

Britain: Lib Dem conference backs coalition with Tories

Julie Hyland
19 May 2010

On Sunday, a special conference of Liberal Democrat members overwhelmingly endorsed the leadership's decision to form a coalition government with the Conservative Party.

Party leader Nick Clegg had previously secured the backing of most of his MPs and the federal executive for the move, paving the way for its announcement on May 12.

This meant he was freed of any constitutional obligation to convene a special conference of members to ratify the deal. But Clegg had no reason to avoid such a discussion. Barely any of the 2,000 delegates in attendance voted against the resolution to support the coalition, "Building a fairer Britain in government".

According to Mark Pack, co-editor of the *Liberal Democrat Voice*, the "debate lasted nearly four hours, during which a few voices of opposition spoke out. The final vote, though, was so overwhelming (I made it about 98% to 2%) that Nick Clegg joked it had been rather North Korean in style".

Pack continued, "It was notable that all the ministers speaking during the debate described themselves as such—and were strongly applauded when they did. They were also regularly accosted by people congratulating them on their appointments".

Clegg told the conference that "the stakes are high", but "Real, big change never comes easy. So it would simply be wrong for us to let this chance of real change pass us by. The chance to transform politics, the chance to hardwire fairness into our society, the chance to change Britain for good".

The resolution stated that the Tory/Lib Dem coalition "has significant advantages for the country, for the implementation of progressive policies and for the creation of a more cooperative style of politics".

The "coalition agreement represents the best chance to create a stable government that can address the serious economic challenges facing the country in a fair and sustainable manner", it states, while making a series of points setting out the party's "long-term opposition to tuition fees, support for proportional representation for the

Commons and income and wealth inequality".

All this is completely cynical and meaningless.

The Tory/Lib Dem government is set to impose the most savage austerity measures in generations, which will destroy the living standards of millions of working people.

The agreed plan for an "accelerated reduction in the deficit" means that Tory proposals for cuts of £64 billion are on the cards, a collective reduction in GDP of 9.3 percent.

Already an additional £6 billion in spending cuts has been set out, and Chancellor George Osborne has announced a "review" of public spending and an emergency budget on June 22. This is the prelude to cuts in public sector pay and pensions, and the gutting of public provision.

Meanwhile, the government is set to cut corporation tax, in order to ensure a more "business-friendly" environment.

As for Lib Dem commitments to "democratic reform", it has already junked its pledge for the introduction of Proportional Representation, is supporting moves to raise to 55 percent the bar needed to move a no-confidence motion in parliament and is reportedly collaborating on plans to stuff the House of Lords with Tory-Lib Dem peers.

Its actions have exposed the claims by sections of the media, including the *Guardian* and the *Independent* newspapers, and others that the Lib Dems represented a "progressive" alternative in the election.

In similar vein, in the days following the announced pact between the Tories and Lib Dems, there was speculation that the coalition was doomed to fail because of the supposedly inevitable opposition from within Clegg's party.

The Lib Dems were "naturally" closer to Labour, it was argued. Many of its members would feel betrayed by being drawn into a coalition with the Tories.

Former Liberal Party leader David Steel was said to be concerned as to a coalition with the Tories while, writing in the *Observer*, former Lib Dem leader Charles Kennedy said, "It is hardly surprising that, for some of us at least, our political compass currently feels confused". He continued, "that really encapsulates the reasons why I felt personally unable to vote for this outcome when it was presented to

Liberal Democrat parliamentarians”.

Despite such “concerns”, Steel and Kennedy have come down full-square behind the government, with Steel insisting, “We have not only to hope this coalition works—we have got to make damn sure it does”.

Talk about the Lib Dems supposedly being “closer” to Labour ignores the fact that this is in no way a marker of Clegg’s party’s “progressive” character.

In the first instance, Labour is a right-wing bourgeois party—the architect of a historically unprecedented rise in social inequality during its 13 years in office, and of imperialist wars of conquest.

Secondly, the Lib Dems too had been explicit in making clear their commitment to the international finance markets in the run-up to the election. The party unveiled its manifesto at the headquarters of the Bloomberg financial information service in the City of London, where then-Economics spokesman Vincent Cable had insisted that at least £35 billion in public spending cuts were necessary.

Its manifesto spelt out the party’s commitment to extending the privatisation of health and education undertaken by Labour, and pledged to be a “critical supporter” of the ongoing invasion of Afghanistan.

If the Lib Dems were regarded as being to the “left” of Labour, this is mainly because Labour had moved so far to the right. But the ex-left groups are also responsible for perpetuating this mythology.

At the time of the mass demonstration against the Iraq invasion in 2003, for example, the Stop the War Coalition—led politically by the Socialist Workers Party—gave pride of place to Kennedy and the Lib Dems just days before they pledged their support for the war effort once it had begun. This was of a piece with the STWC claim that pressure on parliament and the United Nations could stop the war.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has also noted the extraordinarily friendly approach taken by Karen Reissman, an SWP’s candidate in the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, towards the Lib Dem spokesman at a hustings during the election in Manchester.

Clearly, the ex-left groups had big hopes for the Lib Dems in the election. Commenting on its aftermath, Hannah Sell for the Socialist Party claimed that its acceptance of the coalition was “only possible because the Liberal Democrats—although always a capitalist party—have suffered their own equivalent to Blairism.

“Clegg and his allies around the ‘Orange Book’ successfully fought to move the party to the right on a whole number of issues; particularly on economic questions.

“Radical Lib Dem MPs may be reluctantly acquiescing to the situation now”, she went on, “but the pressure on them

will be enormous when their ministers are proposing 22% cuts in public spending”.

Sell’s argument only obscures the real class character of the Lib Dems, which, long before Clegg and his “Orange Book” group got to work, was an anti-working class, anti-socialist party.

Historically, the Lib Dems have their roots in the Liberal Party—the main party of the British bourgeoisie until it was eclipsed by the Labour Party in the 1920s.

This sealed the Liberals long-term decline—a situation that was really not reversed until the 1980s following the right-wing break from the Labour Party led by Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Bill Rogers and Shirley Williams.

The “Gang of Four” was motivated by a deep hostility to the leftward shift in the working class that followed Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher’s election in 1979, and which also found its expression within the Labour Party.

With the launch of the Social Democratic Party, they worked to encourage the Labour and trade union bureaucracy to move sharply against this development and to discipline the left. Cable was one of those who defected from Labour to the SDP.

The SDP entered an alliance with the Liberal Party to contest the 1983 and 1987 general elections, thereby ensuring that Thatcher remained in power to continue the offensive against the working class, before officially merging in 1988.

Once Labour’s right-wing transformation was completed under Tony Blair in 1997, there were great hopes expressed on both sides for a possible merger. Blair proclaimed Jenkins as a political mentor and bemoaned the creation of the Labour Party and the split with the Liberals as a tragic division of the forces of “progress”.

That merger proved more difficult, but now, with the passage of the Lib Dems into a government tasked with fundamentally restructuring economic and social relations in the interests of big business, a meeting of some key figures is taking place.

Former *Observer* editor Will Hutton, one of the leading intellectual figures behind New Labour, has been appointed to head an inquiry into public sector pay, while MP Frank Field is to be the new “poverty czar” while still apparently retaining his membership of the Parliamentary Labour Party.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact