An Equidistant Memory? The Liberal Democrats and Their Relationship with the Two Main Political Parties in Britain.
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Abstract
In recent years the Liberal Democrats have become defined by their relations with the Labour and Conservative parties. Their co-operation with Labour under Paddy Ashdown led to the party being perceived as of the centre-left. In the same way, the coalition government is beginning to tie the party to the centre-right politics of the Conservative party. The dissertation will assess the factors that have motivated the party, whose default setting is one of political equidistance between the main parties, to change their inter-party relations. In so doing it will demonstrate that the party’s leadership has been the driving force behind this process, while the membership of the party has acted as a restraint on close co-operation.
Introduction

‘After years of expectation of a great alliance of the ‘Liberal-Labour centre-left’ and in defiance of the general assumptions of most politicians and political commentators, the coalition that emerged was actually between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives’ (Laws 2010:7).

Traditionally the Liberal Democrats have been viewed as a party of the centre-left and as a result more likely to co-operate with the Labour party as opposed to their Conservative rivals. This image was encapsulated by the concept of a ‘realignment of the Left’, which was emphasised by party leaders such as Jo Grimond, David Steel and Paddy Ashdown. However, the desire for realignment was never fulfilled, even under Ashdown who believed that the party had their ‘best opportunity’ to achieve such a goal during his leadership (Ashdown 2009:311). Given that leaders of the party have exhausted so much effort over the years in pursuit of co-operation with Labour, the decision to join a coalition with the centre-right Conservative Party is a subject that requires serious investigation.

Moreover, within only a year of the formation of the coalition, there are already signs that the left of the party is mobilising against the Liberal Democrat leadership. Indeed a slate of such Liberal Democrats were elected to the Federal Executive (FE) and the Federal Policy Committee (FPC) in November 2010 (Stratton 2010). Moreover, a former Policy Director of the party, Richard Grayson, has gone as far as to encourage co-operation with the Labour party, which would occur simultaneously with the party being in government with the Conservatives (Grayson 2010b). Given the difficulties the party has faced over tuition fees and at the recent by-election in Barnsley, there is clear potential for increasing internal conflict within the party, which could result in the early downfall of the coalition government. By assessing the motivating factors behind the Liberal Democrats’ relationship with the two main parties since its inception, this essay will indicate the most probable sources of the future stumbling blocks that the party will have to navigate if it is to survive the difficult years ahead.

Methodology

There are clear difficulties involved in the study of political parties given that they are complex organisations, which have a number of layers, such as leadership, activists and ordinary members. Moreover, the federal nature of the Liberal Democrats makes research of
the party even more challenging. One potential option would be to undertake elite interviewing in order to obtain the opinions of key figures within the party. However, such an approach would be problematic given that many prominent figures within the Liberal Democrats are currently involved in the process of government and therefore would be difficult to interview. As a result material from party elites will be elicited from the vast amount of primary material that has been published by several elite-level Liberal Democrats such as Paddy Ashdown, Ming Campbell, David Laws and current leader, Nick Clegg.

An alternative approach to the use of elite-level material would be to conduct a survey of the Liberal Democrat membership. However, surveys are costly, time-consuming and more suited to postgraduate research. Moreover, a survey of Liberal Democrat members during the current period would likely be prejudiced by the day-to-day events of the current government. Therefore, although a future survey of the membership is certainly warranted, conducting one for this project would be inappropriate. Furthermore, the results from two surveys of Liberal Democrat members taken in the 1990s are already available (Bennie, Curtice, and Rüdig 1994; Whiteley, Seyd and Billinghurst 2006). By using this research and the material available from the elite level, the dissertation will provide as accurate a picture as possible of views at different levels of the party. In this way it will avoid being skewed towards one particular tier, which would be the danger of using material focused on a single echelon of the party.

Structure

The study will begin with a review of the literature on the party organisation of the Liberal Democrats. In so doing it will highlight the debates surrounding whether the party is oligarchical or stratarchical in nature. However, it will show that this debate remains unresolved. Moreover the literature on Liberal Democrat party organisation has generally not taken in account the intra-party struggle over relations with other parties. In addition the majority of the literature was written prior to the formation of the coalition. Therefore the dissertation will aim to plug this gap within the literature.

Following the literature review, the dissertation will assess the role that ideology has played within debates around relations with the two main parties. This chapter will show that although ideology does help to explain the attraction of particular wings of the party to co-
operating with either Labour or the Conservatives, the limited role of ideological factionalism within the party means that ideology cannot solely account for changing relations with other parties. Moreover, the fluidity of inter-party relations can also be attributed to the political circumstances of the time.

The second chapter will illustrate that leadership has been the predominant factor in stimulating closer relations with the two main parties. However, it will also highlight that the personal characteristics of the leader are crucial in determining these relations. Ashdown and Clegg are examples of strong leaders, who took a key role in moving the party towards closer relations with another party, whereas Kennedy and Campbell had a more laid-back style, meaning that relations with other parties were never driven by a persistent current.

The third chapter will demonstrate that an oligarchical leadership has not had exclusive control over inter-party relations. Instead the Liberal Democrat membership has played a role in preventing the leadership from undermining the independence of the party.

The ensuing conclusion will summarise the general argument of the study. This is that the Liberal Democrats’ relations with other parties are driven but not dictated by the party leadership, with the membership, through the FPC, FE and party conference, acting as an evident restraint. This underlines the general view of the literature that the party is diffuse in terms of its power distribution.

**Literature Review**

The literature on the Liberal Democrats is heavily concentrated upon the party’s electoral performance at the expense of analysis of its co-operation with other parties. However research on the party’s internal structure and intra-party discipline has been extensive. These debates have focused upon the nature of the organisation and whether it fits an oligarchic or stratarchical typology. This might appear at first to be unrelated to inter-party relations. However, whether the party is leadership-dominated or has a more diffuse power structure has a determinant effect on the potential for positive interactions with other parties. If the leadership has greater control over the internal workings of the party, this gives elites greater flexibility when it comes to co-operation. On the other hand, if power is diffuse, there is greater potential for opponents of such a strategy to obstruct a move towards closer relations.
The traditional view of political parties is that they are oligarchic in nature; that is they are characterised by ‘a minority of directors and a majority of directed’ (Michels 1962:70). This implies a very limited role in terms of decision-making on policy and strategy for ordinary party members. Elements of the literature on the organisation of the Liberal Democrats seem to legitimise this typology. Indeed there has been a widespread emphasis on the ability of party leaders to dominate internal proceedings (Ingle 1996:119; McKee 2000:23). Moreover, the leadership has the potential to control the FPC in lieu of a strong counter-veiling grouping elected to the body by conference delegates. Given the committee’s prerogative of offering alternatives to conference decisions that are deemed unacceptable to it, this body has the potential to be ‘harnessed by the leadership’ against an unwilling membership (Fisher 1996:97). However, the idea of an omnipotent leadership does not correspond to reality. Indeed there have been numerous high-profile occasions when conference has circumvented the leadership’s inclinations such as over the debate on legalising cannabis in 1994. In addition the FPC can be a considerable obstacle in itself, as will be highlighted in Chapters 2 and 3.

The party can also be seen as oligarchical due to the party in Parliament increasingly becoming a centre of power as a result of its burgeoning representation in recent years (Evans 2007:99). Indeed it has been argued that Liberal Democrat MPs now have a ‘de facto, right of veto’ over policy (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005:10). This could be extended to matters of strategy, as a party leader who cannot retain the support of a majority of his MPs for a decision to align with another party is unlikely to prolong their leadership. McKee (1996b: 364) argues that such ‘competition’ among elites obstructs the party from constituting an oligarchy in the traditional sense. However, Michels (1962:202) did foresee the potential for ‘a number of smaller oligarchies’. Therefore the Iron Law would remain in tact in spite of competition between multiple forms of oligarchy. Moreover, the extent of consultation within the Parliamentary Party has prevented serious fissures between the leader and his colleagues in Westminster for the most part (Cole 2009b: 262,267). This means that the leadership can frustrate this particular power centre within the party. Therefore the ability of the party in Parliament to predominate strategic decisions about relations with other parties can be called into question. Chapter 2 will illustrate that the Parliamentary Party has played a largely secondary role to the leadership in terms of inter-party relations.
In contrast to the Iron Law of Oligarchy, the stratarchical model emphasises a more complex distribution of power, in which varying structures are involved in competitive interactions with each other (Eldersveld 1964). This model bares a remarkable resemblance to the ‘hybrid’ model proposed with regard to the Liberal Democrats (Evans 2007:100). This model is more satisfactory than the oligarchical model in relation to the party as it recognises that there are multiple power structures, which have differing degrees of influence over time depending on circumstances. This encompasses the kind of variations that the changes in the size of the party in Parliament bring about. Moreover, the ability of party bodies to frustrate the leadership has been acknowledged by members of the elite itself (Campbell 2008:255; Kavanagh and Cowley 2010:107; Kennedy 2001: xvii; Laws 2010:75). However, the literature tends to overemphasise the ability of the grass-roots to achieve its policy and strategic objectives. Indeed the party elites have tended to dominate the motions debated by conference (Russell, Fieldhouse and Cutts 2007:96). It is only very occasionally that conference passes a motion that was proposed by a local party association. Therefore even though activists can obstruct the leadership’s intentions through votes at conference, their role should be considered more as an obstacle than an instigator in the policy-making process. However, stratarchy is flexible enough to account for points at which the leadership is prevalent and others where the membership has a greater role.

Moreover, Carty (2004:9,13) uses the Liberal Democrats to highlight the way in which the party fits this particular model due to its federal nature. Crucially the national parties in Scotland and Wales have their own executive and policy-making bodies. This structure can be seen to inhibit ‘the growth of top-down control of the type common in New Labour and in the Conservative Party’ (Whiteley, Seyd and Billinghurst 2006:184). In relation to co-operation with other parties, this area has been analysed in the literature with regard to the party’s involvement in coalitions in Wales and Scotland’s devolved bodies. Indeed Ashdown was seen to be pushing for coalitions in both countries, as this would have corresponded with his emphasis on co-operation with Labour at the national level at the time (Deacon 2007:159; Laffin 2007:657). However, that coalitions were eventually formed in both devolved authorities does not necessarily mean that the leadership achieved its objective through its own volition. Indeed the Welsh party were initially reluctant to enter into coalition with Labour (Walter 2003:200). However, they were eventually convinced of the merits of
coalition due to the number of Liberal Democrat manifesto commitments contained in the coalition agreement. Moreover the rejection of coalitions in Scotland and Wales in 2007, which could be seen as representing the will of the membership at the devolved level (Cole 2009b: 269), also coincided with the party’s more fraught relationship with Labour at the national elite level at this time. Therefore coalition formation in devolved authorities can be seen as a process where the views of the leadership and memberships align, rather than involving decisions being forced upon one group by the other. This suggests that the process was far from oligarchic, but instead characterised by stratarchy.

While the study of inter-party relations at the devolved level has been extensive, the literature has a sizable void in the case of co-operation at the national level. The work of Joyce (1999), which described the relationship between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, did not assess the role of internal party structure in relation to co-operation between the two parties. Moreover, the work would have benefited from access to the Ashdown diaries if it had been published a couple of years later. A more recent work contained analysis from a senior party strategist which suggested that Ashdown was able to pursue his ‘Project’ of closer relations with Labour due to his personal ‘credit rating’. It goes on to suggest that this is ‘consistent with the mainstream literature on party organisation and party systems’ (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005:67). However, this book does not provide a comprehensive assessment of co-operation with other parties, and tends to focus on the party’s electoral performance and strategy. Furthermore, the recent literature on the deterioration of relations with Labour has been scattered among various journals and chapters in books on British general elections. Most of this work has been descriptive in nature rather than offering a clear judgement as to the role of leadership and membership in the process. Moreover, the proximity of the coalition formation to the present day means that the material that has been produced since then has not been able to engage in cross-comparison with relevant contemporary literature in the way that this dissertation will do. Therefore there is a clear gap within the literature on Liberal Democrat party organisation and relations with other parties that this essay will proceed to fill.

1. **The Role of Liberal Ideology**

The early years of Paddy Ashdown’s leadership were marked by the political strategy of equidistance. Through this strategy, the Liberal Democrats would position themselves as
representing the centre ground of politics, between Labour and the Conservatives. In practice this meant that the Liberal Democrats ‘would respect the democratic wish of the British people, and try to reach an accommodation with the larger of the two major parties in the event of an indecisive election’ (Ingle 1994:106). This strategy might suggest that the Liberal Democrats internally had a position that was ideologically equidistant between the two main parties. However, as this chapter will show, the party broadly held a social liberal stance, meaning that in reality they were closer to the Labour Party at this time. In this respect the strategy was mainly political in that it was an attempt to answer questions about which party they would support in the event of a hung parliament, rather than one motivated by the ideological prescriptions of the Liberal Democrats. Indeed if the party had been pursuing a strategy that was consistent with its ideological stance, it would have come out in favour of supporting Labour rather than pursuing equidistance.

The debate among academics has brought forward two main explanations for why the Liberal Democrats pursued equidistance during this period. The first of these is the argument that the Liberal Democrats suffered a degree of self-doubt as to their political identity (Bennie, Curtice and Rudig 1994:152; Brack 2009:103 McKee 1996a: 158; Russell and Fieldhouse 2005:1). This self-doubt is seen as an obstacle to the formation of a coherent identity, which would likely move the party away from a position of equidistance and towards one of main parties. However, while the argument does recognise that there are competing identities within the party, it ignores that one particular identity was prevalent during this period of time: social liberalism. Social liberalism represents the view that state action ‘is justified’ in order to redress social problems that inhibit individual freedom (Brack 2007g: 386). Indeed shortly before the formation of the Liberal Democrats, it was argued that the Liberal Party emphasised social rather than classical liberalism to a much greater extent in the crucial economic realm (Curtice 1988:116-7). Given that the social democrat side of the merged party also advocated an extended role for the state, it is self-evident that it would adopt social liberalism as a general creed. If party strategy towards the two main parties had followed its social liberal position, then the Labour party would have been the party’s natural partner in the event of a hung parliament and the party would have made this explicit. It is surprising that it did not given the ‘growing list of policy overlaps between the two opposition parties’ (Leaman 1998:4). Instead the party defied ideology and took a pragmatic political decision to avoid a clear pronouncement of their hung parliament strategy.
The second argument has been that the Liberal Democrats have lacked clear ideological factions within the party (Brack 1996:98, 2000:13; McKee 1996a: 157-8, 1996b: 365). Without factions to pursue particular ideological positions, there would be no vehicle for pushing the party in one direction or another; towards Labour or the Conservatives. However, just because the party existed in lieu of strictly defined factional groups did not thwart debate within the party over its direction. Indeed, McKee (1996a: 158) himself acknowledges that there was ‘a continuation of earlier jousting between Liberals and Social Democrats’. Moreover, a lack of factionalism did not prevent a closer relationship with Labour following the 1992 election, when factionalism had not become sufficiently more pronounced. Therefore a more rational justification for the maintenance of equidistance at this stage lies in the unpopularity of both Labour and the Conservatives. The Conservatives’ popular appeal had been seriously tainted due to the Poll Tax and the abrupt end to Thatcher’s premiership. However, Labour was still in the process of a move to the centre-ground, which would only come to fruition during Blair’s leadership. Therefore neither party was suitably popular to justify a closer relationship.

Given the predominance of social liberalism, the decision to end equidistance and move towards the Labour Party could be seen as a merely an ideological move in order to take account of the prevailing mood within the party. Indeed Ingle (1995:30) argues that there was ‘a leftward shift of the Liberal Democrats’. However, the reality is much more complicated. If ideology were the main motivating factor, then it would seem strange that equidistance existed in the first instance, seeing as social liberalism was prevalent before and after the change in stance. Grayson (2009:58) suggests that ‘in 1992, in the first Liberal Democrat manifesto, the agenda began to shift in a more overtly social liberal direction’. Seeing as the party still maintained the policy of equidistance going into the 1992 election, a Liberal Democrat party with a leftward-looking policy agenda did not necessarily oblige the end of the equidistance strategy. Therefore social liberalism cannot be seen to account for the end of equidistance.

A more plausible explanation for the end of equidistance would be another argument put forward by Ingle (1995:30), which is that the Labour Party’s move towards the centre ground made the ideological distance between Labour and the Liberal Democrats much less apparent.
This pronounced move could be seen to completely invalidate the equidistance strategy, as the Conservatives were subsequently seen as much further away from the Liberal Democrat position than Labour was. In contrast to the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats found common ground with New Labour over the need to have a significant degree of government intervention in order to ‘mitigate’ the excesses of the free market (Joyce 1999:271). Moreover, New Labour under Blair made further moves to accommodate the Liberal Democrats on the issue of constitutional reform. This was particularly evident in relation to the Cook-Maclennan agreement prior to the 1997 election and the ensuing Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) on the issue during the first New Labour term of office. Therefore it was understandable why a closer relationship with Labour might be sought due to ideological preferences.

Despite this ideological stimulus, ending equidistance must also be understood with regard to the political circumstances of the time. By 1995, the Conservatives had become increasingly unpopular due to the withdrawal from the Exchange Rate Mechanism and a number of cases of political sleaze. Therefore most Liberal Democrats ‘would admit in private that sustaining the Conservatives in office was inconceivable’ (Leaman 1998:7). The party was concerned about the possibility of being seen as potentially propping up an unpopular Conservative Government in the event of a hung parliament. Therefore, even though the movement of Labour towards the centre ground did make co-operation with Labour more appealing, the impetus for the end of the equidistance strategy was chiefly political.

**Renewed Equidistance**

Given that the construction of the ‘Project’ with New Labour had origins that were inherently more political than ideological, it is not surprising that the relationship between the Liberal Democrats and Labour would eventually break down. However, the consensus within the literature is that the subsequent move away from Labour towards a more sceptical view of co-operation was based on policy and ideological differences. One of the main criticisms of Labour from a Liberal Democrat perspective is that they acted in an increasingly ‘authoritarian’ way through the curbs it established on civil liberties in the wake of the ‘War on Terror’ (Brack, Grayson and Howarth 2007:i; Dorey and Denham 2007:68-9). This approach certainly alienated the Liberal Democrats, who ‘exist to build and safeguard a fair, free and open society, in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality
and community’ according to their Constitution (Liberal Democrats 2009:7). The noticeable absence of the word ‘security’ suggests that liberty is a greater priority and so would take precedence over preventative measures that restrict individual freedom. Indeed even before the War on Terrorism, Charles Kennedy lamented Jack Straw’s decision to limit trial by jury, arguing that ‘Labour’s priorities veer too much towards this kind of punitive populism that does not treat the causes of crime or safeguard the rights of the individual’ (Kennedy 2001:88). Even though it must be noted that Kennedy was writing the book with a forthcoming general election in mind and so was likely to exaggerate claims regarding his political opponents, the sentiment is certainly one that would have resonated with fellow Liberal Democrats. In particular the concept of individual freedom has the potential to unite social liberals, who were naturally sympathetic towards Labour, as well as classical liberals who were suspicious of the general extension of the state under the Labour government with regard to security, but also economic affairs. In this sense Labour’s actions relating to civil liberties were a crucial ideological motivating factor in the move away from co-operation with Labour.

A further Liberal Democrat qualm with Labour was that they were not radical enough, from a Liberal Democrat perspective, in relation to constitutional reform. Despite Labour’s decision to pursue devolution for Scotland and Wales, Labour’s actions corresponded to ‘the very bottom end of the Liberal Democrats’ expectations of federalism’ (Deacon 2009:87). Indeed in Wales only limited legislative powers were permitted, and Scotland was given negligible powers over taxation. Moreover, in relation to local government ‘New Labour remained as big a centralizing force as their predecessors’ (Deacon 2009:97). Given that Labour had moved significantly in relation to devolution compared to previous governments, it might be thought that the Liberal Democrats would be satisfied with piecemeal reform. However, Liberal Democrat views regarding constitutional reform must be considered in their historic perspective. Indeed as far back as 1983, ‘the central concern of Liberals in the Commons was [sic] less with socio-economic issues than with questions of…constitutional reform’ (Bogdanor 1983a: 10; Norton 1983). When the history of campaigning on constitutional reform is taken in account, it is entirely understandable why the Liberal Democrats were frustrated with the lack of progress. In this way the move away from Labour could be seen as being a result a lack of ideological coherence between the two parties over constitutional reform.
Furthermore, perhaps the crowning jewel of co-operation for the Liberal Democrats would have been constitutional. Indeed Joyce (1999:302) speculated that ‘the determining factor to secure enhanced co-operation is likely to be electoral reform’. Labour’s failure to act on the proposals of the Jenkins Commission could be interpreted as the final nail in the coffin for co-operation between the two parties. Moreover, while the Liberal Democrats had been ideologically committed the electoral reform, the party had strong political reasons to pursue Proportional Representation due to the fact that it could give them greater parliamentary representation. In this sense the promise of electoral reform provided a potent stimulus for co-operation with Labour. When that stimulus was removed, the political motivation ceased to exist. In this sense, while ideological considerations played a role in thawing relations with Labour, it was the political repercussions of a lack of electoral reform that signaled the end of co-operation.

Moreover, there was also a sense that Labour was beginning to move away from the Liberal Democrats in their reforms to the public sector, in particular in health and education (Ingle 2008:137). Indeed Paul Burstow, then Liberal Democrat Spokesman for Health, argued in the 2005 Manifesto that the party did not ‘subscribe to the false idea’ that choice in the health service would solve all of its problems (Liberal Democrats 2005:4). In this sense the Liberal Democrat move away from Labour could be seen as a response to ideological motivations. However, Burstow was perhaps overstating the differences between the Liberal Democrats and Labour in this regard. Indeed traditionally the Liberal Democrat approach ‘to the ‘public’ versus ‘private’ debate was chiefly pragmatic’ (Ingle 1994:97). Burstow’s statement would indicate that Liberal Democrats are opposed to all private sector involvement in the National Health Service per se, whereas their position is more nuanced. His statement can also be perceived as a political one given that it is contained in an electoral manifesto. Therefore ideological motivations relating to private sector involvement in the health care and education were not a strong motivating factor in the move away from Labour.

A more convincing argument in helping to explain the move was that public spending under Labour had reached such a level that the Liberal Democrats could no longer maintain their calls for further spending (Brack 2010:173; Cable 2009a:165; Dorey and Denham 2007:68; Grayson 2009:56, 59). In this political context, the Liberal Democrats were forced to reassess
their political stance towards public spending. This would inherently move the party away from the Labour Party position, as the Liberal Democrats sought to create a distinctive identity in relation to this issue. Therefore, although ideological concerns were a strong motivating factor in the move away from Labour, the move would not have occurred had it not been for the political stimuli relating to electoral reform and public spending.

In light of the thawing of relations with Labour, some Liberal Democrats argued that the situation warranted not only a move away from Labour, but also a distinct change in emphasis from the traditionally dominant social liberalism towards a more classical, economic liberalism. The so-called *Orange Book* liberals, led by David Laws, argued that there was a need to ‘reclaim economic liberalism; and marry economic liberalism to our social liberalism’ (Laws 2004a: 40). In this sense the *Orange Bookers* can be seen as attempting to take the party in an economic direction that would reduce the ideological distance from the Conservative party. Indeed the publication was met with widespread hostility from many social liberals, most of whom subscribed to the view that 'the Orange Book…can be seen as turning away from the direction in which liberal thinking has been heading for over a century' (Rathborne 2005:19). Moreover, ‘it ruffled liberal feathers and failed to win either a general acceptance or instil a sense of common purpose’ (Randell 2007a:42). This might lead one to the view that the *Orange Book* was a complete failure. However, even though the contributors to the *Orange Book* may not have achieved all their objectives, they certainly opened a debate within the party and pushed it incrementally in a more economic liberal direction, and in doing so closer to the Conservative position.

In spite of the opposition towards the *Orange Book* within the party, its success can be seen in the way in which social liberals within the party sought to reconcile the arguments made within the publication with social liberalism. Indeed, Howarth argued that the difference within liberal thought was between ‘maximalist’ and ‘minimalist’ social liberals (Howarth 2007:7). This can be seen as an attempt to shift the debate back into social liberal territory, but it essentially recognises the legitimacy of the economic liberal position. By equating an economic liberal position with social liberalism, Howarth reduced the potential for future conflict if economic liberal policies were to be put forward within the party. Indeed during the Policy Review of 2005-6, the FPC ‘crafted a policy that could readily be ‘sold’ to different tendencies within the party’ (Dorey and Denham 2007:76). Economic liberals would be
satisfied with the removal of the 50 percent income tax rate, while social liberals could support the measures, which reduced taxes for those on lower incomes. The fact that the FPC needed to pacify both groupings suggested that the *Orange Bookers* had made significant progress. By moving the party in an economic liberal direction, the party would be more likely to support the Conservative party in the future. This suggests that ideological considerations did play a role in the movement towards the Conservatives in the run-up to the 2010 General Election and the subsequent coalition negotiations.

Moreover, equally as important to the increased likelihood of co-operation between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives has been the modernisation of the Conservatives under David Cameron’s leadership. By emphasising his brand of liberal conservatism, Cameron sought to court not only Liberal Democrat voters, but also Liberal Democrat politicians. Indeed in 2007, Cameron made a call for the two parties to ‘co-operate on the key areas of devolving power and the environment’. This was interpreted as ‘preparing the ground for establishing a coalition government’ with the Liberal Democrats (Watt 2007). Given that this was a message to Liberal Democrat voters, this could be seen as a cheap political ploy to win votes. Indeed more sceptical commentators have argued that ‘one-nation’ Conservative philosophy…has yet to re-emerge despite Cameron’s media spin’ (Holmes, P. 2007:213). However, given the relentlessness of the modernisation message post-2007, it would appear that the Conservatives have moved at least to some extent on social issues. Moreover, the fact that Cameron has drawn criticism from many traditional Conservative media figures (Kavanagh and Cowley 2010:74), suggests that Conservative supporters believe that Cameron’s strategy has been more than just spin. In moving the Conservative Party towards the centre ground, Cameron greatly increased the likelihood for co-operation with the Liberal Democrats, given the convergence of their views on civil liberties and localism. Therefore ideology clearly played a role in the co-operation between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats following the 2010 General Election.

In spite of the greater convergence between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in recent years, the newly formed coalition cannot be explained purely in ideological terms. Political considerations were clearly important such as the electoral arithmetic involved, which was skewed in favour of an agreement with the Conservatives. The Liberal Democrats would also gain various political advances from the coalition such as the electoral reform
referendum and the pupil premium. Moreover, as will be explained in Chapter 2, the party elites involved in the coalition negotiations favoured a deal with the Conservatives. Therefore the ideological convergence and political considerations were both crucial in the formation of the coalition between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives.

This chapter has demonstrated that changes in the Liberal Democrats’ relations with other parties have been motivated by ideological factors. However, these ideological factors need to be assessed with regard to the political context under which they occurred. The following chapters will evaluate the role of internal political factors to highlight the essential role played by the leadership and grass-roots of the party in determining inter-party relations.

2. The Role of Liberal Democrat Leadership

In addition to ideology, leadership is another important factor in the changing relations between the Liberal Democrats and the two main parties in Britain. As illustrated in the previous chapter, the decision to discontinue the policy of equidistance in 1995 was motivated by Labour’s ideological movement towards the centre ground as well as the growing unpopularity of the Conservative government. However, even in light of these considerations, equidistance could not have come to an end without the forceful leadership of Paddy Ashdown. He took the view that the Conservatives had dominated government for much of the twentieth century precisely because of the split in the centre-left vote between Labour and the Liberals. His vision was that closer co-operation with Labour would lead to a realignment of the Left, which had the potential to keep the Conservatives out of power for a generation, especially if it led to a proportional voting system for Westminster elections (Ashdown 2009:274). This quick-fix strategy was strongly opposed by the likes of Gordon Lishman, Tony Greaves, Liz Lynne and the majority of Liberal Democrat councillors who championed an alternative, long-march strategy, based on the view that the party could eventually achieve power on their own (MacIver 1996b: 176). This strategy, heavily influenced by community politics, sought to retain the party’s distinct equidistant position. While a greater number of influential Liberal Democrat MPs sought a quick-fix strategy, involving greater cross-party co-operation, along similar lines as Ashdown (MacIver 1996b: 176), without his leadership it would have been impossible to break the impasse between these two opposing groups.

By taking the lead on this issue, Ashdown embraced his ‘Action Man’ persona, cultivated due to his experience in the British Special Forces. He pursued politics very much like a mission
of sorts, with him leading his Liberal Democrat troops proactively into battle. Indeed taking a strong stand risked the ire of the long-march centrists, who objected to the public pursuit of the strategy in the 1992 Chard Speech, which called for co-operation with Labour. The speech caused considerable opposition within the Parliamentary Party and wider membership, with one MP describing it as a ‘burnt offering’ (Brack 2007b: 81). This reaction occurred even though the leader had conducted multiple consultations with the party’s MPs (Ashdown 2009: 268). The fact that Ashdown had consulted the Parliamentary Party is an indication that he required their support. However, the number of MPs the party had at this stage meant that it did not have the effective veto power it later acquired. Therefore Ashdown had more room for manoeuvre than he did after the 1997 election. In spite of this, given the hostile initial reception in the party as a whole, his decision to push forward with putting an end to equidistance was a brave one, which provided the party with the stimulus necessary to significantly alter their relationship with Labour.

Retrospectively it might be argued that such a decision was an obvious one. Indeed the Liberal Democrat membership considered itself to be of the centre-left and generally closer to Labour (Bennie, Curtice and Rudig 1996:142-4, 148). Therefore closer co-operation with Labour could be seen as a natural progression for the party. However, it is doubtful that Ashdown had access to such information when deciding to push ahead with ending equidistance. Indeed the initial hostility to the strategy would have indicated that the party as whole were not supportive of him.

Moreover, calls from the likes of Lynne were heavily influenced by the fact that the party in the Northwest region were fighting Labour in elections as their main opponents. Therefore any move towards Labour would make it more difficult for such local parties to differentiate themselves. Opposition to the strategy was particularly evident during the Littlewood and Saddleworth by-election, where the Liberal Democrats and Labour were conducting a very hostile campaign against each other (Cook 2010:226-7). Given that the Liberal Democrats were in competition with Labour in many areas of the country, the decision to abandon equidistance had the potential to split the party in two. Indeed, a move towards Labour could also have jeopardised the party’s strong position in areas such as the Southwest, where their main opponents were the Conservatives, as traditional Conservative voters were likely to be discouraged from voting Liberal Democrat if it were to facilitate a Labour government. That
this did not become an issue was due to tactical voting arrangements made with the Labour Party closer to the 1997 election. Such co-operation could not have been guaranteed during the primitive stages of co-operation with Labour. Therefore a decision that held such risk can only be seen as one taken at elite level in spite of clear opposition from the party membership.

Even though Ashdown was able to obtain conference support for ending equidistance (Rawnsley, Brack and Smith 2001:10), and the party was given three years between the Chard Speech and the official announcement ending equidistance, conference’s decision-making was influenced by Ashdown’s positive ‘credit rating’ derived from improving the party fortunes after its difficult foundation (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005:67). Therefore the stimulus for ending equidistance can be considered to be chiefly leadership-driven during the early stages due to activists’ acquiescence to Ashdown’s strong will for closer Labour ties.

The relatively consensual relations between Ashdown and his subordinates that characterised the period of closer co-operation during the dying embers of the Major Government were not replicated once Labour came to power. Indeed the relationship between Ashdown and Tony Blair was ‘highly confidential’ with only a small group of advisers privy to the secret negotiations (Campbell 2008:129). While such an approach was understandable given the incredibly controversial matters being discussed, such as coalitions, mergers and policy concessions, it inevitably meant that the Project would be conducted on a purely top-down basis. Such an approach to relations with Labour illustrates the extent to which the leadership was the only clear and consistent driving force for closer relations, highlighting oligarchic tendencies.

Even though the forceful approach of Ashdown during this period was necessary in order to subvert the inevitable opposition to his strategy of closer co-operation, the uncompromising manner in which it was done alienated potential allies, who would be vital if Labour had been able to deliver on Proportional Representation, which would have made a coalition between the two parties possible. Indeed Ashdown effectively ‘bounced’ his Parliamentary Party into supporting Labour’s first Queen’s Speech (Rentoul 2001:492). Even though it contained many Liberal Democrat policies such as Bank of England independence, the introduction of a minimum wage, Freedom of Information, devolution and human rights legislation, the way in which Ashdown did not encompass a desire to maintain the party’s independence was a sign
of increasing distance from his MPs. Indeed opposition parties voting for a Queen’s Speech is almost unheard of. Even though he was simply trying to keep to his policy of ‘constructive opposition’, Ashdown prompted a backlash at the September 1997 conference, where Charles Kennedy threatened that there would be ‘blood on the carpet’ if the leader tried to force a coalition upon the party (Daily Telegraph, 22 September 1997, cited in Hurst 2006:92-3). This outburst by a leading MP, who was not in Ashdown’s inner circle, was a warning to the leader that the failure to pursue a more consensual approach would increase the difficulty of making further progress with the Project. Given that forming a coalition was the ultimate end of Ashdown’s pursuit, as mentioned in a 1992 Position Paper (Ashdown 2000:576), Ashdown’s wishes necessitated pushing the boundaries of his party’s tolerance in order to attempt to achieve the goal of realignment. However, an overtly oligarchic approach was unlikely to succeed in a party that generally emphasises the need for openness and deliberation.

The establishment of the JCC, which sought co-operation between the two parties on constitutional affairs, should be considered as a measure that attempted to test the extent of this tolerance. Indeed, Liberal Democrats ‘at all levels’ viewed the JCC ‘with deepest suspicion’ (Rentoul 2001:492). Given that the two parties had worked together on constitutional affairs during Scottish Constitutional Convention and the Cook/Macmillan Commission prior to the election, it is perhaps surprising that the party saw the JCC as a threat. However, its existence must be taken in the context of the overall development of the relationship between the two parties at the time, given that Ashdown had called for increased co-operation at the September 1997 conference. Moreover, questions about whether the JCC was necessary to ensure constitutional reform were not just retrospective (Cable 2009b: 248), but apparent at the time. Therefore when Ashdown later unilaterally announced the extension of the JCC’s remit to consider non-constitutional issues, it is hardly surprising that it produced uproar within the party (Alderman and Carter 2000:313; Brack 2007b: 83; Rawnsley 2001:207 Russell and Fieldhouse 2005:43). The party may have been prepared to accept their independence being blunted if it brought long-sought constitutional changes. However, the extension of the remit ran counter to the desire within the Parliamentary Party to pursue a more critical rather than constructive form of opposition to Labour (Cable 2009b: 249; Dutton 2004:287). Furthermore, MPs were given barely a few hours notice of the change (Bartle 2001:234; Cook 2010:243; Hurst 2006:94). This gave the impression that Ashdown was
attempting to coerce the Party into accepting further co-operation despite the failed attempt to secure Labour support for electoral reform. Such disdain for the views of dissenting colleagues distanced the leadership from the Parliamentary Party, resulting in a complete lack of consensus for further co-operation. While the leadership employed techniques to subvert parliamentary opposition, by holding smaller meetings involving ‘MPs of strategic importance’ in order to help achieve positive results in the full meetings of the Parliamentary Party (Russell, Fieldhouse and Cutts 2007:91), this tactic did not deter heavy criticism of Ashdown’s approach. Indeed the febrile meeting prior the announcement not only signalled the beginning of the end of close co-operation with Labour, but also Ashdown’s leadership. Ashdown could no longer rely on the support of his parliamentary colleagues, meaning that they were likely to veto any further moves towards co-operation. This highlights the extent to which Ashdown relied upon his party to achieve further co-operation, but the oligarchic way in which he acted alienated the party, meaning that a coalition with Labour would prove to be illusive.

The curtailment of co-operation with Labour was not just a result of Ashdown’s isolation from his Parliamentary Party, but also from the party as a whole. Indeed it has been argued that the leader should have engaged the membership of the party, which tended to agree with Labour on a number of fronts (Bartle 2001:237). This approach would have prevented the kind of strains placed on internal relations caused when Ashdown tried to interfere in coalition negotiations between the two parties in Scotland and Wales (Deacon 2007:159; Laffin 2007:657). However, this line of argument ignores the potential consequences of such a strategy. Indeed such efforts would likely split the party on the basis of who the party was in competition with on a local level (Cable 2009b: 249). Moreover, it would have also opened up the proceedings to a potentially hostile media, especially the Conservative-supporting newspapers. This would have discouraged rather than promoted co-operation between the two parties. In addition, it ignores the clear opposition to co-operation at grass-roots level shown by Triple Lock obstacle put in place by the spring 1998 conference. This highlighted the deep scepticism within the party towards co-operation, which ruled out an alternative bottom-up approach to relations with the Labour government.

The approach of Charles Kennedy was to move the party away from outright co-operation with Labour towards a more equidistant approach. However, the idea that this move resulted
in ‘a clear sense of political direction’ is a gross exaggeration (Cable 2009b: 270). Indeed, in contrast to Ashdown, Kennedy’s leadership was epitomised by laid back approach, with a clear lack of direction in terms of policy and strategy (Bentham 2007:64; Blair 2010:122; Brack 2007b: 86; Butler and Kavanagh 2002:64-5; Campbell 2008:157). Therefore the stimulus for the change of approach in terms of relations with the two main parties came from elsewhere. Indeed there is a strong case that Kennedy was effectively forced to take a more nuanced approach given the backlash against Ashdown’s relationship with Labour. Indeed by 1999 co-operation was ‘even less popular…with the membership’ (Campbell 2008:151). Given that Kennedy showed a willingness to co-operate with Labour under the correct circumstances (Alderman and Carter 2000:326-7), the move towards a more equidistant approach must be seen as an attempt to assuage sceptical party members. Moreover, Kennedy’s reluctance to ire the party membership can be seen by his refusal to become embroiled in the Welsh Assembly coalition negotiations of 2000 on behalf of Tony Blair (Hurst 2006:110-1; Laffin 2007:661; Rawnsley 2001:359; Rentoul 2001:456-7). Whereas Ashdown had tried to use similar opportunities to advance the Project, Kennedy allowed the devolved party a free hand in the talks. This highlights to extent to which Kennedy placed his personal wishes subservient to the will of the party by allowing it to function as a stratcharchy.

Following the 2001 general election, Kennedy began to adopt a more critical approach with Labour. Indeed, in September 2003, Kennedy told his MPs to ‘take the gloves off’ against Labour (Cowley and Stuart 2004:18). In this sense Kennedy was able to take a firmer line against the government on issues such as Iraq and civil liberties, which he saw as being contrary to liberalism. However, despite his leadership on these issues, their critical nature led some to question whether he had the ability to move the party beyond a purely negative approach towards the other parties. The necessity of Kennedy providing a coherent narrative was all the more prevalent due to the ongoing and heated debate over whether the party should pursue a social liberal or economic liberal agenda. Instead of taking sides in this debate, Kennedy only showed ‘lukewarm’ support for the publication of the Orange Book (Randell 2007a: 42; Kennedy 2004: xiii; Garnett 2009:43). This lack of leadership highlighted Kennedy’s hands-off approach and desire to avoid potential conflict. However, by leaving the debate open, he left the party’s future relationship with the two main parties in limbo.
With the growing ascendancy of the economic liberals within the Parliamentary Party, a failure to meet the demands of the *Orange Bookers* was bound to lead to a move away from the social liberalism pursued during Kennedy’s early years. Indeed, they were given key Shadow Cabinet roles after the 2005 election and also under Menzies Campbell (Campbell 2008:289; Rathborne 2005:17; Russell, Fieldhouse and Cutts 2007:95). Given that Kennedy’s removal was conducted by the party’s MPs, who were becoming increasingly economically liberal in outlook, the change in direction could be seen as an oligarchic coup by party elites. Despite this shift in emphasis, there was resistance within the membership. Reform of economic policy was limited to due to Campbell’s short tenure, and when that reform came through the removal of the 50p tax rate, it had to be sold to the party as ‘redistributive’ in combination with new green taxes on air travel (Grayson 2009:60; Russell, Fieldhouse and Cutts 2007:95). Given that this policy had allowed the party to be portrayed as a ‘tax and spend’ party during the 2005 election, the fact that Campbell was concerned about the potential margin of victory or defeat (Campbell 2008:265), highlights the continued relevance of social liberals within the party. Campbell and his Shadow Cabinet could push the party in the direction of economic liberalism, and consequently closer to the Conservatives, but the mass membership was always an obstacle, emphasising persistent stratarchy.

Campbell, himself, still had affections for Labour stemming from his support for Ashdown during ‘the Project’. This almost came to fruition when Gordon Brown offered to install Ashdown as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, which had the potential to realise the dream of Liberal Democrat representation in government, which was not possible during Ashdown’s leadership. However, both Liberal Democrats involved were reluctant due to the ‘political chasm’ that had opened up between Labour and the Liberal Democrats since 1997 over tuition fees, nuclear energy, Trident, identity cards, public services, council tax and Iraq (Ashdown 2009:376-7; Astle and Murray 2007:1; Campbell 2008:284-5). Given the political detachment that had increased under Kennedy and Campbell, Liberal Democrat representation in Cabinet was not possible on policy grounds. However, in delaying a decision on the issue, Campbell allowed for a leak of the story, leading to a ‘fractious mood’ among his MPs (Campbell 2008:286). This highlighted the need to involve the Parliamentary Party in the consultative process, especially given their increasing power, which was revealed by the demise of Kennedy’s leadership. Indeed the leadership learned this lesson by involving its parliamentarians in the decision-making process for the 2010 coalition negotiations.
Moreover, it showed Campbell’s inability to acknowledge the shifting sands within the party from sympathy to hostility towards Labour, as the call for outright rejection of Brown’s offer would not have been so resounding during the Ashdown years. In this way Campbell displayed the kind of indecisiveness reminiscent of his predecessor. By being open to working with Labour, Campbell had failed to provide effective leadership for his increasingly economically liberal MPs, resulting in an incoherent approach to relations with the two main parties.

Nick Clegg’s leadership has been interpreted as not constituting a move towards the Conservatives (Douglas 2009:27; Russell 2009:159). However, this analysis is completely inaccurate. Indeed prior to the economic recession, Clegg promised tax cuts, £20 billion in savings and a 4p reduction in the basic rate of tax (Cook 2010:298). This was a clear move to distance the party away from their traditional ‘tax and spend’ image and towards the tax-cutting Conservatives. Moreover, under the stewardship of David Laws and Norman Lamb, there was now a consensus with the Tories over public sector reform at elite level (Astle and Bell 2008:4). Furthermore, there had been a distinct change in tone on Europe, moving away from the party’s traditional Europhile position to one that was clearly more critical of the European Union (Cable 2009b: 276; Clegg 2004). This made the party’s position on Europe somewhat more palatable to the Eurosceptic Conservatives. Therefore there was a clear shift at an elite level to position the party so that it could pursue co-operation with the Conservatives in the event of a hung parliament.

Despite these changes, it has been argued that the Liberal Democrats maintained a position of equidistance in that they could still co-operate with Labour (Kavanagh and Cowley 2010:105; Laws 2010:138, 269-270). Indeed the social liberal wing of the party remained an obstacle to internal policy reform through its presence on the FPC, with the ‘free schools’ initiative unable to pass this barrier (Brack 2010:178; Kavanagh and Cowley 2010:106). However, in the event of the coalition negotiations of May 2010, the party leadership was in a strong position to achieve an agreement that was chiefly economically liberal due its predominant role in the negotiation process. Even though Andrew Stunell was a part of the negotiating team ‘to ensure that the wider party’s perspective would be properly represented’ (Laws 2010:15), he had already come to the conclusion that a coalition with Labour would not work the day after the election (Ibid: 44). Therefore Stunell’s role as a representative of grass-roots
opinion, which would have naturally favoured a coalition with Labour, was compromised at a very early stage. Indeed, even though the FE, and activists at the Special Conference ratified the Coalition agreement, the role of the grass-roots in the process was minimal, and it is clear that the initiative for a coalition with the Conservatives was evidently provided at leadership level.

Moreover, the role of personalities in the negotiation process played a prominent part in their outcome. Indeed the talks with the Labour negotiating team were fraught with tension, as it appeared that Ed Balls, Ed Miliband and Harriet Harman were opposed to the objective of finding an agreement (Laws 2010:155). The Conservatives, on the other hand, were desperate to get back into power, after thirteen years of Labour government. Therefore negotiations with the Conservatives were bound to be more co-operative in nature. More importantly, if a potential coalition were to be long lasting, then relations between the two party leaders would need to be at least cordial in nature in order to survive the difficulties inherent in coalition government. While Cameron and Clegg’s discussions were ‘constructive and amicable’ (Hennessy and Kite 2010), the talks between Brown and Clegg were hostile, especially when the future of Brown’s leadership was brought up (The Telegraph 2010). Therefore the atmosphere under which the elite-level negotiations took place was highly conducive to an agreement with the Conservatives.

The likelihood of working with the Conservatives was also aided by the prominent role played by the Parliamentary Party during the negotiating process. By consulting MPs, the leadership team avoided the problems experienced by Ashdown and Campbell, who faced widespread opposition to potential co-operation with Labour. Indeed the reaction of the Parliamentary Party to the negotiated agreement was ‘one of elation’ (Laws 2010:193). In light of this widespread support for the coalition, the Parliamentary Party’s veto power would not be employed. However, in lieu of the consultation process, sceptical MPs such as Charles Kennedy and Ming Campbell would not have witnessed the extent of positive feeling within the Parliamentary Party, and may not have come to accept that resistance was futile, as they did in the event. Instead, by involving the parliamentarians, the leadership facilitated a united front on an elite level. Therefore even though the grass-roots would have preferred to co-operate with Labour, it was the leadership that dominated the negotiating process, meaning that the grass-roots’ traditional restraining role was less prominent than under normal
circumstances. This gave the leadership within the party the opportunity to secure their preferred option of a coalition with the Conservatives.

This chapter has shown the importance of the style and purpose of party leadership in dictating relations with other parties, by arguing that Ashdown and Clegg pursued proactive leadership, verging on oligarchy, which resulted in a significant move towards greater cooperation. On the other hand, Kennedy and Campbell, who employed a more relaxed and consensus-building approach, found it more difficult to provide a coherent strategy. This suggests that the nature of party leadership has been a crucial variable in determining relations with the two main parties.

3. The Party Membership as a Constraint

Whereas the previous chapter highlighted the role of the party leadership as the driving force behind changes in relations with the two main parties, this chapter will outline the role that the membership, and in particular party activists, play in restraining the freedom of movement of their leaders, helping to provide the stratarchical framework necessary to prevent the existence of oligarchy within the Liberal Democrats.

The leadership’s ability to achieve its goal of ending equidistance, and in so doing facilitate closer relations with Labour, could be interpreted as a triumph for elites within the Liberal Democrats. However, this reading of the pre-1997 period ignores the significant problems that the leadership faced in obtaining party approval. Indeed when they tried to push through an early motion on strategy at the 1992 September conference, they were faced with considerable opposition from activists, and were only able to pass a significantly watered down motion after last-minute negotiations with veteran activist Tony Greaves (Ashdown 2000:194-5; Douglas 2005:304; Walter 2003:165). That Ashdown moved so quickly on an issue that he had only advocated a few months earlier in his Chard Speech emphasises that the leadership was prepared to pursue an oligarchic approach. However, the fact that it was forced to back down by the party’s activists highlights the extent to which the party was still stratarchical, meaning that Ashdown would require a much greater degree of endeavour before he could get his way. Indeed following this climb-down, the leader went to great efforts to ensure full consultation (Rawnsley, Brack and Smith 2001:10,13). Given that the Liberal Democrat membership was strongly weighted towards the centre-left of British politics, and broadly
sympathetic to the Labour party in comparison to the Conservatives (Bennie, Curtice and Rudig 1994:156, 1996:142-4, 148; Butler and Kavanagh 1997:69), it is surprising that the leadership would have to go to such lengths. However, while the leadership’s motivation for co-operation was partly to prove that co-operation could work in order to negate public concerns regarding the instability of coalitions under Proportional Representation, the membership was far from convinced about the merits of coalition politics. Indeed only 35 percent supported the idea of coalition government, whereas a quarter did not, while the remaining members were indifferent (Bennie, Curtice and Rudig 1996:142). More importantly, the desire of activists to be involved in the decision-making process has considerable weight in explaining this curiosity. In so doing they ensured that the party would pursue its strategy in relation to the two main parties in a manner consistent with the concept of stratarchy.

In contrast to the consensual approach taken prior to 1997, following Labour’s rise to power Ashdown’s manner of relations with Labour were highly secretive and therefore very much in tune with oligarchy. Indeed in spite of strong criticism from a party members’ consultative session at the September 1997 conference (Ashdown 2001:94), Ashdown insisted on pressing the party to hold its nerve during his set-piece speech (Rawnsley 2001:205; Rentoul 2001:493). This marked Ashdown’s increasing detachment from the core sentiment within the membership, as he pushed for a degree of co-operation that it was unwilling to tolerate. In so doing Ashdown was alienating the very people whose support he would require to validate his chief goal of a coalition with Labour. By pursuing an oligarchic rather than stratarchic approach, Ashdown’s strategy undermined his overall prospects in a party in which consultation was the norm. Under these circumstances it is understandable that the membership reacted by committing the party to a more diffuse framework for decision-making in the form of the Triple Lock resolution. This measure was so restrictive of Ashdown’s freedom for manoeuvre that it left him ‘in a black temper’ and on the verge of resignation (Hurst 2006:94; Brack 2007b: 83). Indeed it meant that it was impossible for the leadership to enter a coalition without a broad consensus of the party, and potentially the party activists if the high thresholds could not be met within the Parliamentary Party and the FE. Therefore Triple Lock reinforced the stratarchic nature of the party, meaning that multiple centres of power could be responsible for making decisions about relations with other parties.
Despite Triple Lock being in place Ashdown continued to attempt to circumvent the views of the membership as a whole as shown by the extension of the JCC to non-constitutional issues. Ashdown pushed ahead with this in spite of the fact that there was ‘a lot of nervousness in the air’ at the September 1998 conference (Ashdown 2001:274). Even though the leadership was able to push through the extension of the JCC, the depth of anger this proactive move caused within the party as a whole meant that the Project was essentially dead in the water (Ashdown 2001:337; Bartle 2001:234; Brack 2007b: 83; Denver 2002:148; Douglas 2005:311; Rawnsley 2001:207; Russell and Fieldhouse 2005:43). Indeed there are clear links between the reaction to the extension of the JCC and Ashdown’s resignation as leader. The opposition which it caused was evident is the formation of the Campaign for Liberal Democracy, which was a group determined to regain the independence of the party (Alderman and Carter 2000:313). Given that there had been very limited factional behaviour within the party previously (McKee 1996a: 157-8), the inception of this group was a clear sign that activists were preparing the ground for decisive action against the leadership. Therefore the decision of Ashdown to resign can be interpreted as him waving the white flag in view of the certain demise of his Project (Hurst 2006:93; Quinn and Clements 2011:67). This period of Liberal Democrat relations with Labour clearly emphasises the difficulties involved in Ashdown’s oligarchic approach, highlighting the need for a broad consensus in order to successfully achieve closer relations with other parties.

Given the degree of hostility over relations with Labour within the party, it is not surprising that this issue dominated the 1999 leadership election to choose Ashdown’s successor (Cook 2002:253). Indeed it gave rank and file members the ‘opportunity to influence’ future relations with Labour (Alderman and Carter 2000:312). Therefore the decision to appoint Kennedy could be seen as a natural selection given Kennedy’s previous opposition to co-operation during Ashdown’s leadership. However, to argue that Kennedy ‘matched perfectly the mood of the party’ (Campbell 2008:152), would be to overstate the degree of scepticism he held for continuing relations. Indeed Kennedy had emphasised the potential for the party to continue its co-operation with Labour through the JCC (Alderman and Carter 2000:321; Denver 2001:641; Hurst 2006:98). Therefore if the membership desired a complete breakdown of co-operation they could have chosen a more sceptical candidate such as Simon Hughes. However, it is possible to overstate the role of relations with Labour during the contest. The membership may have been making an evaluation that Kennedy was more
selectable than the alternative candidates, especially in the case of Hughes who was seen as more left-wing. Moreover, the degree of support for Hughes at 43 percent was in itself a message to Kennedy about the desire for an end to close relations with Labour (Denver 2002:153; Hurst 2006:100). Therefore despite his victory, the small margin meant that Kennedy would have to significantly tone down co-operation in order to placate the party membership.

Kennedy’s leadership style also facilitated greater membership input into strategic decision-making. This was evident in his decision not to press the Welsh Liberal Democrats into a coalition with Labour in spite of a personal plea from Tony Blair (Hurst 2006: 113; Laffin 2007:661; Rawnsley 2001:360; Rentoul 2001:456-7). Moreover, Kennedy’s decision to identify the party as being left of Labour on the ideological scale could also be interpreted as following the will of the membership of the party (BBC News Analysis and Research 2001:71; Kavanagh and Cowley 2010:105; Meadowcroft 2000:439). By pursuing a strategy endorsed by his membership, Kennedy was clearly seeking to avoid the criticism levelled at his predecessor of acting in an oligarchic manner, by bringing the party activists back into the fold, and in doing so reinforcing the degree of stratarchy within the party. However, Kennedy’s style became more problematic after the 2001 election with the rise of the Parliamentary Party in terms of prominence. Therefore Kennedy now ‘faced the challenge of leading both a grass-roots party which jealously protected its autonomy and a newly ambitious Parliamentary Party which expected a more modern ‘professional’ approach to party affairs’ (McAnulla 2009:39). However, Kennedy’s laid-back approach meant that the membership was forced to halt the rise of the Orange Bookers, as it could not rely on its leader to do so. This was particularly the case at the September 2005 conference where Orange Book-inspired motions calling for the privatisation of the Royal Mail and a 1 percent cap on the EU budget were both defeated comprehensively by activists (Evans 2007:101; Garnett 2009:43; Hurst 2006:231-2). In this way the stratarchic nature of the party meant that the membership was able to prevent the Orange Bookers from moving the party towards the right and consequently closer to the Conservative Party.

The most significant change of Ming Campbell’s leadership was the decision to drop the 50p top rate of income tax. Such a tax-cutting measure would naturally be considered a move towards the right and closer to the Conservatives. Indeed during the consultation for the
policy change, ‘most respondents’ supported the retention of the high top rate (Dorey and Denham 2007:74). Therefore the ability of the leadership to get its way could be seen as a sign of oligarchy, undermining the will of the party members. Indeed it has been argued that the leadership was only able to achieve the policy change due to Campbell’s long association with the centre-left (Grayson 2010a: 8). However, Grayson’s position as a proponent of retaining the rate would suggest that he is not an objective enough source to provide a clear rationale for the motion’s success. That a consultation was taking place in itself is a sign of stratarchy. Moreover, the leadership took note of the concerns of activists over the potential of the policy change to take away from the state’s redistributive arsenal, by reinforcing the move with a raft of tax measures that overall would strengthen redistribution. Therefore the leadership had clearly achieved a measured change of policy, which was sufficient to appease the membership and the Parliamentary Party, meaning that stratarchy was prevalent under Campbell’s tenure.

In stark contrast to his two predecessors, Nick Clegg’s leadership was much more proactive in its advocacy of a more economically liberal approach that would take the party closer to the Conservatives. In the years prior to the coalition, Clegg tried to rebrand the party as a tax-cutting party as opposed to its traditional tax-raising image. This involved an emphasis on targeting child benefit and public sector pay and pensions for cuts in public spending (Cook 2002:310). Given that the party remained socially liberal at an activist level, it would be expected that such initiatives would be blocked at party conference. However, the leadership successfully employed a typical oligarchic approach by bringing out the ‘big guns’ of the party to sell the changes to conference. This led one commentator to argue that, by accepting the changes, the party was becoming increasingly ‘leadership loyal’ due to the problems attached to its two previous leaders Grayson (2010a: 8-9). In so doing Grayson is suggesting that instead of having limited authority due to his marginal victory over Chris Huhne in the leadership contest of 2007, Clegg in fact had additional bargaining power, as the party could not afford to have another period of leadership troubles. While this judgement has merit, it does not mean that the leadership was omnipotent. Indeed, the party’s social liberal activists managed to organise a slate of candidates for the election to the FPC in order to block further attempts to shift party policy to the right. It had success in this regard over tuition fees and free schools (Astle and Bell 2008:4; Brack 2010:178; Grayson 2010a: 9; Hurst 2010:46; Kavanagh and Cowley 2010:106, 109-110; Laws 2010:204; Quinn and Clements 2011:78).
Therefore the party’s activists were able to use alternative power centres in order to prevent the leadership from moving the party closer to the Conservatives prior to the coalition.

In spite of opposition from within the party towards Clegg’s strategic direction, the nature of the Hung Parliament situation meant that coalition negotiations would be by necessity secretive and elite-led. Therefore even though Liberal Democrat members were generally opposed to the Conservatives and the idea of a coalition with them (Astle and Bell 2008:2; Quinn and Clements 2011:68, 80-1), the ability of the leadership to control the talks left them in strong position to lead the party towards a coalition. While it has been argued that the membership could have few complaints about a lack of consultation due to the close involvement of the Parliamentary Party, FE and the activists at the Special Conference in the decision-making process (Kavanagh and Cowley 2010:210 221), the party activists insisted on reaffirming the party’s commitment to key manifesto policies on tuition fees and voting reform (Curtis 2010). In this way they were quietly indicating their reluctance to give ground to the Conservatives on such issues. However, the coalition document meant that a significant number of policy areas were subject to review, meaning that subsequent events were liable to conspire against the social liberal element of the party. This has been shown over policies such as tuition fees and reform of the NHS. Therefore, even though the coalition was overwhelmingly supported at the Special Conference, this does not mean that activists are completely satisfied with it, leaving the possibility for acrimony if the leadership is not responsive enough to the views of members. Indeed the coalition, though supported by a number of power centres in the party, has led to a potentially oligarchic situation.

This chapter has highlighted the role of the membership of the party as an obstacle to close co-operation with other parties, if full consultation does not take place. This was particularly relevant during the later Ashdown years and has the potential to surface again as a result of the current coalition with the Conservatives.

**Conclusion**

Given the constantly changing nature of relations between Liberal Democrats and the two main parties since the party’s inception in 1988, the study of this topic is of particular relevance. Indeed the party has moved to and away from equidistance, in and out the JCC during the Labour Government, to the left of Labour under Kennedy, followed by a move
back to equidistance under Campbell, and finally towards the Conservatives under Clegg. Moreover, the fact that the party is now in government with the Conservatives with the option to withdraw (or threaten to do so) from the coalition prior to 2015, the issue of its relations with other parties is all the more pressing. This dissertation has helped to shed some light on the internal rationale for these frequently changing relationships with other parties, which has potential ramifications for the coalition and what action may need to be taken in order to ensure its longevity.

In the literature review, the dissertation highlighted the existing literature on the Liberal Democrats’ internal structure and its connection to the wider theoretical framework on party organisation. It illustrated that the most prominent interpretation of the party’s structure has been one of stratarchy as opposed to oligarchy due to the multiple power centres that exist within the party. However, the review also accentuated the dearth of literature linking the party’s organisational structure to its relations with other parties, something that this dissertation has sought to rectify.

The chapter on ideology introduced the competing perspectives of social and economic liberalism. Whilst acknowledging the prominence of social liberalism within the party as a whole, it argued that ideology is a poor indicator of the changing relations with other parties. Indeed the ideological position of the party was very similar before and after equidistance, meaning that electoral factors such as the relative popularity of other parties were a more important determinant of the nature of relations. Moreover, ideology cannot explain the move away from Labour and towards the Conservatives. During Clegg’s leadership, while social liberalism was popular within the grass-roots, economic liberalism had taken root within the Parliamentary Party. Therefore a clear ideological position is difficult to ascertain without reference to the role of leadership and membership.

The second chapter sought to address this problem by emphasising the importance of leadership as the driving force behind closer relations with other parties. Indeed Ashdown and Clegg pursued proactive strategies in order to achieve their goal of closer relations, often using oligarchic techniques to do so. Kennedy and Campbell, on the other hand, adopted a more laid back style, giving the opportunity for other power centres to influence the strategic
direction of the party. This emphasis on stratarchy resulted in the reassertion of the party’s independence.

The final chapter assessed the role of the party membership, arguing that activists act as an obstacle to oligarchy by using party conferences and bodies such as the FE and FPC in order to actively prevent closer relations with other parties. Therefore, while Ashdown was able to take the party into the JCC, the membership placed clear limits on how far he could pursue co-operation due to the Triple Lock mechanism. Moreover, activists were also able to slow down the efforts of the Orange Bookers, under Ashdown’s successors, from moving the party in the opposite direction. Indeed only the specific circumstances surrounding the coalition negotiations allowed the party elite to achieve their aim of closer co-operation. However, given the historic role of the membership as a road block to close relations, the Liberal Democrat leadership will need to keep in close contact with party activists in order to ensure their room for manoeuvre is not limited in the same way as has previously occurred, which would lead to increasing difficulties for the coalition as a whole.

References:


Liberal Democrats (2006) Fairer, Simpler, Greener, Farnborough: Liberal Democrat Image


