 50p tax rate on the highest earners, a replacement of council tax, free care for the elderly and the abolition of tuition fees. Alongside the subsequently notorious donation from Michael Brown, the party raised a significant sum for the campaign, which alongside the retention and expansion of central office staff put the party in a strong position for the election. The Iraq war had provided the opportunity for the party to take a principled position on an issue, and stand distinctively to the two main parties – and it was one that Kennedy had taken.

Entering the campaign on 18.2%, which would rise to 23% by polling day, was a stronger position for the party than in 2001. Broadcast media saw Kennedy front 63% of the Liberal Democrats coverage in key bulletins – a fall from 2001, and behind Michael Howard's proportion of coverage for the Conservatives (Harrison, 2005). The issue of the Iraq war was broadly compartmentalised from election coverage, but rose in prominence in the later stages of the campaign, something which can only have been welcomed by the Liberal Democrats. The party once again deployed Kennedy across the Party Election Broadcasts. Three broadcasts counterpointing the failure of the two main parties to deal with 'the issues' were bookended by Kennedy opening the run with a pitch showing the Liberal Democrats record of delivery in Scotland, and concluding with another mini-biopic including references to his family, upbringing and portraying him as a grounded, in touch leader attuned to delivering a new approach (Harrison, 2005:112-113). In contrast to 2001 a number of papers were stronger in their backing to the party. *The Independent* and *The Independent* on Sunday came out in support for the Liberal Democrats, with *The Guardian* emphatically calling for an increase in

number of MPs for the party, amidst a more tepid backing for Labour than was customary for the centre-left publication. More surprisingly, some supportive nods were made to Kennedy's party from *The Mail on Sunday*. This was reflected in the increase in editorials covering the party – to 14, or 6% in contrast to 3% in 2001 (Scammell and Harrop, 2005:132), though once again the party secured no front-page coverage focussed on its announcements. That is not to say there was no interest in the party – the prospects of advancement was recognised and a level of scrutiny afforded to the manifesto that had been more absent in 2001. Unfortunately for Kennedy, his failure to clearly explain the policy of local income tax at the launch led to critiques of his performance. The document was largely seen as being to the 'left' of Labour and saw some criticism from the *Financial Times* as being unrealistic (Scammell and Harrop, 2005). Set alongside this, in contrast to 2001, the party did place adverts in the national press – 13 insertions covering almost 9 pages (Scammell and Harrop, 2005:144).

The increase in support for the party in the final weeks of the campaign came ahead of the increase to 62 MPs, the highest ever for the Liberal Democrats and the largest third party presence in decades. It was, for some, not enough and perceived as a failure to break through in what was viewed as favourable circumstances, particularly in losing seats to the Conservatives, and the failure of the 'decapitation strategy' to reciprocate this, with Butler and Kavanagh questioning "perhaps because of its new positioning it lost a net three seats to the Conservatives" (Butler and Kavanagh, 2005:192). On the other hand, YouGov polling showed Kennedy was popular among Liberal Democrat voters and his standing had risen during the campaign (Butler and Kavanagh, 2005:184). The party also succeeded in establishing that whilst there may still be two larger, 'main' parties that the third party had a greater relevance than in previous Parliaments.

## Charles Kennedy's leadership and the General Elections of 2001 and 2005

### Concentrated visibility of the leader

**Table 27- Concentrated visibility of Charles Kennedy in general election campaigns of 2001 and 2005 (mentions within articles)**  
source: content analysis by author

	Ratio (Leader to Party)	Kennedy (%)	Liberal Democrats (%)	Kennedy (N)	Liberal Democrats (N)
<b>2001</b>	0.44	30	70	154	351
<b>2005</b>	0.44	30	70	278	653
<b>Combined</b>	<i>0.44</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>70</i>	<i>432</i>	<i>986</i>

A sample from 535 articles collected from the 2001 election and 861 articles from the 2005 election were analysed, which showed a flat line in the concentrated visibility of Charles Kennedy of 0.44 (Table 27). This was a fall in concentrated visibility in comparison to Ashdown's leadership. When considering the number of articles mentioning Kennedy (Table 28), this rose from 0.55 in 2001 to 0.57 in 2005, but this small increase was only a return to the level of coverage Ashdown secured in 1997. The 2005 election campaign also coincided with the birth of Kennedy's son, which accounts for a portion of coverage that could be considered 'atypical' to the campaigns more generally. In both elections, it was considered likely that Labour would win outright, supporting the argument that in elections where the outcome is more certain the concentrated visibility of the Liberal Democrats leader fell.

**Table 28- Concentrated visibility of Charles Kennedy in general election campaigns of 2015 and 2005 (number of articles mentioning)**source: content analysis by author

	Ratio (Leader to Party)	Kennedy (%)	Liberal Democrats (%)	Kennedy (N)	Liberal Democrats (N)
<b>2001</b>	0.55	46%	83%	61	111
<b>2005</b>	0.57	52%	92%	112	197
<b>Combined</b>	<i>0.56</i>	<i>50%</i>	<i>88%</i>	<i>173</i>	<i>308</i>

Key coverage reflected this move – with no papers leading on the party at all on their front pages in either election. The notable doubling in editorials for the party was largely based on the Liberal Democrats' stance on Iraq – a key driver in securing profile in the 2005 election, which goes some way to explaining the increase in sample size between the two elections.

**Table 29- Coverage of the Liberal Democrats in front page lead stories and editorials in 2001 and 2005 elections**

source: adapted from (Scammell and Harrop, 2001:169; Scammell and Harrop, 2005)

	2001 (%)	2005 (%)
Front page lead stories	0	0
Editorials	3	6

Kennedy's position as a figurehead against the Iraq war individually helped increase the concentrated visibility of his leadership in 2005, as well as the party's coverage more broadly.

### **Personalisation of the coverage of the leader**

Table 30 sets out the references made across the analysed samples to aspects of personalisation. It is notable that the proportion of coverage that was personalised fell between the 2001 and 2005 elections but was notably higher than the personalisation of the coverage of Paddy Ashdown. It is particularly notable that of the coverage of Kennedy as leader, 79% of references to the leader in the 2001 election included a focus on one of the three aspects of personalisation. This was partly because he was a new leader – and newer in the role in 2001 than Ashdown had been in 1992 – but also due to a level of focus around his personality. As reflected in the content of Party Political Broadcasts – showing Kennedy in his home constituency – and his confession that he was a “fully signed-up member of the human race”, Kennedy's personality was a huge part of his appeal. It is notable that it was mentions of ‘personal qualities’ that saw the largest increase compared to the 1997 election, and reflects that Kennedy's personality, distinct from his competencies as a politician, garnered more media interest. That being acknowledged, there were also more mentions of Kennedy's personal life and his competencies. In regard to the former this was in part due to suggestions of health conditions, but also a larger emphasis on his Highland roots, and – in the 2005 campaign – the birth of his child. The fact remains that even when considering the level of personalisation in relation to overall coverage of the party and the leader, there was an increase; it was not simply a case that the coverage of the leader was more personalised, but that this personalisation in turn accounted for a larger share of the coverage of the campaign as a whole.

**Table 30- Number of references made relating to the personalisation of leader in the 2001 and 2005 elections**

Source: content analysis by author

References	2001 (N)	2005 (N)	2001 (%)	2005 (%)
Concentrated visibility of the leader <i>(References to the leaders % of total references of party + leader)</i>	154	278	30	30
Reference to Characteristics of Politicians / <i>References to Characteristics as % of references to leader</i>	42	51	27	18
Reference to Personal Qualities / <i>References to Personal Qualities as % of references to leader</i>	57	63	37	23
Reference to Personal Life / <i>References to Personal Life as % of references to leader</i>	23	48	15	17
Any aspect / <i>Any aspect as % of combined coverage of party &amp; leader</i>	122	162	24	18
Any aspect / <i>Any aspect as % of coverage of leader</i>	122	162	79	58

The other measure of personalisation to consider is the number of articles making reference to the leader, and the extent to which that is personalised. Table 31 shows that whilst the concentration of visibility fell, references to any aspect of personalisation increased in 2001, before falling back to a comparable level to 1997 in 2005. This was reflected too in the personalisation of coverage of the leader, which rose to 75% in 2001, before falling to 61% in 2005. There is a more notable increase in articles with a focus on leadership characteristics than in respect to those focussed on personal qualities. When considered alongside Table 30 this shows that when personal qualities were considered there was more to say about this aspect – in short when focussing on Kennedy’s personal qualities, journalists had more to focus on. This was often references to his humour, personal interactions and empathy; Table 31 shows, however, that in 2001 there was a notable increase in coverage of Kennedy’s capabilities as leader; this was not universally positive – the focus on aspects of his personal qualities, and laid-back nature were sometimes used to suggest he was not a ‘serious’ leader. The key conclusion here is that the coverage of Kennedy’s leadership was notably more



personalised that Ashdown's, with that coverage focussing more on each aspect of personalisation in 2001, before falling in 2005.

**Table 31-Articles making reference to which includes personalisation of leader in the 2001 and 2005 campaigns**

**Source: content analysis by author**

References	2001 (N)	2005 (N)	2001 (%)	2005 (%)
Concentrated visibility of the leader <i>(References to the leaders % of total references of party + leader)</i>	61	112	46	52
Reference to Characteristics of Politicians / <i>References to Characteristics as % of references to leader</i>	22	25	36	22
Reference to Personal Qualities / <i>References to Personal Qualities as % of references to leader</i>	17	21	28	19
Reference to Personal Life / <i>References to Personal Life as % of references to leader</i>	7	22	11	22
Any aspect / <i>Any aspect as % of combined coverage of party &amp; leader</i>	46	68	27	22
Any aspect / <i>Any aspect as % of coverage of leader</i>	46	68	75	61

## Nick Clegg

### An overview of the 2010 campaign

The 2010 general election campaign was a watershed moment for Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats. Following his performance in the first leaders' debate, the party broke into the public consciousness, and secured a greater share of attention and coverage than in any other election in the party's history. Alongside the peculiarities of the opportunity presented by the debates, this election was also the closest since 1992, with a balanced parliament a real possibility. This transformed the usual questions around which other party a Liberal Democrat leader would rather work with from being a distant hypothetical to being a key campaign question.

Expectations from the election varied, but universally increased following that first debate, with some expecting to see the Liberal Democrat 100+ seats (Helm and Woolf, 2010). The context entering the campaign was harsh, with Kavanagh and Cowley opining "until the 2010 campaign began, the brutal truth was that the Liberal Democrats had polled best when led by a drunk" (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010:112). Clegg's personal approval ratings shot up – he had entered the campaign having not increased the party's polling and his own standing, with his approval rating rising from being in the 40% region to 77% (Cutts et al., 2010:108-109). Having entered the campaign polling around 19.9%, this rose to 28.7% on average after the debate (Cutts et al., 2010:110) – it was a transformative moment, and the phrase 'I agree with Nick', a recurring comment from Gordon Brown in the debate, became the unofficial slogan amongst many of the newly inspired supporters. Clegg seized the opportunity to portray the other two leaders as part of an 'old politics', and to draw on the idea that he was the candidate for change – something reflected too in the manifesto, entitled 'Change that works for you'. The focal policies for the manifesto were the delivery of fair taxes, a fair chance for children, a fair future and a fair deal, with signature policies of targeted tax cuts, investment in pupils from poorer families, environmental policies and a plan to 'clean up' politics illustrating the themes. This was also to mark the start of the most hostile coverage any Liberal Democrat leader faced in an election campaign, with attacks from *The Daily Telegraph*, *the Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express*, which focussed on the nationality of his wife and family, his upbringing and his finances, which all consumed staff time in rebutting (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010:166). Whilst the flipside to this was more attention and positive coverage, it was clear the party was sailing in new waters. The context of the election changed – the Liberal Democrats were now expected to perform strongly and to hold the balance of power in the balanced parliament. Clegg's approach was generally to maintain an equidistant line, with a

clear focus on respecting the will of the people, though as the campaign wore on he did set out a position that he would not support Brown in a balanced parliament if Labour finished third (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010:172-173).

The Liberal Democrats used Clegg across all Party Election Broadcasts, as a clear figurehead promising a new kind of politics. He also accounted for 72% of appearances in key bulletins, in contrast to Kennedy's 63% in 2005, though the role of the television debates in shaping some bulletins has to be considered (Harrison, 2010:262). That said, initial plans for Clegg and Cable to act as a 'double headed' team were dropped as Clegg's star rose – the most visual example of this early intention was reflected in the party's tour bus which was adorned with an image of both men (Wring and Ward, 2010:220). In terms of print media there was clearly a higher level of coverage for the party than in any other campaign, with more editorials and front pages (positive and negative) devoted to the party than ever before (Scammell and Beckett, 2010:298). Scammell and Beckett also note that alongside the television debates emerging as a key focus of the print media (accounting for 10% of coverage) the leaders themselves became a subject in their own right – in contrast to 2005 when only the coverage of Blair could be considered as such (2010:296-297). The eventual outcome was not what Clegg, or the party, had expected or wanted. A fall in seats, though still holding the balance of power, was unimaginable at the start of the 'Clegg-mania' and gave a sense of 'falling short' to the ultimate result (Clegg, 2016a). The advent of the leaders' debates had, however, changed the campaign completely, and Clegg's performance and persona was more crucial to the party's performance than in any other election. The role of the debates also relegated the importance and prominence of other coverage and traditional campaign focal points. Whilst the party clearly had sought to accentuate Clegg in PEBs, the official tour of constituencies and other campaign aspects, nothing could parallel the weight that his performance in the inaugural debate had.

### **An overview of the 2015 campaign**

The 2015 campaign was unique with the Liberal Democrats campaigning on a record in government and amidst expectations ranging from a wipe out at worst, to something resembling a halving in numbers at best. The election was expected to, once again, produce a balanced parliament and the party's role in that result could be, again, important. The party entered the campaign polling poorly, at around 8%; the failure to secure electoral reform to the Alternative Vote removed any mitigation from the forthcoming election.

The strategy for the campaign was centred on the role of the Liberal Democrats as a moderating force to either of the main two parties – anchoring the government to the centre

ground to deliver a stronger economy and a fairer society. This approach was seen as ideal for a balanced parliament – though with hindsight many feel there should have been a clearer warning as to what a Conservative majority would risk (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2015:171). This return to equidistance was arguably challenging for a party that had spent 5 years working with one, whilst being opposed by the other. The party had faced a challenging media environment from the first day of government and struggled to distinctively cut through or gain credit for its achievements, this was compounded by decisions such as Clegg continuing to sit next to Cameron at PMQs for the duration of the government, and other such visual cues that created what some saw as a perception of weakness, or being complicit (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2015:102-103). Alongside this the party had haemorrhaged local councillors in each year of the Coalition, lost a swathe of MSPs, AMs and MEPs and went into the campaign seen as being expected to lose heavily. It was a challenging context. For Clegg personally, the campaign also saw him face criticism for many decisions taken in government, especially on the issue of tuition fees. The policy decision was also portrayed – and seen – as being a proof point that the Liberal Democrats, and Nick Clegg specifically, could not be trusted. This was the central attack of the Labour campaign.

The leaders' debates would not form the game-changing role they did in 2010 for any leader, in part because the novelty had worn off, but more largely because the various formats proposed by the broadcasters to ensure Cameron's involvement led to a mish-mash of leaders in what some saw as 'unwinnable' formats with up to 7 on stage at any one time. Whilst he performed well in the debate, Clegg was largely ignored by the media and fellow panellists in each debate. The Party Election Broadcasts – a first for the party – omitted the leader, aside from the final version which included Clegg in voiceover. The contrast to other campaigns in this regard, was stark. The campaign manifesto focussed on setting six red lines that the party would demand in the event of a balanced parliament – to protect education funding, bring forward an emergency budget, increase the personal tax allowance, increase funding to the NHS, end the public sector pay freeze and a package of measures on the environment. As the campaign wore on it became clear the Conservatives path to victory was routed through decimating the Liberal Democrats in the South West. Clegg and others sought to temper the idea that the party would allow Miliband into Downing Street with the support of the SNP in an effort to protect these seats, but without ruling out a Coalition in a move that would have split the party (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2015:196-197). Whilst the campaign itself improved Clegg's standing, it was not enough to undo the damage done to his, and the party's, reputation in the previous five years. Broadcast media in general focussed quite heavily on 'horse race' coverage of polls and the likely outcome; which given the fact the polls pointed (wrongly) to a balanced parliament was significant. That being said, the complexity of the various

permutations of outcome would naturally lead to more coverage of this sort, though even the BBC's Head of News would later admit the balance was wrong (Beckett, 2015:294). A core complaint from key Liberal Democrat figures was the constant emphasis placed on possible SNP involvement in government – which fuelled the Conservatives' campaign message. Alongside this more complex broadcast landscape, the print press provided a difficult context for the Liberal Democrats – whilst the *Financial Times*, *The Independent* and *The Times* all endorsed a repeat of the Conservative- Liberal Democrat coalition (to a greater or lesser extent) (Deacon and Wring, 2015:304) The party was covered on 6 front pages (Deacon and Wring, 2015:314-321), with the coverage notably having less of a focus on Clegg and his family than the 2010 campaign (Deacon and Wring, 2015:323).

The outcome of the election was far worse than the upper 20s-lower 30s seat projection that some had held internally. The drafting of detailed Coalition negotiating documents (Laws, 2015) in retrospect seems surreal, given the decimation the party faced at the polls, the worst the party or its predecessors had faced since 1970.

## Nick Clegg's leadership and the General Elections of 2010 and 2015

### Concentrated visibility of the leader

**Table 32- Concentrated visibility of Nick Clegg in general election campaigns of 2010 and 2015 (mentions within articles)**

source: content analysis by author

	Ratio (Leader to Party)	Clegg (%)	Liberal Democrats (%)	Clegg (N)	Liberal Democrats (N)
<b>2010</b>	1.03	51	49	1188	1159
<b>2015</b>	0.57	36	64	306	541
<b>Combined</b>	0.77	43	57	1494	1700

The concentrated visibility of Clegg increased markedly in the 2010 campaign in comparison to any other leader in any other election to 1.03 – there were more mentions of him by name than the party as a whole in the samples analysed from this period. This fell away in 2015 to a ratio of 0.57, a level still higher than Kennedy in 2001 or 2005, and equal to Ashdown in 1997. This shows the atypical nature of the 2010 campaign in a stark way. Alongside this, other research has suggested that the level of coverage Clegg received in this campaign almost matched Cameron's in some areas, with 9 front page lead stories focussed on him compared to Cameron's 10 (Scammell and Beckett, 2010:296). Consideration to the party leaders' coverage in respect to newspaper headlines found Clegg to be mentioned in 73 headlines, compared to 70 for Cameron and 66 for Brown – and at a ratio of 1.87 to his party, with Cameron at 1.32 and Brown at 1 (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014:162).

**Table 33- Concentrated visibility of Nick Clegg in general election campaigns of 2010 and 2015 (number of articles mentioning)**

source: content analysis by author

	Ratio (Leader to Party)	Clegg (%)	Liberal Democrats (%)	Clegg (N)	Liberal Democrats (N)
<b>2010</b>	0.91	78	86	239	262
<b>2015</b>	0.68	57	83	106	156
<b>Combined</b>	0.83	70	85	345	418

In considering the number of articles that made mention of Clegg, there is again a clear increase to 0.91 in 2010, before falling back to 0.68 in 2015 – though this is still the highest level by this measure since 1992. It is clear from every measure that 2010 was a standout election for the party, with a higher concentrated visibility. The 2015 campaign saw a higher level of concentrated visibility than in some other elections, and Table 33 suggests that there was still a degree of coverage afforded to Clegg beyond what would be otherwise expected of

an average Liberal Democrat campaign, which was in part down to his higher profile role as Deputy Prime Minister, and partly because of the expected outcome of the campaign to be a balanced parliament.

### Personalisation of the coverage of the leader

**Table 34- Number of references made relating to the personalisation of leader in the 2010 and 2015 elections**

Source: content analysis by author

References	2010 (N)	2015 (N)	2010 (%)	2015 (%)
Concentrated visibility of the leader <i>(References to the leaders % of total references of party + leader)</i>	1188	306	51	36
Reference to Characteristics of Politicians / <i>References to Characteristics as % of references to leader</i>	321	23	27	8
Reference to Personal Qualities / <i>References to Personal Qualities as % of references to leader</i>	109	8	9	3
Reference to Personal Life / <i>References to Personal Life as % of references to leader</i>	181	29	15	9
Any aspect / <i>Any aspect as % of combined coverage of party &amp; leader</i>	611	60	26	7
Any aspect / <i>Any aspect as % of coverage of leader</i>	611	60	51	20

Table 34 shows clearly that in 2010 there was far more coverage in absolute terms of personalised aspects of Clegg. In proportionate terms, there was a notable increase in focus on his characteristics as a leader – though only to a level similar to Kennedy in 2001. Coverage of his personal life was comparable to elections under Kennedy’s leadership, and there was actually a fall in the number of mentions of personal qualities in comparison to Kennedy. This suggests that much of the increased coverage for Clegg was proportionately focussed on him as the figurehead of the party, and the policy offers and campaign interventions were personalised to him. The fact that 26% of mentions relating to the leader referred to any aspect is higher than under other leaders, but only marginally so. By 2015 the coverage is notable in that mentions refer far less to aspects of personalisation than at any other time – with the exception of Clegg’s personal life which does remain higher. This is likely to be in part because coverage focussed on a wider range of leaders in general, the various combinations

of who could form a majority and the inclusion of his name in relation to a whole plethora of decisions taken in government, which did not relate to his personality. Alongside the fact he was now not a 'newcomer', and there was no 'Cleggmania' moment, this fall is expected, and in some ways better reflects the level of personalisation seen by Prime Ministers, who are mentioned more frequently as a political actor, but with a lower proportion of coverage mentioning personalised aspects. Additionally, he was well known enough to act as to not need explaining as being the Liberal Democrat leader, and the political landscape in the 2015 election was more complex with focus on the SNP, Greens, DUP and UKIP to an extent that had not been present in 2010, as well as the fact the Liberal Democrats were polling around 8% and thus may have been 'written off, and written out' by some of those covering the contest. It is likely that all of these factors contributed to the fall in personalised, and absolute, coverage.



**Table 35- Articles making reference to which includes personalisation of leader in the 2010 and 2015 campaigns. Source: content analysis by author**

References	2010 (N)	2015 (N)	2010 (%)	2015 (%)
Concentrated visibility of the leader ( <i>References to the leaders % of total references of party + leader</i> )	239	106	78	57
Reference to Characteristics of Politicians / <i>References to Characteristics as % of references to leader</i>	128	17	54	16
Reference to Personal Qualities / <i>References to Personal Qualities as % of references to leader</i>	52	7	22	7
Reference to Personal Life / <i>References to Personal Life as % of references to leader</i>	42	17	18	16
Any aspect / <i>Any aspect as % of combined coverage of party &amp; leader</i>	222	41	44	16
Any aspect / <i>Any aspect as % of coverage of leader</i>	222	41	93	39

In considering the other measure of visibility, once again it is clear 2010 was a personalised campaign – 93% of articles in which Clegg was mentioned included a personalised element. Those mentioning his characteristics as leader totalled 54% suggesting that whilst the number of mentions made to these personalised qualities, as in Table 34, may not be as markedly higher, that it was proportionally an aspect more considered in Clegg than any other leader – as you would expect in an election where a balanced parliament is likely, and the leader untested. Articles mentioning his personal qualities or personal lives, however, were comparable to other leaders. This compounds the idea that with the prospect of his holding office there was a personalised focus on his suitability to hold it amongst the press. In 2015,

this fell – partly for similar reasons to those suggested in relation to Table 34, that some coverage related more to Clegg in his role as Deputy Prime Minister and his record, but also because as someone who had held office, and been scrutinised for it, there was less speculation and discussion around these aspects. The more interesting change is the drop-in coverage around personal qualities, which is harder to explain. Each, however, is an anomaly in terms of elections; in one campaign a balanced parliament was likely, and Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats broke through in the inaugural television debate in a way that swelled coverage and focus beyond anything any other leader had faced – or had the opportunity to deliver. In the other, Clegg had been Deputy Prime Minister for five years, faced a more complex electoral terrain with a greater focus on the prospect of not only Coalitions, but also of other parties. To draw too generalised comparisons on a like-for-like basis has limitations, but on the basis of the analysis Clegg fought the campaign with the most personalised coverage of any leader in 2010, and the least in 2015. Part of this will be campaign led – as noted Clegg was not deployed in all opportunities by the Liberal Democrats in 2015 (in PEBs for example), but this cannot explain the change entirely.

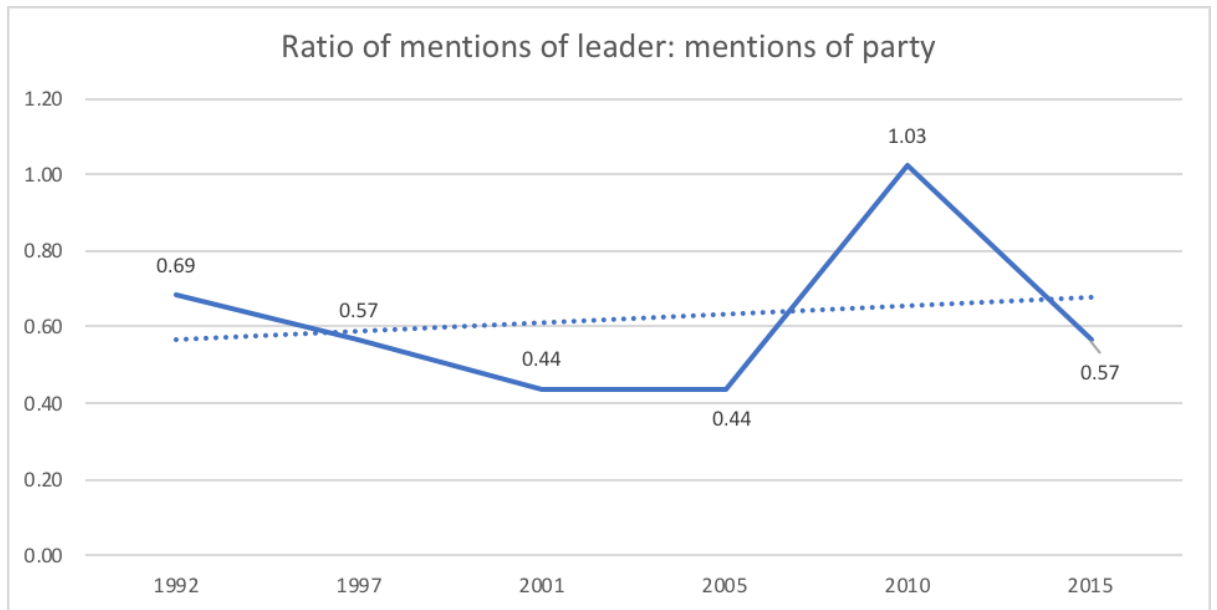
## **Leaders in General Elections**

As demonstrated the overall trends in personalisation of coverage of Liberal Democrat leaders are more complex than may have been assumed. What is more consistent is the party's use of the leader at the forefront of campaigns – in PEBs, press comments and clips and other factors within the control of the party.

Considering firstly the concentrated visibility of the party leaders, by either measure whilst there is variation in either given measure (See Tables 21 and 22), there is not a consistent upward or downward trend. In the cases of Clegg and Ashdown there was a greater concentration in each of their first elections as leader. Furthermore, in elections where the outcome of the election was less certain – 1992, 2010, 2015 – the concentration of coverage was also higher. Kennedy had served as an MP since 1983, so had been an MP for 16 years when he became leader, in contrast to Ashdown, who had served 5 years, and Clegg, who had served 2 years. Alongside his holding several offices in the party – such as being party president – his appearances in the media over this period perhaps contributed to him being more of a 'known quantity' around election coverage. This would also partly explain the fall in Ashdown and Clegg's concentrated visibility in second general elections though broader research would be needed to advocate this as in any way a conclusive feature. The absolute number of articles mentioning the leader and party, and total mentions of both, also support this concentrated trend (See Figure 18 and 19)

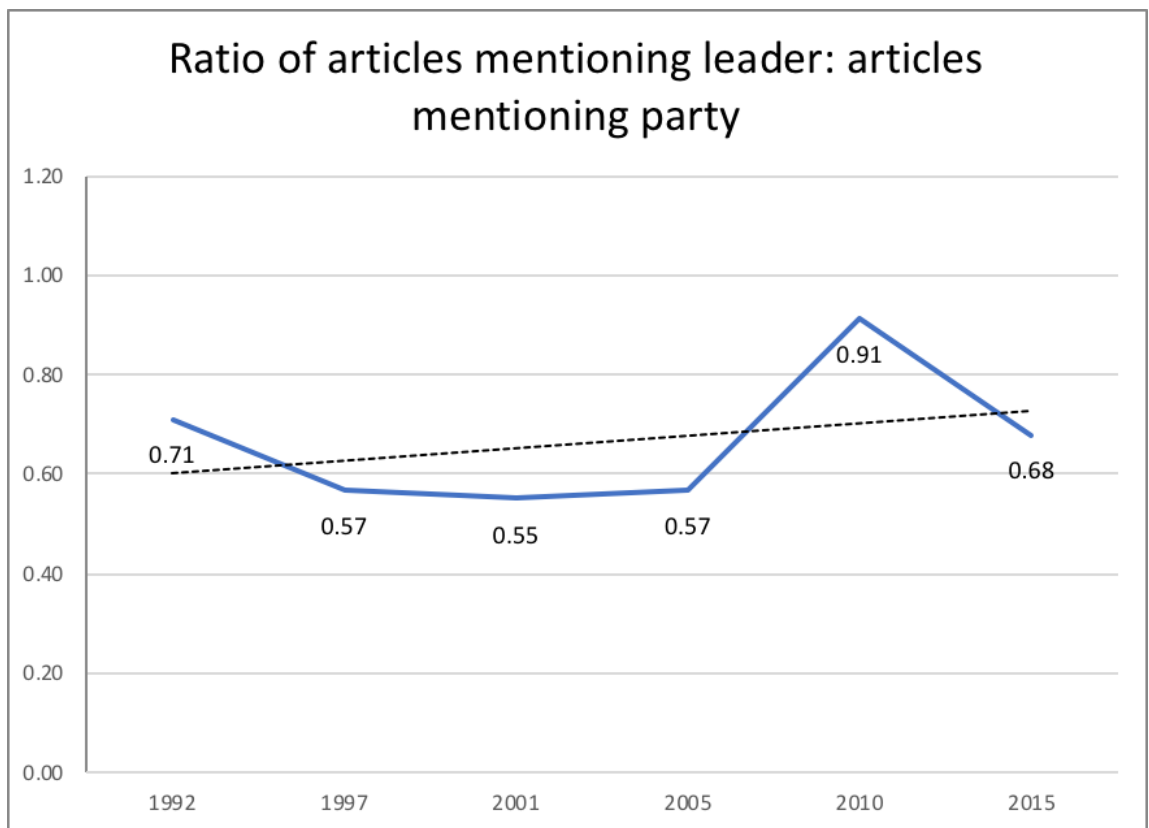
**Figure 17- Ratio of mentions of leader to mentions of party in General Elections 1992-2015**

Source: content analysis by author

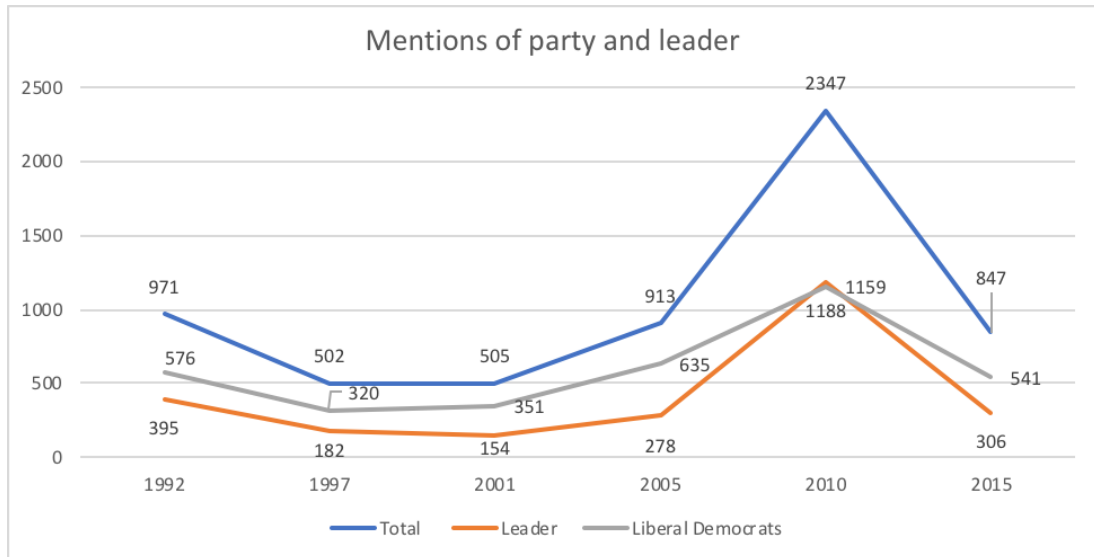


**Figure 18- Ratio of articles mentioning the leader to mentioning the party in General Elections 1992-2015**

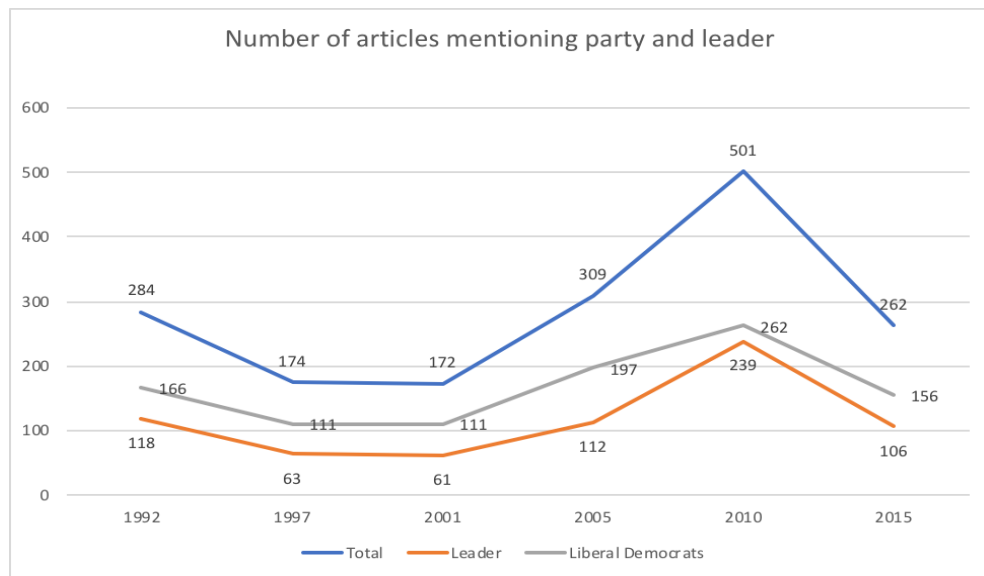
Source: content analysis by author



**Figure 19- Mentions made of the party and the leader in General Elections 1992-2015**



**Figure 20- Number of articles mentioning the party and the leader in General Elections 1992-2015**  
 Source: content analysis by author



In respect to the extent coverage was personalised, Figure 21 shows that articles making reference to personalised factors varied. The 2010 contest is stark in that 93% of the articles making mention of Clegg contained a personalised factor; with 44% of all coverage of the Liberal Democrats doing so. This was significantly higher than the average of 68% and 28% respectively (see table 37). It is also the case that until 2015 there was an upward move in the

personalisation of the leader's coverage. In respect to the intensity of the coverage – the number of references made to personalised elements, Figure 21 shows that Kennedy's was the most personalised coverage of any leader. This suggests that whilst the concentrated visibility of Kennedy was lower (Figures 19 and 20), more articles focussed on personalised elements of his leadership than Ashdown, or Clegg in 2015 (see Figure 21) and where that coverage was garnered, there was significantly higher focus made to personalised elements (Table 36). It is clear that there was a general upward movement until 2015, where the personalised coverage of Clegg fell. This is likely down, in part, to the fact he was more of a known quantity, and coverage focused more on his policy demands in a balanced parliament, than who he was, what he was about and the personalised attacks he faced in 2010.

Considering the types of personalisation, Figures 23 and 24 show again the variation. There is an upward move in the proportion of both references to, and articles referencing, the leaders' personal lives in coverage through the period, though a small dip for Clegg in comparison to Kennedy. It has to be noted though that the absolute number of mentions for Clegg's coverage in 2010 are so much higher, and with a prominence unparalleled by other leaders that this should not be ignored in conclusions, whilst it is masked by a strict quantitative measure. In the three elections where a balanced parliament was seen as a possibility, the characteristics of the leaders feature in a greater proportion of articles than other characteristics (see Figure 24). It is notable too that the references to Clegg's personal qualities are remarkably lower in both 2010 and 2015 than his predecessors (Figure 23). On the whole there is a downward move in the proportion of personalised coverage by either measure focussing on personal qualities from 2001 – with an exceptional spike in references to Kennedy's qualities in that campaign.

In short, the picture around the personalisation of the Liberal Democrat leaders is complex. Clegg in absolute terms received the most personalised and intense coverage in 2010, but as a proportion it is Kennedy who saw the most personalised coverage, which also focussed far more on his personal qualities than the other leaders. Whilst the coverage of Kennedy was more personalised, he was less visible as a leader than Ashdown. Though Ashdown had a comparable proportion of articles referencing his personal qualities, Kennedy received far greater focus in the intensity of the references made to his. The contrast in personalised coverage for Clegg between 2010 and 2015 is stark, as noted in the previous section. Overall, until 2015 the personalisation of coverage had been increasing, and changing, and this would likely have maintained in a similar manner had the electoral prospects of the party not altered so radically. In respect to wider literature, this pattern is not contradictory at this stage, Langer's broader observation being that:

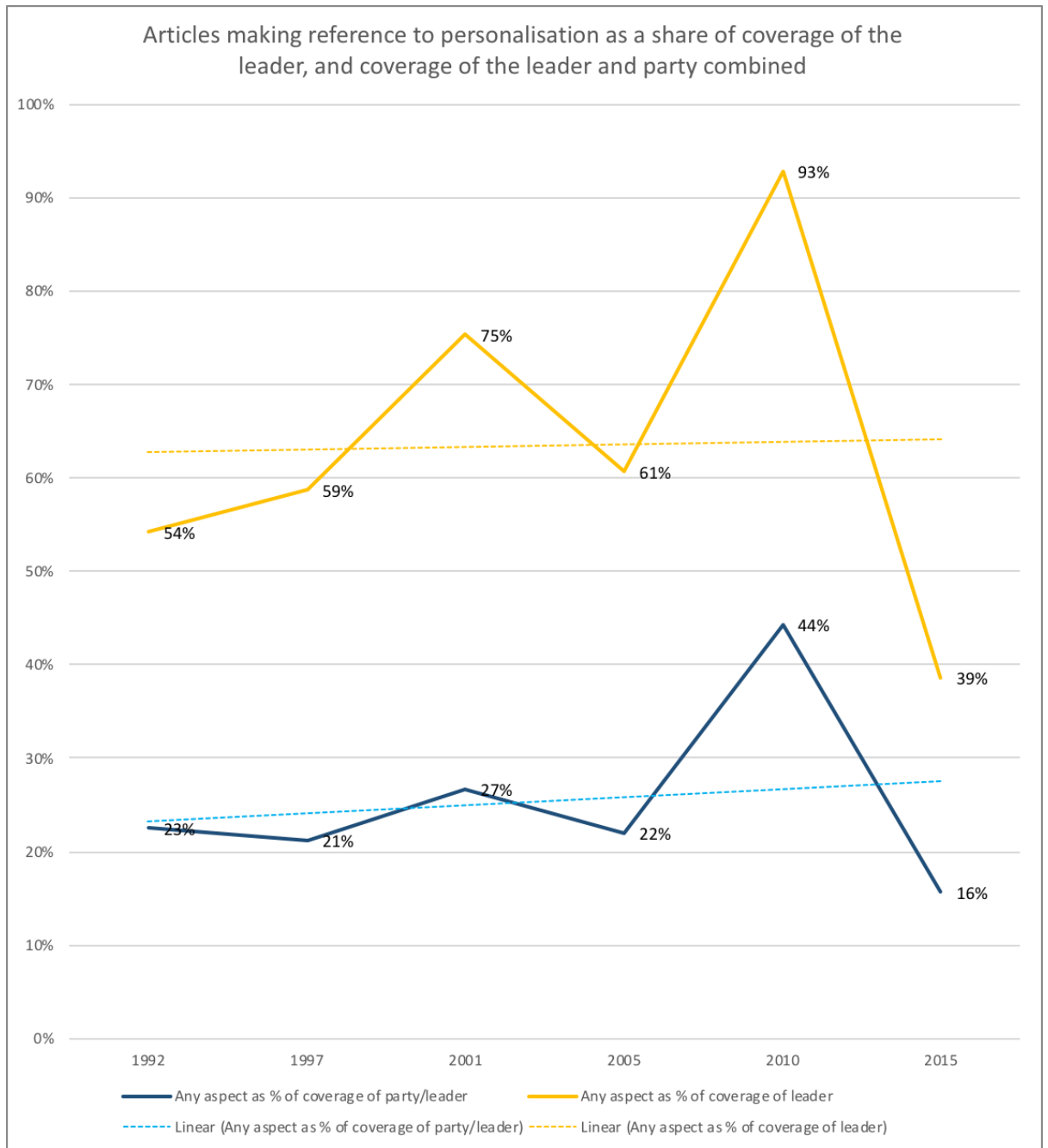
[R]esearch during elections in several countries has indicated that more candidate-centred campaigning is not necessarily associated with a greater emphasis on leaders' personal qualities (Langer, 2011:79-80)

In summary the extent and type of personalisation of coverage throughout the 1988-2015 period for Liberal Democrat leaders in General Election campaigns could be summarised thus:

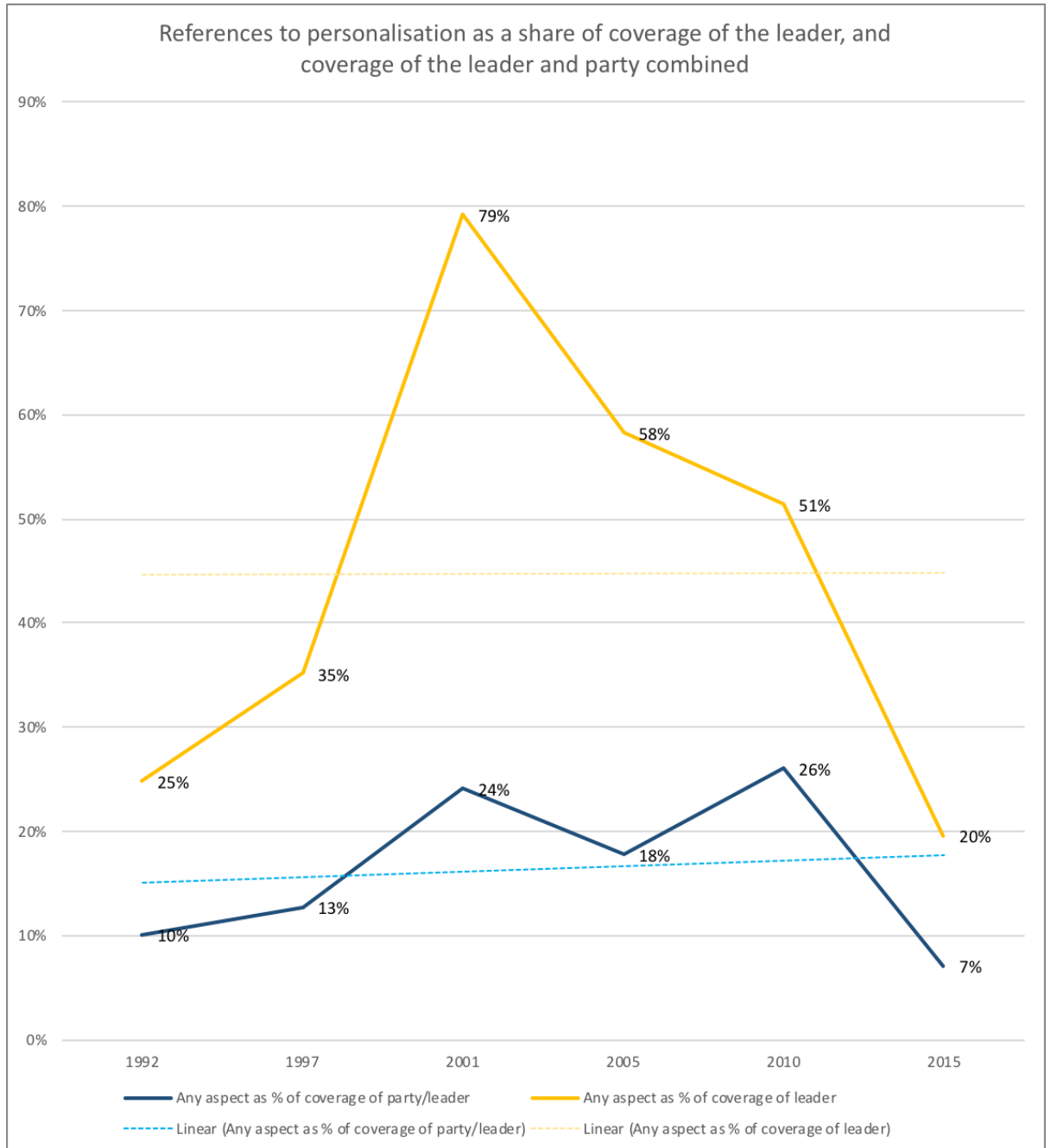
**Table 36- Personalisation of coverage for Ashdown, Kennedy and Clegg**

	Visibility (references)	Visibility (articles)	Key personalised aspect of coverage
Ashdown	0.63	0.65	Qualities/Characteristics
Kennedy	0.44	0.56	Qualities (particularly 2001) / Characteristics
Clegg	0.77	0.83	Markedly higher focus on characteristics
Average	0.60	0.68	

**Figure 21- Articles making reference to personalisation as a share of coverage of the leader, and coverage of the leader and party combined in General Elections 1992-2015**  
 Source: content analysis by author

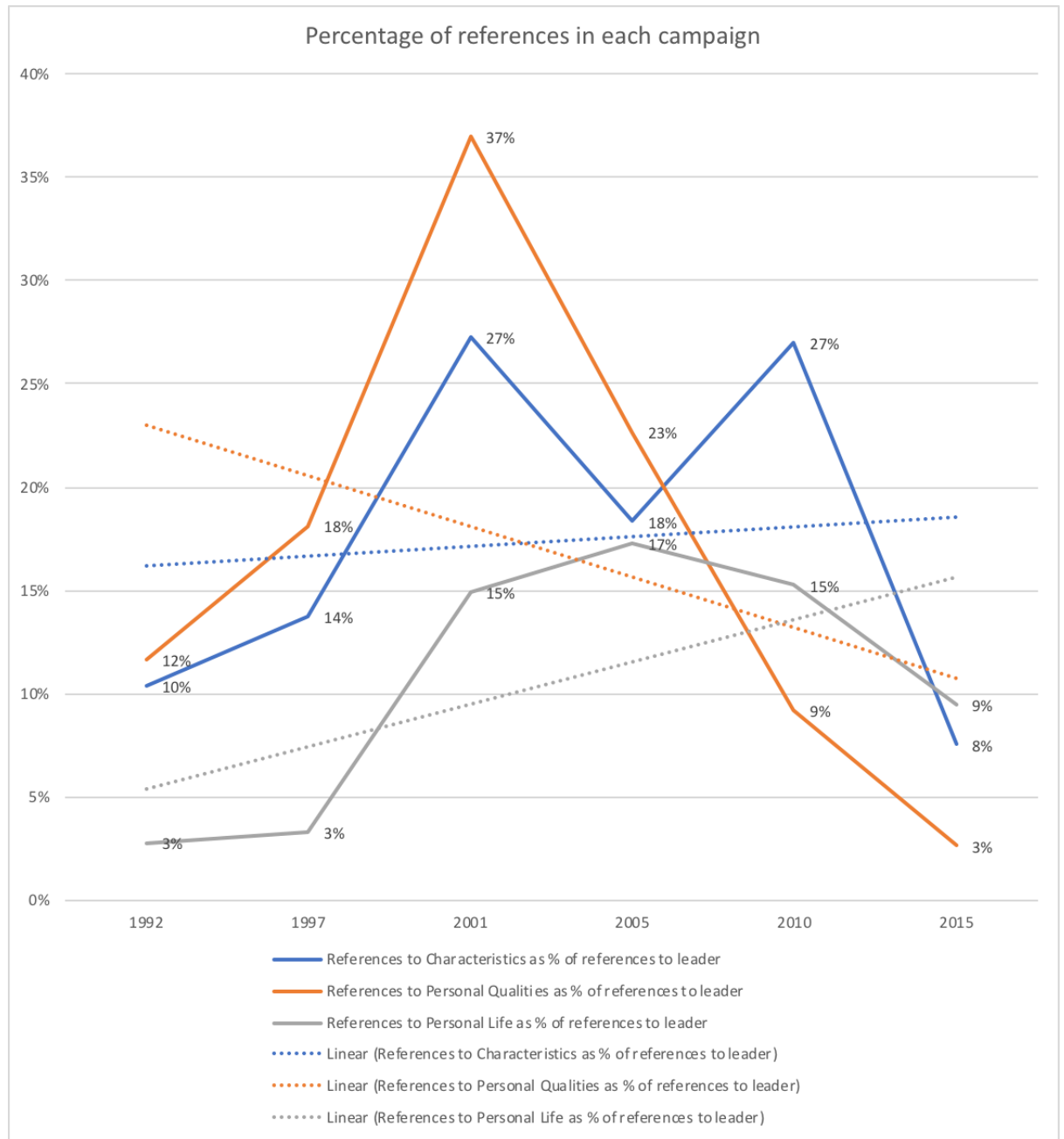


**Figure 22 References to personalisation as a share of coverage of the leader, and coverage of the leader and party combined in General Elections 1992-2015**  
 Source: content analysis by author

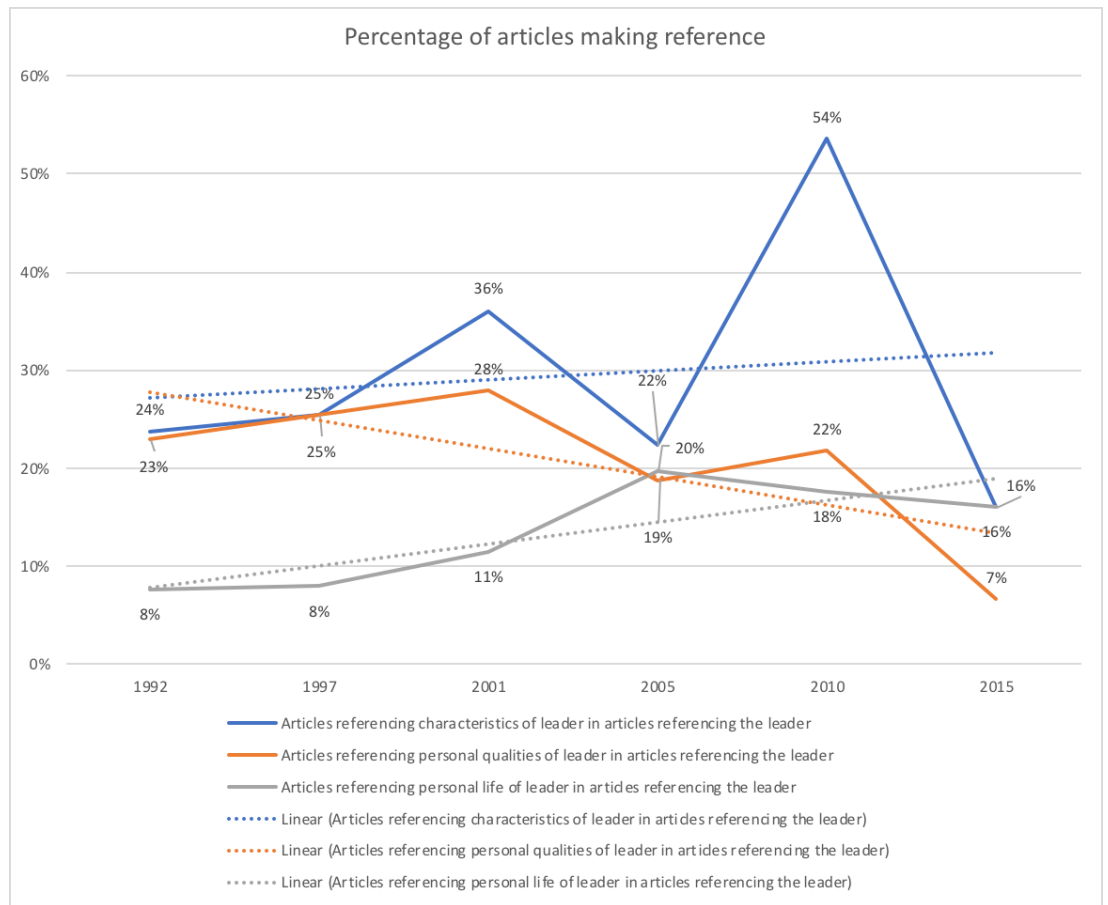




**Figure 23- References of X as a percentage of the references made to the leader in General Elections 1992-2015**  
**Source: content analysis by author**



**Figure 24- Articles making reference to X as a percentage of the articles with reference made to the leader in General Elections 1992-2015**  
**Source: content analysis by author**



**Table 37- Consolidated table of the number of references made relating to the personalisation of leader in elections 1992-2015**

Source: content analysis by author

<b>Mentions</b>	<b>1992</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>All Samples</b>
References to the leader	<b>395</b>	<b>182</b>	154	278	<b>1188</b>	<b>306</b>	2503
Reference to Characteristics of Politicians	<b>41</b>	<b>25</b>	42	51	<b>321</b>	<b>23</b>	503
Reference to Personal Qualities	<b>46</b>	<b>33</b>	57	63	<b>109</b>	<b>8</b>	316
Reference to Personal Life	<b>11</b>	<b>6</b>	23	48	<b>181</b>	<b>29</b>	298
Any aspect	<b>98</b>	<b>64</b>	122	162	<b>611</b>	<b>60</b>	1117
References to Characteristics as % of references to leader	<b>10%</b>	<b>14%</b>	27%	18%	<b>27%</b>	<b>8%</b>	20%
References to Personal Qualities as % of references to leader	<b>12%</b>	<b>18%</b>	37%	23%	<b>9%</b>	<b>3%</b>	13%
References to Personal Life as % of references to leader	<b>3%</b>	<b>3%</b>	15%	17%	<b>15%</b>	<b>9%</b>	12%
Any aspect as % of coverage of party/leader	<b>10%</b>	<b>13%</b>	24%	18%	<b>26%</b>	<b>7%</b>	18%
Any aspect as % of coverage of leader	<b>25%</b>	<b>35%</b>	79%	58%	<b>51%</b>	<b>20%</b>	45%

**Table 38- Consolidated table of the number of articles making reference to the personalisation of leader in elections 1992-2015**

Source: content analysis by author

Articles	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015	All Samples
Referencing the leader	<b>118</b>	<b>63</b>	61	112	<b>239</b>	<b>106</b>	699
Referencing Characteristics of Politicians	<b>28</b>	<b>16</b>	22	25	<b>128</b>	<b>17</b>	236
Referencing Personal Qualities	<b>27</b>	<b>16</b>	17	21	<b>52</b>	<b>7</b>	140
Referencing Personal Life	<b>9</b>	<b>5</b>	7	22	<b>42</b>	<b>17</b>	102
Any Aspect	<b>64</b>	<b>37</b>	46	68	<b>222</b>	<b>41</b>	478
Articles referencing characteristics of leader in articles referencing the leader	<b>24%</b>	<b>25%</b>	36%	22%	<b>54%</b>	<b>16%</b>	34%
Articles referencing personal qualities of leader in articles referencing the leader	<b>23%</b>	<b>25%</b>	28%	19%	<b>22%</b>	<b>7%</b>	20%
Articles referencing personal life of leader in articles referencing the leader	<b>8%</b>	<b>8%</b>	11%	20%	<b>18%</b>	<b>16%</b>	15%
Any aspect as % of coverage of party/leader	<b>23%</b>	<b>21%</b>	27%	22%	<b>44%</b>	<b>16%</b>	28%
Any aspect as % of coverage of leader	<b>54%</b>	<b>59%</b>	75%	61%	<b>93%</b>	<b>39%</b>	68%

**Coding Frame**

	Code 1= Yes, 0= No
Concentrated visibility	How many times is the political party mentioned within the unit of analysis?  How many times is the leader mentioned within the unit of analysis?
Personal qualities of politicians	EXAMPLES  How many times is the characteristic 'likeable' mentioned within the unit of analysis? How many times is 'normal' mentioned within the unit of analysis? How many times is 'personable' mentioned within the unit of analysis? How many times is 'loving' mentioned within the unit of analysis? How many times is 'humble' mentioned within the unit of analysis? How many times is 'funny' mentioned within the unit of analysis?
The characteristics of politicians	How many times is the characteristic of 'competence' mentioned within the unit of analysis? For example: the leader does not understand the office he or she is responsible for.  How many times is the characteristic of 'leadership' mentioned within the unit of analysis? For example: the leader failed to rally his or her party behind him or her.  How many times is the characteristic of 'credibility' mentioned within the unit of analysis? For example: a broken promise by the candidate in the previous elections, say on lower taxes

	<p>How many times is the characteristic of ‘credibility’ mentioned within the unit of analysis? For example: the leader is criticized by a family member for not keeping his or her promises to spend more time with his/her family</p> <p>How many times is the characteristic of ‘morality’ mentioned within the unit of analysis? For example: an investigation against the leader for accepting bribes or undermining the career of a rival.</p> <p>How many times is the characteristic of ‘morality’ mentioned within the unit of analysis? For example: the leader was caught cheating on his or her spouse</p> <p>How many times is the characteristic of ‘rhetorical skills’ mentioned within the unit of analysis? For example: a reference to a great speech by the leader in parliament</p> <p>How many times is the characteristic of ‘rhetorical skills’ mentioned within the unit of analysis? For example: a reference to a great speech by the leader in a private ceremony or to one made before he or she entered politics</p> <p>How many times is the characteristic of ‘appearance’ mentioned within the unit of analysis? For example: a reference to the ‘presidential appearance’ of the candidate.</p> <p>How many times is the characteristic of ‘appearance’ mentioned within the unit of analysis? For example: a reference to the past of the leader as a winner of a beauty pageant.</p>
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Personal Life	<p>Family life. This includes family relationships and all aspects of domestic life, including lifestyle choices, e.g. car choice, recycling, smoking etc.</p> <p>Past life or upbringing. This includes all biographical information.</p> <p>Leisure time. This includes all information on hobbies, vacations, and recreational activities.</p> <p>Love life. This includes all information on sexual relationships, marriage and divorce</p> <p>Religion: this must be outside his/her official activities (e.g. visit to St Paul's Cathedral on Remembrance Day)</p>
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## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Alongside drawing conclusions from the analysis above, the opportunity to draw on the perspectives of each of the interviewees – particularly former party leaders – as to their overall considerations of the role, and how their fellow leaders performed in the role is something that can be offered in this work. Similar approaches have been offered previously, for example see (Brack et al., 2015), but the number of interviewees and common focus of interviews conducted for this work allows comparisons to be made. The importance of the breadth and depth of interviewees is also of note; all leaders, with the exception of the late Charles Kennedy, were interviewed at least once as part of this research, alongside a number of Chief of Staffs, key advisors and senior politicians from across the party's history. As such the first section of the conclusion will centre on the thoughts of leaders on leaders in their own words. This is augmented by figures close to various leaders. The second part of the conclusion will then pull together the threads established throughout the work and make clear conclusions on what this work demonstrates about Liberal Democrat leadership.

### Leaders on Leaders

The perspective of leaders on their predecessors and successors is particularly interesting when considering the impact they have on the party. When asked to consider what makes a good leader of the Liberal Democrats, and their perspectives on their colleagues there were a number of themes that emerged, which will be discussed. It is worth, however, recounting in length some of the thoughts that those in leadership positions at various times of the party's history shared. Charles Kennedy was not interviewed for this thesis, so considerations from those who served in significant roles – Dick Newby as his Chief of Staff, Shirley Williams who was leader in the House of Lords – have been drawn on to offer some perspective from this period in this section.

There was agreement from those interviewed that the role of the party leader was important for the Liberal Democrat – unsurprising in itself, but there was a common theme that the leader was perhaps more defining of the party as a whole, than perhaps had been the case for other parties of before

You more than epitomise a party these days. The public, the image that people have of the party is increasingly based in the face, the demeanour, the colour of tie, the suit, the cut of the jaw of the leader and you can't ask leaders... (Clegg, 2016a)



There was also general agreement that the leader was important in explaining the course the party had taken – supporting some of the conclusion of the second chapter in relation to the drivers of change – Shirley Williams commenting on the formation of the Coalition that it would not have happened under Kennedy:

I think it's unlikely, there's a chance Ming would have done it on the basis of national loyalty, there's a sense of responsibility. I don't think Charles could have done it at all, and I think it would have been very difficult for a non-Orange booker to have done that, the general thought in the back of everyone's minds was that a Coalition would always be with Labour (Williams, 2011)

Clegg, however, did point to the limitations of the leader in controlling some aspects of the party's course and the issues that it created for him:

We have this appalling culture which is so not fit for modern politics which is a very punctilious emphasis on collective decision making and all the rest of it and then when things go wrong almost exclusive responsibility is hoisted on the shoulders of the leader and at the same time he or she is neutered, like a political eunuch in the party. You can't have it both ways. (Clegg, 2016a)

Having led the party in government and in the face of more media scrutiny and opposition attack than any other it is perhaps the case that this observation is particular to his tenure- indeed it was shared only proactively in anyway by Paddy Ashdown, but is worth noting.

Aside from this Tim Farron pointed to the need for a leader to build an effective team to deliver on their priorities, and also to be guided as well as leading:

A good leader has got to be able to do two things, appoint the right people and know your own weaknesses and know where you have to fill in and take advice. It is a weird combination that you have to be egocentric enough to want be it and humble enough to take advice when doing it. (Farron, 2019)

Ashdown too pointed to this, in an interview with James and Brack,

I think one of the key qualities of the leader is to know their deficiencies, and therefore to compensate for them in the people they have around them. That was a lesson that probably took me a long time to learn. (Ashdown et al., 2015:457)

There were a number of general perspectives as to what made for an effective leader, which largely support the criteria advanced under the adapted Stark Model in the opening chapter. Ashdown's comments in this regard pertain largely to the second and third criterion. Whilst he places more importance on a leader's vision, this doesn't contradict the elements that are included in our model:

If somebody said to me what does a politician need I'd rank them in descending order: they need first of all courage. Without moral courage you cannot take the decisions you need to take. They need secondly a vision and thirdly, and its least important of the three, the capacity to communicate. (Ashdown, 2011)

He also agreed with the importance in leading a united party and acting as a unifier. Clegg too pointed to the importance of garnering attention at key moments for the party:

I realised over time being leader, is that 99% of what happens in politics is of course bollocks or makes no difference at all and is a huge amount of treading water (Clegg, 2016a)

This in itself was recognised by leaders in their colleagues, Ashdown noting that "Charles himself was a huge electoral asset" (Ashdown, 2011). The importance that the leader has was also summed up by Campbell in relation to how contrasting with a predecessor was usually an advantage:

The British public always tend to choose someone different the next time round. So, after Brown, they had Cameron, it is interesting as Theresa May is about as unlike Cameron as a Tory as you can get, so some people make their pitch on the basis that they are radically different from whoever has gone before. Very few people stand up and say 'I am the continuity candidate' (Campbell, 2019)

Tim Farron pointed to the need to clearly prioritise what the goals of leadership were, something that is clearly important from Chapter 1 and 2 in explaining change in leaderships, and also what the drivers of change were at various stages.

More than any other party it is about being outside of Parliament enlarging the numbers of the troops and it is about clarity. The most useful thing you can have as leader is being very clear what it is you are trying to achieve. You don't have to a list of just one thing, you can have more but it shouldn't be a very large number of things. If you are not clear what you are for, and what your mission is then you achieve nothing. (Farron, 2019)

In terms of supporting the conclusions of chapter one, the most succinct example, though all leaders supported most of the thesis, came from Clegg;

I think what won me through if I am being self-critical is not because I took a particularly good ideological position, it's because I was considered to be modern, fresh enough without being excessively divisive and appeared at that time to have an appeal to the media and beyond the party, which the party had a real appetite for at the time. (Clegg, 2016a)

This, in a quote, is the three criteria summed up and placed into the hierarchy advanced in Chapter One – Unity being most important, with ability to perform well in the media to garner

Attention of defining importance in his contest with his views on Policy being worthy of comment, but of least importance in explaining his victory.

Ultimately, each of the leaders interviewed referred to attributes that support the thesis advanced in the first chapter as to explaining what made for an effective leader, and success in a leadership race. Furthermore, the importance of the leader as a driver of change was also universally recognised by interviewees – though of course given their own work this was likely to the case – which supports at least the thrust of the conclusions found in Chapter Two. It is also important – and interesting - to consider the stylisation each leader has of others who also led the Liberal Democrats.

### **Leaders on Paddy Ashdown**

Ashdown's leadership was defining for the party's early years, and he himself was clear in what he sought to achieve in this period:

I was very conscious of one thing, the thing that really drove me. There is no bloody point in being a leader unless you know what you want to be leader for, there is no point in being a leader to just wallow in the bubble bath of leadership and I was absolutely clear that this would be a miserable job unless you were clear what you wanted it for (Ashdown, 2016b)

He sought to form the Liberal Democrats as a new party, 'greater than the sum' of its Liberal and SDP parts, garner attention and develop radical, distinctive policies (Ashdown, 2016b) This involved pushing the party membership beyond their collective natural position of comfort – notably to the point of the membership introducing a 'triple-lock' to limit his leeway in pursuing closer working relationships with Blair's New Labour. Crucially though, Ashdown would temper his wishes in the face of dissent, a clear example being on the name of the party, though it would occur throughout his leadership:

I have a rather strange view about the party... I think the party is a deeply irrational, frustrating, difficult, carpet chewingly annoying institution to lead, but it is nearly always right at the right decisions. I don't quite know how, I think it is because we are liberals (Ashdown, 2016b)

Ashdown's own conception of leadership placed emphasis on the role of ideas – the third criterion in the model advanced in Chapter One, he also placed emphasis on the need to cut through in the media, the second criterion. The was something identified too by Nick Clegg:

Paddy cut exactly the right identity at the time of a plucky, forthright leader and a small merry band of Lib Dems being constantly crushed underfoot by the bigger battalions in British Politics. I remember Paddy being interviewed after that disastrous [1989] European election result ...and his defiance was very attractive (Clegg, 2016a)

The importance of his manner in the coverage when he did cut through is also important and supports the contention in chapter 3 as to the importance of personal qualities of leaders in shaping voters' perceptions of the party. Ming Campbell also highlighted personal qualities and attributes of Ashdown as key to explaining his period of leadership:

Paddy was terribly impatient but that was borne out a huge desire to get things done, I mean Churchill used to write on the side of memos "action, this day", and Paddy had a real sense of that. I think people bring different qualities. Paddy brought energy.

He was into this question of the divided nation long before anyone else, and he did it by going out on fishing trawlers and going down mines and staying in housing estates and that kind of thing. Cometh the hour, cometh the man – he was exactly what we needed. (Campbell, 2019)

Something that ran through the interviews was the recurring reference to the personal qualities and decisions taken by Ashdown – there was less reference to the wider political landscape, with the exception of Blair's leadership of Labour, than would be the case for other leaders. In part this was because of the limited early prospects for the party to influence wider matters than in later years, but it also supports the points that interviewees were advancing – that Ashdown had taken on the task of making sure the party 'survived' by throwing himself into the role and defining this period through his own endeavours, alongside steady progression in local government and stunning by-election victories.

In terms of his own leadership, Ashdown recognised the contrasts between himself and others, including his successor Charles Kennedy. His observation as to the importance of this, and also how the needs and wants of the leader and party membership flux over time also underscores the contention of this work that the leader of the Liberal Democrats is of key importance in explaining the party's history:

I think the party chooses the leader it needs at that time...they chose me when they needed a sort of commando climber who would go up the rock face and drag them up behind, after 11 years they got fed up with me and quite rightly so, I got a bit fed with them and we were getting grumpy towards each other... I think they got bored of it and I was getting grumpy with them though I love them to bits, so they chose who? They chose Charles who was exactly the right person. (Ashdown, 2016b)

### **Leaders on Charles Kennedy**

The transition from Ashdown to Kennedy in leadership style was noted, with several interviewees pointing to Kennedy's ability in the media – something discussed in particular in Chapters One and Three. Tim Farron succinctly summarised the view that:

Charles' great strength was being out there doing the media and being a vehicle for us. When he is on form there is no one better (Farron, 2011)

This was a view shared by Nick Clegg:

I saw Charles as what he was, a wonderful communicator, there was a lovely common touch about him, an ease about him . (Clegg, 2016a)

In contrast, Cable points to what he recalled as difficulties in Charles in cutting through in the media – though notably this is not a comment on his performances when he did:

Very often the problem we had was being heard at all – I was a great fan of Charles, but you could go a whole month and there would be no Lib Dem in the media at all. (Cable, 2017)

Others too pointed to his media performances and communications skills as being especially important to his leadership, whilst there was a range of observations as to his approach to the tasks he faced as leader in terms of positioning the party and developing a narrative and policy agenda. Cable notes this change in approach,

With Charles it changed. He was less enamoured of the Blairite government, he was much more concerned with distinctiveness, thinking through strategic positioning and I think making much more explicit that we were an alternative party of the left which was never quite the same with Paddy, though it was there. (Cable, 2017)

Clegg also reflects the shift in the party through this period, though suggests that Kennedy's agenda was grounded in opposition politics, rather than a cohesive ideology:

he self-evidently wasn't as interested in ideas and policy as Paddy was. less to do with Charles and more the circumstances at the time as Labour and perhaps more Blair sucked up to big business and so on, the party did go in quite a sharply anti-business, higher tax... it certainly was not the Liberalism of Grimond or even Ashdown.

I am not going to pretend I felt massively uncomfortable about it, because I am not sure if it mattered, but it did feel at the time, very 'catch all'. It was like putting up a great big sail, catching the cross currents and opposition to the government from all directions

It was effective opposition politics. It was opposition politics which was premised on the idea that the party would continue in opposition.(Clegg, 2016a)

and

[He] was a masterful positioner. He was very good at positioning and knowing what the right tone was and in that sense he was exactly right for that phase (Clegg, 2016a)

This is supported by, and reflected well in Campbell's summary of this period:

Charles was thought of as the amusing man in the pub, a nice guy with a turn of phrase but it was only when Iraq came along that things came together (Campbell, 2019)

The fact that Kennedy had less personal interest in policy but still comfortably secured the position of leader again suggests the notion of a hierarchy amongst leadership criteria holds true. The idea that Kennedy was less interested in policy, or that the party had become 'ideologically lazy' – a phrase used by one senior Liberal Democrat – is something that Kennedy's counterpart in the House of Lords from this period disagrees with:

The opposition to Labour was above all Iraq, Iraq dominates that period, I was leader of the party in the Lords, it was the biggest elephant in the room. We defined ourselves for the first time since, I suppose Jo Grimond really, as being against both the traditional parties and the nature of Iraq was Lib Dems on one side and Conservatives and Labour on the other (Williams, 2011)

Similarly, James Gurling – Kennedy's then brother-in-law and someone who worked closely with him, as well as holding several senior roles in the party said:

I think he was [interested in policy], I just don't think that he saw it as being his job to decree what the policy was. He'd been party president for two terms. He'd been involved in the policy all the way through, I don't think he as leader decided you know 'it's my job to tell the policy committee, what they should be thinking, or where they should be going'. In that sense he was a much more representative consensual - he might disagree with, what they came up with but he would 99.9% regurgitate the platforms that the party had decided to stand on.(Gurling, 2019)

In respect to the importance of the leader in defining the party through this time Ashdown felt that the party changed after his departure as leader:

I think the party became lazy- and the consequence of that was we didn't face up to some of the issues we should have to face up to, and some of these were economically liberal issues and in fact if anything economic liberalism weakened in that time because Grayson and Kennedy and others were very much more social liberals, so I think it weakened substantially and the party became intellectually very lazy. (Ashdown, 2011)

There was generally a clear agreement from all the leaders that Kennedy was an astute media performer, and that this was important. This supports the assertions of Chapters One and Three in this regard. The disagreement over how cohesive Kennedy's party was in this period in terms of ideology or policy approach is perhaps testament to the differing opinions on the matter held by those interviewed. As set out in Chapter Two there was a degree of change between Ashdown and Kennedy in style of leadership as well as philosophy and the critique, or lack, from some may pertain partly as to how much they agree or disagree with the direction of the party in this period – particularly for those more involved in the events.

## Leaders on Ming Campbell

As set out in the first chapter the leadership election in 2006 ultimately was defined by the need for unity in the party. Farron, who was Campbell's PPS, sums up his forte in this contest:

He was the safe pair of hands and had the endorsement of the big crowd. He had Paddy, he had Shirley Williams; generally, if you get those two in a Presidential or Leadership election you've won. And in the Parliamentary Party, of the 60 odd MPs, I think 30 plus MPs would have been on his side, maybe 40. Also he had been a good, solid Deputy Leader (Farron, 2019)

His ability to provide stability and unity was highlighted by all the leaders interviewed, as well as most others. Opinion divided moreso over his record as leader, some pointed to the limited success in the polls, blaming the media for their coverage of him, whilst others argue he was effective at rebuilding the party's internal machinery, and would have performed well had a snap election been called. Campbell himself points partly towards this latter threat as informing his tenure:

I did it more out of duty – I had turned down the chance to stand [in 1999] as I had seen at close quarters – I am good friends with David [Steel] – what a mess it can make of your life. It was summed up for me when I was at Stansted airport one Saturday night at 7 o'clock having spoken at a regional conference, getting on a plane to see my wife to come back to London at 4 o'clock the next day. I was reluctant. Perhaps if I had been more grasping things might have been better (Campbell, 2019)

Farron pointed to what he saw as some of the key successes of this period:

What Ming did was make sure there was a proper leaders office and it connected with Cowley Street, and it connected with the rest of the party and he developed talents of people. It was an open handed approach, so when people like Nick Harvey were brought back into the frontbench he's a massive asset. He had the boldness to do things differently (Farron, 2011)

Farron would make integrating his Leaders Office and LDHQ one of the first acts of his leadership in 2017, having seen up close the challenges that emerged through both Kennedy and Campbell's leaderships. (Farron, 2019). Alongside this Vince Cable pointed to what he saw as a shift in approach to readying the party, and an emphasis on credibility:

Ming ... was about getting us ready, the assumption was politics was changing, Cameron coming in, we might have a crucial role to play, probably with Labour but there wasn't absolute certainty about that but that it became much more the case before 2005 that we had to have policies that were credible and would stand up to critical examination (Cable, 2017)

Others were more critical of the overall purpose of his leadership, whilst there was common consensus from those closely involved that the party was ready for a 2007 Election, Clegg felt that this period lacked definition:

unfortunately it became quite obvious quite quickly, that Ming didn't really quite know what he wanted to do with the leadership of the party, [Ming is] a man I have huge respect for, by all merits there was gravitas ...but no-one could have predicted the savagery with which the British press quickly turned (Clegg, 2016a)

In respect to these comments they touch on the second and third criteria set out in Chapter One – garnering attention and development of policy; it is notable that neither of these featured prominently in the 2006 contest, and whilst there were notable achievements on Campbell's part in respect to the internal reforms by his own assessment it was these aspects that were more challenging in his tenure. What is clear, however, is that the party leadership stabilised through this period so that these aspects became more salient than they had been previously. In respect to the second chapter, whilst each of those interviewed pointed to some reforms Campbell made to processes, there was less emphasis on policy or positional development than in relation to other leaders, supporting the conclusion of the second chapter that the increased influence of those outside the party leadership in explaining change had been maintained.

### **Leaders on Nick Clegg**

Clegg won the narrowest victory of any Liberal Democrat leadership election and his tenure would see the party significantly develop before, and during, its time in government. As may be expected a number of the other leaders focussed on his presentational abilities – Farron noting that he had backed Clegg over Huhne, who he saw little between in other respects for such reasons:

The difference being that Nick would be better on the telly, and that was important for the party (Farron, 2019)

Ashdown too pointed to Clegg's ability to communicate as a key aspect of his leadership. The conclusions of Chapter Three in respect to the importance of leaders' debates, as well as conclusions in Chapters One and Two in regard to Clegg's advantage in Huhne in the 2007 leadership contest, and some of the reasoning as to how he drove key changes in his time as leader are supported by these observations:

when you have the decided then the capacity to articulate that to the public is absolutely crucial and the crucial element that I think Nick had which I think other politicians don't is the vital element, is in an age where people are fed up of politicians he has the capacity to speak like an ordinary person and do it in a rather direct fashion, this came across well in the leadership debates. (Ashdown, 2011)



Dick Newby argued that in contrast to others' views there was not a significant shift in policy, which would run counter to the conclusions of Chapter Two – though that contrary view was supported by others:

In term of content, the policies weren't very different but in terms of tone they were. Because Nick genuinely saw himself in the centre of British politics, Charles never did. He saw himself on the moderate left. That is why he had gone into the SDP so some of the language Nick used, Charles would have disagreed with and the whole concept Nick strongly believed in Charles didn't believe in. (Newby, 2016)

Newby's focus on the presentation of policies, and the narrative used to communicate them is persuasive, though does underplay the significance in policy changes through this period. In terms of broad approach, there was a continuity from Campbell's tenure as noted by the interim acting-leader Vince Cable:

Post 2005 it was all much more disciplined, and Charles was gone. Then Nick came in and it was very much about credibility and preparing for government. (Cable, 2017)

Campbell had a subtler observation that Clegg's leadership was not as strong as Ashdown's (as a comparison) in respect to commanding leadership, pointing more to the notion that he had built a loyalty around him:

So, it certainly was leadership in that it was taking the party into government – but he did so with massive endorsement. Of course, now everyone says 'oh I was against'

I think you've either got to have loyalty built in around you, or be sufficiently dominant that loyalty in a sense in imposed and Paddy was certainly the second of those, Nick wasn't in terms of personality (Campbell, 2019)

Clegg pointed to his policy developments ahead of the 2010 election as well as his battles for policy changes in government (Laws, 2016a) as being important in his time as leader:

making the tax allowance the centrepiece was probably the biggest shift and my focus on education and the pupil premium was my personal stamp (Clegg, 2016a)

Something that is also notable is that whilst many commentators pointed to Clegg's personal unpopularity amongst the wider public at the time of the 2015 election this was not something raised by any of the leaders interviewed. This omission contradicts some of the conclusions of Chapter Three, but the wider perception sustains it overall.

## **Key Conclusions**

The key question set out at the start of this work was who has led the Liberal Democrats, and what impact had each had on the party?

Firstly, the case of the Liberal Democrats has necessitated routinely adapting theoretical frameworks to allow for proper analysis. Models that have been previously applied have not proven adequate without some adaption to considering the case of third parties. By making these adaptations this work has made a contribution to furthering the literature in respect to the construction of analytical frameworks, and also – through their application – to the analysis conducted on the Liberal Democrats.

Through the course of three chapters the two parts of this key question have been comprehensively addressed – from setting out an explanation as to who won each contest, why and establishing an explanatory framework, to offering conclusions as to the extent to which leaders drove change in the party, and their roles in general election campaigns. Alongside this, other conclusions can be drawn as to the suitability of established academic frameworks in analysing the Liberal Democrats and several key adaptations that were required across the distinct approaches to take into account the differences between the third party in UK politics and the Conservative and Labour parties who have been subject to greater academic analysis. Additionally, the impact of a party that has always been in opposition entering government provides a tentative contribution in defining the differences between the two. Importantly, each chapter has drawn on interviews with key individuals in the party, which offer a unique contribution to the literature. Whilst it is unlikely all will agree with each conclusion offered, the broad consensus of the interviews supports many of them. In particular, as set out in the previous section, the interviews with those who have served as leader themselves offer strong support for a number of the conclusions made, and indeed for the contention of those who have established the theoretical frameworks to analyse such subjects. Clearly, the views of leaders themselves should not be taken as the final word on a subject – particularly when there must be a natural awareness that their comments reflect on their own tenure too – but where they do support – or contradict – assertions made by academics, journalists or others that are clearly useful sources to draw upon and consider.

### **Chapter One**

The first chapter showed that the model proposed by Leonard Stark in explaining which candidate is successful in leadership elections can be adapted for use in respect to Liberal Democrat leadership contests. This is necessitated by the fact the original model placed too

much emphasis on the prospect of securing office as a factor in leadership contests. Similarly, whilst policy interests were a factor in offering explanatory power, a broader conception of a would-be leader's proposed strategy provided greater context when seeking to explain this aspect of leadership contests. Both of these changes were made, as ultimately the original model proposed by Stark did not take into account the most likely and achievable goals for a third party: the ability of a leader to secure attention and media coverage is clearly more relevant than their suitability as a prime minister. Likewise, specific policy preferences are important, but how a leader would approach relations with the two larger parties is arguably more so; this compounded by the fact that the Liberal Democrats form policy through party conferences, so in theory – if not entirely in practice – the leader has less power in respect to specific policy than in the Conservative or Labour parties.

Considering the reasons for each of the candidates standing shows that most candidates sought to win, appendix one of the first chapter reflecting 9 of the 12 candidacies were with the intention of winning; one was to lay a marker, two sought to gain attention for a particular issue, or the candidate. Analysis of the four contests showed that on every occasion the successful candidate could be considered to be the most unifying – even if this was only as unifying as another candidate. This supports the hypothesis that unity is the most important criterion for a leadership candidate to convey. However, in terms of explaining success in leadership elections the perceived ability to secure coverage and cut through was more commonly the explanation for which candidate was successful. In the 1988 contest Ashdown was stronger in this respect than Beith, in the 1999 contest Charles Kennedy was seen to be the strongest candidate and in 2007 Nick Clegg's narrow victory over Chris Huhne is best explained by his perceived strength in terms of his media performances. Indeed, it is only the 2006 contest, which was in the aftermath of Kennedy's forced departure that can be most explained by Campbell's strength in unifying the party. The role of candidates' strategies was of less importance, supporting the hypothesis that this was the least important of the three criteria. The clearest support for this hierarchy is the 2006 contest, where Huhne performed strongly against expectations but did not beat Campbell, despite arguably being stronger in terms of getting attention for the party and his overall strategy; this was because Campbell excelled at uniting the party at a time this was of particular importance. Furthermore the close proximity of the 2006 and 2007 contests emphasise this; Clegg won a contest against a backdrop of a largely united party, where small differences in policies became flashpoints of the campaign as opposed to the contest of 2006, where Campbell's ability to unify and that he was a 'safe pair of hands' were the most important qualities to convey. Furthermore, where candidates were perceived to be less unifying – for example by engaging in negative

campaigning, being less than forthright in a matter, or by not having a wide, diverse network of support, this acts a powerful explainer in why they were not more successful.

### Chapter One Conclusions:

**The most important factor in explaining who won Liberal Democrat leadership contests was the candidates perceived ability to attract positive media attention for the party.**

- Leonard Stark's framework for explaining leadership contests can be applied to the Liberal Democrats with some important adaptations.
- Most candidates for leadership of the party sought to win the contest – they were not primarily seeking to gain attention for a particular view, nor to lay a marker for a future contest
- The criteria identified as explaining the outcomes of leadership elections can be placed in hierarchical order of importance, and presented as a pyramid:  
Unity → Attention → Strategy
- Whilst the most unifying candidate always won, the ability to perform well in the media, and secure attention for the party explains most successes in leadership elections.

### Chapter Two

The second chapter applied an approach based on that of Harmel and Janda, and Bale to identifying and explaining change, and drivers of it in the Liberal Democrats. This once again makes a contribution to wider literature by utilising an adapted version of this established model, showing its flexibility and wider potential for application.

Bale built on the model set out by Harmel and Janda, in particular rightly suggesting that change can be driven by a leader, not just by a change in a leader. To make the model suitable for analysis of the Liberal Democrats the model which suggested another driver of change is electoral defeat has been adapted to being one of electoral performance, and furthermore the anticipation of electoral performance. This is something Bale makes reference to, however it deserves incorporating into this driver of change to provide more comprehensive explanations. The areas of change that Bale suggests broadly suit the Liberal Democrats, with some small changes to include changes to prominence given to policies, as well as policies themselves. This meant the framework utilised was:

### Areas of Change

- Changes the public face of the party – changes in leaders and key individuals
- Change in approach and organisation– for example changes in strategy, party structure, staffing or and approach to external events such as by-elections.
- Changes in policy or the prominence and focus given to policies.

### Drivers of Change

- The change of leader and/or changes in the priorities of the leader
- Electoral performance and/or anticipation of electoral performance
- Dominant factions

Alongside this, the role of equidistance is crucial in explaining the party's history and approach and warranted its own analysis; it formed a backdrop to many other decisions taken, and outcomes seen. The adoption, and dropping, of equidistance changes throughout the period in question.

The second chapter demonstrated that the leader of the Liberal Democrats is the primary driver of change throughout the history of the party, though electoral performance and those outside of the party leadership do offer explanatory power to changes in this time too. The period of greatest change were between 1988 and 92, with the establishment of the merged party; post 1997 general election and the increase in resource the party had to utilise; 2007-10 and Nick Clegg's leadership; 2010 onwards, with the party entering government. Sanderson-Nash points to the Mid-Term review post 1997 and the Bones Commission as key points of change – which they are, but the less formal developments in these other periods are of equal significance too. Additionally, the developments in 1988 to 1992 are defining in the sense that they established the Liberal Democrats as a sustainable, third party and lay the ground work for subsequent successes.

Ashdown was responsible for driving significant change in how the party looked – he was a dynamic, contrasting leader to other leaders and his predecessors – in how the party approached elections and was organised, and also in terms of policy. He was committed to ideas and leading a party that should be renowned for putting forward bold policy initiatives to appeal to the broad electorate. His strategies in seeking to displace Labour, then to work with them against the Conservatives and then to consider a realignment show his importance in explaining change, and the extent to which he delivered that in the party's approach to equidistance. Ashdown's response to external events – notably on Hong Kong passports, but also to Blair's assuming leadership of Labour are also critical to explaining this period. The

approach the party took to prioritising achievable goals in the 1988-1992 period also cannot be ignored in what it did to define the party in subsequent years - squeezing support of the continuity-SDP, winning seats in and taking control of local councils, and becoming known for significant by-election wins all built the party's credibility going into the 1992 election. The electoral performance in 1997 was also significant in seeing the party have additional resource, a greater number of MPs and network of staff and was a significant driver of change. To a lesser extent the role of factions did at times influence the development of the party – most notable the introduction of the triple-lock to limit the leader's power in regard to electoral arrangements in the latter part of Ashdown's leadership.

Kennedy's leadership saw more limited change in several areas; the public face of the party did not significantly develop, with a couple of notable exceptions following the 2003 reshuffle with people like Vince Cable given more prominent roles. Where he was defining was on the issue of Iraq and the party's response to it. This consolidated a return to equidistance, which he had begun by cooling relations with Labour after he assumed the leadership. This was a significant change that underpinned to move to position the party as the real opposition to Labour in the 2005 contest – a significant shift from the Joint Cabinet Committees which he inherited from Ashdown. Of more significance in this period than in the preceding ones were the role of factions, including the publication of *The Orange Book*. The larger parliamentary party accommodated more discussion about the party's direction than had perhaps been seen before, though Kennedy's own tolerance of the discussion probably fuelled this perception. Kennedy's own approach to policy development also gave more space to spokespeople and others to advance their own views and ideas; Kennedy himself taking more interest in the bigger picture offer that the party was making than the minutiae of each Federal Policy Committee paper – a contrast to Ashdown

Campbell's time as leader was also defined by low-medium levels of change, though his role in uniting the party and stabilising it are clearly of importance. His role in promoting new MPs to frontbench roles- particularly Chris Huhne and Nick Clegg – was clearly a change in approach driven by him. Whilst policy development was limited, Campbell showed more engagement with issues than previously – including speaking in motions at party conference.

Clegg's leadership is one a sizeable change, driven by him and those involved in his leadership. The most limited aspect of change was in those in key frontbench roles ahead of the 2010 election, though once the party entered government the public face developed hugely. The formalisation of factions was also of significance to this period, and the party's period in office. In terms of policy prospectus, the 2010 manifesto had developed significantly from the 2005 offering – and the unpublished 2007 draft – and was driven by the leadership. Aside

from the inclusion of the policy to abolish tuition fees most of the document was entirely in line with the leaderships wishes and reflects the extent to which they had driven the policy process. Alongside his leadership, clearly the electoral performance of 2010 hugely explains the developments seen between 2010 and 2015; indeed, it is a prism through which every other decision has to be seen. Whilst there was more internal discussion and factions playing a prominent role in this, most key decisions in this period were driven, relate to the leader.

### Chapter Two Conclusions

**The Leader and their preferences is the greatest driver of change within the Liberal Democrats, with the greatest extent of change occurring under Ashdown and Clegg's leaderships.**

- The approach utilised by Tim Bale for explaining change and drivers of change can be adapted for use in analysis of the Liberal Democrats
- The role of equidistance is a crucial consideration in explaining change in the party.
- Between 1988 and 1999 the greatest extent of change was explained by Paddy Ashdown's preferences, though the electoral performance in 1997 was of importance and significance in explaining the 1997 period onwards.
- There was lower levels of change in the public face of the party and policy than previously. Whilst big shifts in approach were undertaken, and driven by the leader, the role of factions increased in the 2001 parliament.
- Campbell oversaw limited but important changes, with the start of a return to equidistance and the role of factions continuing to play a part in explaining the drivers of change.
- The electoral performance of the Liberal Democrats in 2010 frames every change and development subsequent to it, but throughout that period and since his election as leader Nick Clegg and his leadership is crucial in explaining the main changes in the party from his assuming office in 2007 until 2015.
- The Leader and their preferences explain the greatest amount of change in the Liberal Democrats between 1988 and 2015
- The preferences of factions and electoral performance are also significant explainers of change in the party between 1988 and 2015. Electoral performance which saw a significant change in resource – 1997 and 2010 notably, are of particular importance as a driver for change.

### **Chapter Three**

Chapter Three applied Langer's approach to analysing leaders and the coverage of them, specifically in relation to general elections.

In contrast to chapters one and two, there was not a need to adapt the framework to take into account the role of the Liberal Democrats as a third party – by nature of the study that was not as relevant as in Chapter One and Two in regard to this part of the analysis. However, whilst using the framework set out by Van Aelst et al, this was adapted to include consideration to personal qualities, as proposed by Langer. The adaptation of the coding frame is a contribution to wider study in itself, allowing for more descriptive, comprehensive and nuanced conclusions.:

- To what extent have the general elections campaigns, and the subsequent coverage, of Liberal Democrat campaigns, and leaders, been personalised?
- Has this increased or decreased over time?
- Why this development – where there is one – has occurred?

As such the changes made to the coding frame offered by Van Aelst et al. is very important before conclusions can be drawn as to the level of personalisation, and how that is manifested, that has occurred in coverage, a key question for this chapter – which sought to establish

Before turning to conclusions from that analysis, something that was apparent from interviews, looking at the nature of the party's campaigns – party political broadcasts, literature etc – the Liberal Democrats made significant use of the leader during general election campaigns. This included quotes and clips provided to broadcast news – where the proportion of Liberal Democrat quotes coming from the leader rather than other spokespeople was consistently higher than other parties.

Turning to consider the analysis of newspaper coverage, which applied an approach similar to Langer and that set out by Van Aelst et al., it was clear that there was a greater concentration of coverage for the Liberal Democrat leaders in elections where the outcome was less certain – namely 1992, 2010 and 2015, but there was no overall trend of an increase or decrease in visibility

In addition to this, there was evidence to suggest that leaders received a higher level of visibility in coverage about the Liberal Democrats' campaign in the first election they were leader; the exception to this was Kennedy's leadership where it was comparable in each, though removing coverage of the birth of his child would impact this marginally.



In respect to the personalisation of coverage there is something of a mixed picture. Firstly, Clegg's performance and coverage in the 2010 election was atypical; 93% of articles mentioning him contained a personalised factor - which was 44% of the overall coverage of the party's campaign. Coverage of Kennedy's leadership, however, was the most personalised. There was an upward trend in personalisation of coverage until 2015, which is in part down to the spike in personalised coverage Clegg received in 2010, but the personalisation of coverage fell significantly, probably in part he was more well-known having been Deputy Prime Minister for 5 years. This is an interesting area for further study – a comparison with other figures who enter government would be interesting – for example the personalisation of Blair or Cameron's coverage as they entered office and sought re-election.

In respect to the nature of the personalised coverage, there is an upward trend in relation to mentions of leaders' personal lives over the 6 general election campaigns analysed. Furthermore, in the elections where a balanced parliament was most seen as a possibility – 1992, 2010, 2015 – there was an increased proportion in articles featuring reference to a leader's characteristics, suggesting the scrutiny leaders receive in campaigns where there is a prospect of them holding office changes. This would seem a credible hypothesis and is borne out by the evidence here. In respect to the personal qualities of leaders, with the exception of Kennedy's 2001 campaign there has been a downward trend in this personalised coverage.

### Chapter Three Conclusions

**Coverage of Liberal Democrat leaders became more personalised until 2015 in general election campaigns and when a balanced parliament is considered a possible or likely outcome, the extent and personalisation of coverage increases.**

- Langer's approach to analysing personalisation of political coverage is appropriate for applying to the cases of Liberal Democrat leaders
- Studies of personalisation should include consideration of personal characteristics, personal qualities and personal life as distinct features.
- The Liberal Democrats' leaders played a key role in the party's campaigns – in some measures more so than other leaders of other parties in respect to proportion of national 'air war' coverage they secure.
- There is no consistent trend in the concentrated visibility of the Liberal Democrat leader in general election campaign coverage.
- Liberal Democrat leaders receive more concentrated coverage in general election campaigns where a balanced parliament is considered a possible, or likely outcome.

- The concentrated visibility of Liberal Democrat leaders is usually higher in the first election they are leader.
- Coverage of election campaigns under Charles Kennedy's leadership were the most personalised.
- There is some evidence to suggest that following a period in office, personalisation of coverage reduces.
- There has been an upward trend in focus on the personal lives of leaders in general election campaigns
- There has been a downward trend in focus on the personal qualities of leaders in general election campaigns since the 2005 campaign.
- When the prospect of a leader holding office is more likely, personalised coverage is focussed more on their characteristics than in other campaigns.
- Overall, until the 2015 campaign, the personalisation of coverage of Liberal Democrat leaders had been increasing, and changing, and this would likely have maintained in a similar manner had the electoral prospects of the party not altered so radically

### **Key Conclusion**

Taking all this together and returning to the key questions set out at the start of this thesis, it has been clearly demonstrated that to become leader of the Liberal Democrats a candidate must be seen as the most unifying in the field, and then the strongest at gaining attention for the party and then have the strongest support for their strategy. It is usually the perceived ability to gain attention that explains who wins a Liberal Democrats leadership contest. In terms of whether it matters who wins a contest – that is the influence a leader has once in office – it is clear from chapters two and three that it is of crucial importance to explaining the drivers of change and changes that have happened in the Liberal Democrats between 1988 and 2015. It is also the case that the general election campaigns of the party rely heavily on the leader and their performance.

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