

Britain: Liberal Democrats' new leader shifts party to the right

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11 March 2006

Menzies Campbell was elected leader of the Liberal Democrats, Britain's third largest parliamentary party, on March 2. Campbell, formerly the party's deputy leader and foreign affairs spokesman, won 57 percent of the vote in a ballot of party members.

The ballot was the result of a political putsch that saw Charles Kennedy forced out as Liberal Democrat leader by his own Members of Parliament (MPs) in January. Kennedy, who led the party for six years, was one of the few politicians within Parliament to oppose the US-led war against Iraq. He addressed the million-plus demonstration in London in February 2003 protesting the coming invasion.

Sections of the Liberal Democrats were opposed to Kennedy identifying himself with the mass extra-parliamentary oppositional movement. Campbell is reported to have criticised Kennedy's decision to appear on the February demonstration, and the Liberal Democrat leader never appeared at any subsequent anti-war protests.

In 2004, a number of leading Liberal Democrats produced *The Orange Book: Reclaiming Liberalism*. Its publication exposed long-standing divisions over whether the Liberal Democrats should position themselves to the left of Labour, or move to the right so as to win support amongst former Conservative Party (Tory) voters disillusioned by their own party's electoral failures.

In a series of 10 essays, the *Orange Book* came down firmly in favour of the latter, calling for the party to refashion itself as the champion of "free market" capitalism. In their essays, Vince Cable and Nick Clegg said that the party should jettison its positive support for the European Union in favour of restoring the power of national governments, whilst David Laws argued for abolishing the state-run National Health Service and replacing it with an insurance scheme embracing the private sector. The party had wrongly set its face against "economic liberalism" because of that policy's

association with former Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Laws argued.

Kennedy had signed a foreword to the book, in which he claimed that its "creative political thinking" was proof that the party was "not afraid to look anew at the challenges facing Britain." But such a thorough break with existing Liberal Democrat policies could not be accomplished without significant upheaval within the party.

In the May 2005 general election, the Liberal Democrats' opposition to the Iraq war and their calls for an increase in taxes on the rich to finance health and education resulted in their benefiting from a massive swing against Labour, especially in the Labour Party's traditional inner-city strongholds.

But to the alarm of the *Orange Book*'s supporters, these same policies of limited social reform alienated Conservative constituencies, and the Liberal Democrats actually lost seats to the Tories.

The issue came to a head in December, when the Tories selected David Cameron as their new leader. A young and relatively unknown political figure, Cameron's brief was to distance the Tories from their Thatcherite past, without abandoning any of the party's right-wing economic nostrums.

In a comment at the time, BBC News's political editor Brian Wheeler speculated that Kennedy could be Cameron's "first scalp." While the majority of Liberal Democrat members were "traditional, left-leaning liberals," he wrote, "many of the party's brightest frontbenchers are much more right-wing." In fact, those around the *Orange Book* "would not sound out of place in Mr. Cameron's 'Compassionate Conservative' Party," Wheeler wrote.

In just one month, Kennedy had been pushed out by his own MPs in a palace coup that made the one that unseated Thatcher as Tory leader in 1990 look tame by

comparison. In early January, amidst a whispering campaign among the Liberal Democrats and in the media, Kennedy was forced to publicly confess that he had a history of alcoholism, for which he was undergoing treatment.

His admission came after he had been contacted by Independent Television News (ITN) on January 5 to inform him that it would be running an item refuting his previous denials of a “drinking problem.” ITN’s political correspondent Daisy McAndrew had worked as Kennedy’s press spokesperson for two years and had, since going to work for ITN, kept contact with sources within the Liberal Democrats.

Kennedy initially sought to appeal to the membership to save his political neck. On January 6, he made a personal statement before the media about his 18-month battle with alcoholism. The “issue is essentially resolved,” he said.

Challenging his critics to face him publicly, Kennedy announced a snap leadership contest. But, in the face of widespread support for him amongst the members, the parliamentary party openly rebelled.

On January 7, the *Orange Book*’s Vince Cable warned that he would deliver a letter signed by 11 shadow ministers urging Kennedy to stand down. Amidst reports that just 13 out of 62 MPs were prepared to back him, Kennedy announced his resignation.

There followed one of the dirtiest leadership challenges in recent memory. In what appears to have been a series of tit-for-tat revelations, *Orange Book* essayist Mark Oaten’s candidacy for leadership was brought down by lurid revelations that the married father of two had been involved in gay sex sessions with a male prostitute.

Next, the party president, Simon Hughes, the “left” candidate for leadership, was hit by the exposure of details of his own homosexuality—although he refused to withdraw from the contest. In the final result, Hughes came third, behind the “mainstream” candidate Chris Huhne in second place and Campbell in first.

Campbell is regarded as a “safe pair of hands” whose experience as the party’s foreign affairs spokesman is expected to stand him in good stead. He had presented himself as a conciliatory figure between the two wings of the party, despite winning the backing of *Orange Book* supporters for his leadership bid.

It has been suggested that a factor in their support for Campbell is that, at 64 years of age, he will not be able to continue as leader for an extended period, by which time the right wing will have consolidated their forces.

In the event, Campbell has made clear where his

political sympathies lie. At the party’s March 4 spring conference immediately following the ballot result, Campbell won a vote in favour of the partial privatisation of Royal Mail, the UK’s national postal service. A similar plan had been overwhelmingly rejected by the party conference in autumn of last year, with complaints from some that Kennedy had not thrown his weight behind the proposal vigorously enough.

This time round, Campbell insisted that the party should back a watered-down version of the privatisation policy in order to demonstrate that it was “fit for government.” He told the conference, “We are moving out of the comfort zone of opposition politics. We must make three party politics a credible reality.”

The new leader is also seeking to distance the party from its previous policy of raising the top rate of tax to 50 percent for those earning more than £100,000 per annum. In his conference speech, he warned against becoming “fixated” with the 50 percent top rate, saying the tax system should be based on three principles: less tax for the poor, help for the environment, and “support enterprise not stifle it.”

Campbell has subsequently promoted many from the party’s right wing to leadership positions, including Clegg, Cable and Laws. As the party’s new home affairs spokesman, Clegg has made clear he intends to drive forward the policies of “tough liberalism” by sharpening up the party’s line on crime and rebutting claims that it is “soft” on law and order.

David Laws, the party spokesman for work and pensions, has unveiled plans to remove welfare benefits from lone mothers. Laws told the spring conference that the UK’s benefit rules “are totally out of kilter with every other developed country.”

Currently, single unemployed mothers cannot be struck off benefits until their youngest child is 16 years of age. Announcing that mothers had to “look after themselves and their families and not rely on the benefits system for 20 years,” Laws has called for benefits to end when a child reaches 12 years.



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