

Britain: what the Liberal Democrats' leadership contest reveals about New Labour

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The election to choose Paddy Ashdown's successor as leader of the Liberal Democrats said as much about the present state of the Labour government as it did about Britain's third party.

Charles Kennedy won the contest, much to the relief of Prime Minister Tony Blair. For Kennedy was the favoured candidate of Ashdown, due to his commitment to continuing the relationship the Lib-Dem leader has built with Blair and his government. The narrowness of Kennedy's victory showed how shaky this relationship has become, however. This is due in no small part to the growing public hostility to the government's attacks on social conditions and authoritarian disregard for democratic rights.

Kennedy took four rounds before reaching the 50 percent needed to knock out his main challenger, Simon Hughes. It is a sign of the times that Hughes was privately portrayed by the Labour leader in language normally reserved for the left of his own party—as an “extremist”. Fearing the growing animosity towards cross-party collaboration, he openly backed Kennedy. Blair even told the press that if the Lib-Dems positioned themselves to Labour's left on social questions, their party's electoral prospects would be harmed.

A Hughes victory would have effectively stymied one of Blair's key long-term aims—the merging the two parties, in order to heal the breach that began with Labour's formation in 1906 through a break by the trade unions from the old Liberal Party. Blair considers this initial—and ultimately failed—attempt by the working class to establish its own party to have been a tragic mistake. Unification for him would be the final blow in his campaign to eradicate the very concept of class from British political life.

Just how far Labour's degeneration and abandonment

of its reformist past has gone is evidenced by the fact that it is the Liberals who are now portrayed as the left-wing utopians, as compared to Blair's party, with its “realistic” pro-market policies. When the crisis-ridden Labour government of Jim Callaghan formed a pact with the Lib-Dem's forerunner, the Liberal Party, on March 23, 1977, there was outrage on the Labour Party's left. Arthur Scargill, then president of the Yorkshire area of the National Union of Mineworkers, said that the government “should not be prepared to stay in office on a mandate which is now contrary to that submitted in 1974”. The left Labour MP [Member of Parliament] Tony Benn was instrumental in suppressing this opposition, with a 1977 Labour conference speech in support of the government that ended with Liberals coming up and asking for his autograph.

Following Labour's defeat by Thatcher in May 1979, however, the animosities and divisions within the Labour Party exploded, with the election of nominal left-winger Michael Foot as party leader and Benn narrowly beaten as deputy leader by the right-winger Dennis Healy. A number of leading right-wingers known as the Gang of Four—Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Shirley Williams and William Rodgers—split in March 1981 to form the Social Democratic Party (SDP). Explicitly repudiating Labour's past connection with the trade unions and its constitutional commitment to public ownership, the SDP won the support of 13 Labour MPs and one Conservative.

The SDP was to fall under the leadership of Owen. One of its later recruits was none other than Charles Kennedy, who entered parliament at the 1983 General Election as an SDP MP.

In 1987, after years in alliance, the majority of the SDP voted, against Owen's advice, for merger with the

Liberals to form the Liberal Democrats. At the time, Kennedy declared that there was no place in British politics for a fourth party. But many of his SDP mentors have, in the meantime, decided that there is no place for a third. Roy, now Lord, Jenkins is considered an ideological mentor by Blair and a key player in what he has modestly dubbed *The Project* of merging the Lib-Dems with New Labour. Other leading SDP members in Blair's inner coterie include Roger Liddle of his policy unit, and Lord Newby and Sir Ian Wrigglesworth—lobbyists closely involved in the creation of the SDP and contacts of Kennedy.

Kennedy won the backing of Lord Jenkins and Shirley Williams because of his early endorsement of establishing a working relationship with Labour while the Tories were still in office. But he has had to face both ways on the question, in order to maintain support within his own party. After the 1997 General Election, he warned Paddy Ashdown that there would be "blood on the carpet" if cross-party co-operation went too far. He has played a double game ever since. Following his election as Lib-Dem leader, he denounced growing social inequality, called for a more equitable tax system and said that New Labour was deaf to the voices of the "disadvantaged and the dispossessed".

It is hardly difficult for anyone in politics today to appear to the left of Labour. But Kennedy's feigned concern for the poor notwithstanding, the only substantive policy difference between the two parties on social questions is the Lib-Dems' call for a one pence rise in the basic rate of income tax to fund health and education. Contrary to Blair's claims, this slight doffing of the cap to social issues helped win the Lib-Dems control of Labour strongholds Sheffield and Stockport in May's local elections. The main expression of anti-Labour feeling, however, was the refusal to vote at all by 80 percent of the electorate.

Blair's political considerations regarding the events surrounding the Liberal Democrats leadership contest, as in all things, extend no further than the closed environs of Parliament. This narrow view was also reflected throughout the press. The questions regularly posed were along the lines: Would a move to the left by the Lib-Dems win disillusioned Labour voters? Would this strengthen Labour's left wing and handicap Blair's attempt to marginalise them? Would it encourage the Conservatives to move back to the centre ground in

order to mount their own challenge to Blair?

But the contest raised more fundamental questions regarding the stage reached by social and political relations in Britain. It is a remarkable state of affairs when the Liberal Democrats—led by a former member of the SDP renegades—are not only able to make political capital from Labour's attacks on working people, but feel the necessity to do so. The Liberal Democrats have long been the political home of the comfortable middle classes. Today, even these layers are beginning to feel the impact of the destruction of social conditions. Unlike Blair and the narrow privileged layer he represents, they live amongst and share common experiences with the broad mass of working people who have suffered a terrible erosion of their living conditions.

How much greater must be the grievances towards and alienation from Labour within the working class? At the moment this can find no expression due to the domination of political life by the pro-business parties and the absence of an alternative socialist perspective amongst wide layers of the population. This is only a temporary state of affairs. The ever widening social polarisation between rich and poor must inevitably provoke an escalation in the class struggle and a political reawakening amongst working people. Under such conditions, a possible resurgence of the Liberal Democrats will be the least of Blair's problems.



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