

UK Liberal Democrats wracked by sex scandal

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Last week, UK Liberal Democrat Lord Rennard threatened legal proceedings against his party after he was suspended from membership and barred from taking his seat in the House of Lords over unproven allegations of sexual harassment.

The row has been bubbling since February 21, 2013 when *Channel 4 News* ran an item accusing Rennard—the party’s former chief executive and “master strategist”—of sexually inappropriate behaviour.

Bridget Harris, former special adviser to Deputy Prime Minister and Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg, said that, at a conference in 2003, Rennard had touched her knee—making her “feel embarrassed, upset and disappointed.” Former Liberal Democrat activist, now Oxford University politics lecturer, Alison Smith alleged Rennard had touched her back, beneath her dress, at a dinner some six years before.

The women claimed to have raised their objections with the party leadership, but nothing had been done.

The hysteria generated by the claims was in inverse proportion to the minor incidents being complained of. Amid a hue and cry of a leadership cover-up of sexual harassment, Scotland Yard launched an investigation last April, appealing for any other alleged victims to come forward.

In June Rennard was questioned under caution, but by September the police announced that no further action would be taken. Despite this, the Liberal Democrat leadership launched an inquiry headed by Alistair Webster QC.

In his findings, Webster said that the peer had “violated the personal space and autonomy of the complainants,” but it could not be established “beyond reasonable doubt that Lord Rennard had intended to act in an indecent or sexually inappropriate way.”

Bizarrely, having found that no disciplinary charges “would be tenable,” Webster called on Rennard to

apologise to the women for their discomfort. Rennard countered that while he had never intended to cause anyone distress, he could not apologise for something he hadn’t done.

Clegg announced that he would not allow him to take his seat in the Lords. When it was pointed out that Clegg’s pronouncement was unconstitutional, the party’s English Regions Committee announced a fresh disciplinary investigation into Rennard for bringing the party into disrepute by refusing to apologise.

In a lengthy statement, Rennard said that he was the victim of a smear campaign that was causing him ill-health and depression. Complaining of a “humiliating trial by media and a ‘lynch mob’ mentality,” he said he was being instructed to apologise for something he had not done—something that would place him in legal jeopardy should further action be taken against him. He complained that he had been denied the right to see Webster’s report and to defend himself properly against the allegations.

Rennard said that he had “devastating” evidence undermining the testimony against him, as a result of “research” he had conducted, after an alleged victim submitted evidence to Webster’s inquiry. He cited his lawyer, Lord Carlisle, describing the evidence against the complainant as devastating.

The row has ripped the Liberal Democrats apart.

In a strident defence of Rennard, Lord Carlisle, a Liberal Democrat peer and the government’s former independent advisor on terror laws, complained that Kim Jong Un “had nothing on Nick Clegg” for the anti-democratic manner in which his friend had been treated.

Clegg has “chosen to behave as though he accepts the allegations are true, although there has been no hearing and no testing of the women’s evidence,” Carlisle wrote, disclosing that 50 statements supporting Rennard had been placed before the inquiry, including from those also present at the time, contradicting the women’s claims.

Former Liberal Democrat candidate Amy Kitcher has subsequently complained that her name was passed to police and media without her knowledge. Rennard had touched her knee, she said, but rejected that it constituted sexual harassment.

In a Facebook post she asserted, “What has not come out during the course of this case is that some people at the time sought to manipulate Chris Rennard,” including advice from one female activist that she should be “friendly and flirty” with him as it would “help me politically if he noticed me.”

With Rennard threatening legal action against the party over his suspension, and fears that the party could implode, there is talk of “mediation.”

The extraordinary degree to which contested and trivial incidents have exercised the Liberal Democrats underscores the alienation and contempt for the mass of working people within ruling circles. In addition, the hysterical response of a handful of feminist commentators is extremely revealing as to the social interests they represent.

This, after all, is a party that betrayed every single one of its election pledges—most notoriously overturning its commitment to ending tuition fees by supporting the Conservative’s tripling of those fees—with virtually no recriminations from within its ranks. As the coalition partner of the Tories, it has pushed through the most savage austerity measures since the 1930s, plunging hundreds of thousands into poverty without this causing any internal friction. Yet claims of Rennard’s alleged wandering hands summon up furious outrage.

A revealing aspect of the row is the language employed by those rushing to denounce the supposed sexual objectification of women. Thus Polly Toynbee in the *Guardian* writes of a “portly peer” trying it on with women, while Allison Pearson, in the *Daily Telegraph*, attacks Rennard as “Billy Bunter,” a “slimeball” and a “man so fat he last saw his own penis in 1981.” One could be forgiven for thinking that Rennard’s real crime is to be unattractive.

Imagine for one moment if similar invective had been employed against a woman.

In the end, all that concerns the upper middle class layer steering the Rennard affair is their selfish social interests.

The *Independent* editorialised January 16, “This newspaper has been more supportive than most of the Liberal Democrats and the compromises they have needed to make to be a party of government,” and had “backed Nick Clegg and Vince Cable when they proposed higher

tuition fees paid for by student loans. We urged voters—who so often say that they want politicians to work together regardless of party—to show more understanding of the responsibilities of coalition partners.”

Now, however, it is no longer the social fate of millions of workers and youth that is at stake. Rather, “moral equivocation” over Rennard by a party “that so often takes the high moral ground” might undermine the Liberal Democrats among those “concerned with equal opportunities and mutual respect”—that is, in its core upper middle class demographic.

For their part, Toynbee asserted that Liberal Democrats must “learn from Labour that the only way women break past men’s barricades is with women-only shortlists and quotas,” while Pearson complained of “institutional blindness to women” that has seen the Liberal Democrats resist “positive discrimination in any form.”

Two things are clear.

These layers are completely indifferent to democratic rights, especially the principle of innocent until proven guilty. Feminist commentators now routinely insist that every allegation of sexual harassment or assault must be taken at face value, and even that the law be changed to reflect this. This is a feature of numerous manufactured sex scandals, most notoriously in the witch-hunt of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, based on trumped-up accusations of sexual assault.

Whatever the truth of Rennard’s assertion that he is the victim of a smear campaign, the scandal will be used to move the party further to the right. Already, Liberal Democrat President Tim Farron has been placed in charge of formulating rule changes to enable the party leader to impose discipline on all members. This is considered necessary under conditions in which the party must assume greater responsibility for imposing further attacks on working people.

As is made abundantly clear by Toynbee, Pearson et al., the Liberal Democrats will find support for such measures among the feminists—whether nominally of the left or right—provided only that their snouts are given room at the trough.



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