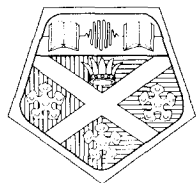


# STRATHCLYDE PAPERS ON GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS



UNIVERSITY OF  
STRATHCLYDE

## LIBERAL DEMOCRATS REVEAL ALL

*by*

*John Curtice, Wolfgang Rüdig  
and Lynn G. Bennie*

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## **Introduction**

The Liberal Democrats are the youngest of all the parties currently represented at Westminster. They were formed just five years ago following the decision of the Liberal Party (whose origins date back to 1859) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) (founded in 1981) to merge. But in contrast to the formation of the SDP the launch of the new party hardly gave the impression that a new political age was dawning. The marriage between the Liberal Party and the SDP had been an unhappy one. The decision to merge caused a serious split within the Social Democratic Party including the resignation of its leader David Owen, the formation of a new breakaway SDP, and the spectacle of Liberal Democrat and SDP candidates fighting against each other in local and by-elections. The new party at first could not even decide what it should be called. Its rating in the opinion polls plummeted to single figures and in the European elections of June 1989 it won just 6% of the vote and was overtaken by the Greens.

The party's first general election outing on April 9 1992 was better but still a tough ride. The tide in the opinion polls seemed to many party activists to hold out the promise of a quarter of the national vote and the balance of power. Instead John Major was returned in triumph, albeit with a parliamentary majority whose reduced size was to be more significant than was initially realised. The Liberal Democrats' share of the vote was, at 18%, as much as five points down on the Alliance's 1987 performance, although the number of MPs elected was just one fewer.

But the eighteen months since the last general election have been happier for the party than it could ever have conceivably imagined in the small hours of April 10 last year. The Conservative government has endured one of the most uncomfortable periods in office of any modern British government. The Conservative Party's poll rating in both the Gallup and MORI polls fell to equal its all time low, while satisfaction with the government and with John Major as Prime Minister actually exceeded the previous low. While Labour secured a substantial lead in the polls, divisions within the party about its future direction, policy and relationship with the trade unions have continued and it has been unable to achieve the levels of popularity it secured at the height of the poll tax row in 1990.

In short, the Liberal Democrats have once again enjoyed the perfect recipe for success, an unpopular Conservative government and a divided opposition<sup>1</sup>. They have grasped the opportunity with open arms. A near-record breaking success in a by-election in Newbury in May was followed by a truly record breaking one in Christchurch in July. Further, the party had a more successful set of county council election results in terms of seats won and councils controlled than was achieved at any time during the history of the Alliance. By the summer the party's opinion poll rating had reached a quarter of the popular vote.

Whether the Liberal Democrats can eventually succeed where the Alliance ultimately failed and 'break the mould of British politics' is

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<sup>1</sup>See S. Ingle, 'The Liberal Democrats and the 1992 Election', (Paper presented at Annual Conference of the PSA specialist group on Elections, Public Opinion and Parties, Univ. of Essex, Sept. 1992)

impossible to say. But it is now apparent that the Liberal Democrats are as serious a potential threat to the established order of British politics as the former SDP were. Indeed, in terms of local government representation the party is already more important than the old Alliance. But who are the Liberal Democrats? What do they believe in? How active are they? What are their views about pacts and coalitions? What has happened to the divisions that existed between the old Alliance parties? Little is known about the answers to these questions. Yet finding them out has clearly become important to understanding the possible future of British politics.

In this report we present the first results from a postal survey of members of the Liberal Democrats undertaken in the spring and summer of 1993. A twenty page questionnaire was sent out to a random national sample of just under two and half thousand members of the Liberal Democrats immediately after the county council elections and the Newbury by-election held in the first week of May. As many as 1,675 replies were received, most of them by the time of the Christchurch by-election at the end of July. This represents a response rate of 68%, slightly higher than in two recent surveys of Labour and Conservative party members<sup>2</sup>, and only a little below that achieved in high quality face to face surveys of the general population such as the British Election Study<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>See P. Seyd and P. Whiteley, *Labour's Grassroots* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992); P. Whiteley, P. Seyd, and J. Richardson, *True Blues: The Politics of Conservative Party Membership* (forthcoming)

<sup>3</sup>This survey like the Labour and Conservative surveys and a similar survey of members of the Green Party. (See W. Rüdig, L. Bennie and M.N. Franklin, *Green Party Members: A Profile* (Glasgow: Delta Publications, 1991)) was financed by the Economic and Social Research Council, under grant no. R-000-23-3450. We are

The report is divided into four main sections. First of all we look briefly at the social profile of Liberal Democrat members. We consider their age distribution and occupations, their education and their religion. Secondly we report on their experience of being party members. How many active Liberal Democrats are there? Do they believe that the party is serving them well? Are they likely to remain members? Then thirdly we look at their attitudes towards some of the major political issues. We ask how pro-European is the party membership? Where does it stand on economic issues? Have the policy differences between Liberals and Social Democrats been healed? Then finally, we look at Liberal Democrats' views on party strategy and the future of the party. What are their attitudes towards pacts and deals with Labour? And who do they think might be Mr. Ashdown's successor as party leader?

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grateful to the council for their financial support, but the council has no responsibility for the views expressed here. We are also grateful to Graham Elson, Keith House and the staff of the Liberal Democrats Membership Services department for assisting us in the selection of the sample and the administration of the survey. But equally they have no responsibility for the views expressed here, for the content of the questionnaire or for the conduct of the survey.

The sample was selected from the database of members of the Liberal Democrats resident in Great Britain held by the party at Cowley St. Members were defined as those who had paid a subscription within the 15 months prior to 30 March 1993. The list was ordered alphabetically within three groups according to whether the member had previously been a member of the Liberals, the SDP or neither and then every 33rd name was selected using a random starting point. Respondents were contacted up to three times to encourage them to respond. Thirty questionnaires were returned because the respondent was dead, gone away, etc. and these have been excluded from the calculation of the response rate. Parallel surveys of former members of the Liberal Democrats and members of the Liberal party and the SDP who had never joined the Liberal Democrats were also conducted at the same time as this survey of current members; their results will be reported later. We are of course deeply indebted to all the respondents for taking the not inconsiderable time to complete the questionnaire.

## **Who are Liberal Democrats?**

Nearly all organisations - with the notable exception of trade unions - are disproportionately middle class in their membership. Even in the Labour Party just under 1 in 3 are members of the working class<sup>4</sup> and just under half belong to the so-called 'salaried', that is people in salaried professional or managerial occupations. But no less than just over 2 in 3 of our Liberal Democrat members indicated that they had an occupation belonging to the 'salaried'. The Liberal Democrats are indeed serious competitors with the Conservatives for the title of the most middle-class party in Britain. Only 55% of Conservative members belong to the 'salaried'<sup>5</sup>. Meanwhile, just 1 in 8 of Liberal Democrats has a manual occupation, only a little higher than amongst Conservative members. As many as 17% are self-employed, nearly double the proportion in the electorate as a whole<sup>6</sup>.

The Liberal Democrats are certainly the most highly educated group of major party members<sup>7</sup>. No less than 43% completed their continuous full-time education after the age of 18 and just under a half have studied for a degree. In contrast just under 1 in 5 Conservative

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<sup>4</sup> All figures relating to the Labour party in this report are taken from Seyd and Whiteley, *Labour's Grassroots*.

<sup>5</sup> All figures relating to the Conservative Party in this report are taken from P. Seyd, P. Whiteley and J. Richardson, 'Who are the True Blues? The Conservative Party Members' (Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Political Studies Association, University of Leicester, April 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Figures relating to the electorate in this pamphlet are calculated from the British Election Study 1992 directed by A. Heath, R. Jowell and J. Curtice. A book giving the results of the study and focusing on the future of the Labour Party is due to be published by Gower next year.

<sup>7</sup> Note however that Green Party members, 2 in 3 of whom have studied for a degree, are even more highly educated than Liberal Democrats (See W. Rüdiger et al., *Green Party Members*).

members completed their education after the age of 18 and less than 1 in 3 Labour members have a degree. This concentration of the educated middle class amongst the Liberal Democrats' numbers is reflected in its voters as well - educated members of the salariat in the electorate as a whole give more support to the Liberal Democrats than any other identifiable group<sup>8</sup>. It should perhaps then be no surprise that despite its middle class membership the party should have campaigned at the last election for a one penny increase in taxation to finance increased education spending<sup>9</sup>.

The party's stance towards taxation is also not inconsistent with the kind of organisation Liberal Democrat members work for. 46% work for a private company or are self-employed while as many as 49% work for a nationalised industry, the government or some other part of the public sector. Amongst the electorate as a whole, in contrast, there are two private sector workers for every one in the public sector.

One of the historical roots of the Liberal Party was religious nonconformism and nonconformists are still more likely to vote Liberal Democrat than other voters<sup>10</sup>. The legacy of nonconfirmism can also be seen amongst the Liberal Democrats' membership. As many as 18% of Liberal Democrats claim allegiance to one of the nonconformist denominations compared with 7% of the electorate as a whole. But even

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<sup>8</sup> See A. Heath, R. Jowell and J. Curtice, *How Britain Votes* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1985) and A. Heath et al, *Understanding Political Change* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> However we should note that as many as 30% of Liberal Democrats attended an independent fee-paying school for at least *part* of their secondary education. It seems likely that experience of public schooling is at least as common amongst Liberal Democrats as amongst Conservatives, 23% of whose *last* secondary school was a private fee-paying school.

<sup>10</sup> J. Curtice, 'Great Britain: Social Liberalism Reborn?', in E. Kirchner (ed.) *Liberal Parties in Western Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).



so the Liberal Democrats are not a party of nonconformists - Anglicans are by far the largest religious group in the party constituting 1 in 3 of all members. Meanwhile, irrespective of their denomination Liberal Democrat members are more likely to be seen in church than the average voter - nearly 1 in 4 claim to attend church once a week compared with 1 in 8 of the electorate.

On the other hand, as Britain's newest political party one might anticipate that the Liberal Democrats would have the youngest membership. But as table 1 shows this is not the case. As many as 1 in 3 of the respondents to our survey were over 65. In contrast less than 1 in 5 Labour Party members fall into that age group. Perhaps not surprisingly the oldest group of members were those who had previously been members of the Liberal Party, of whom as many as 40% were over 65.

**Table 1. The Age of Party Members**

	LibDem	Lab	Cons	Green
	%	%	%	%
Under 26	4	5	1	12
26-35	8	17	4	29
36-45	16	26	11	28
46-55	21	17	17	14
56-65	19	16	24	9
Over 65	33	19	43	9

A party always looks healthier if it has a young age profile. A party with an age profile like that of the Conservatives where 2 in 3 members are aged over 55 would appear to be in danger of losing a large proportion of its members in the foreseeable future. But we should perhaps be wary about drawing such a conclusion. All the major political parties are underrepresented amongst the under 35s. Only the Greens have a distinctively younger membership but this does not appear to have helped them in building up a stable membership base. In fact, our evidence indicates that older members can provide a valuable recruiting ground for new members as they are more like to stay in the party than younger recruits. Just over 1 in 5 of those Liberal Democrats who had not previously been members of either of the two old Alliance parties are over 65, but three quarters of them say they will definitely renew their membership. Of those aged 25 or younger, less than 50% say so. But even so the Liberal Democrats must be disappointed that despite Labour's electoral difficulties in recent years they have clearly not been more successful at winning recruits amongst young people.

The party has however been far more successful than Labour in recruiting women. Only 39% of Labour members are women, compared with 46% of Liberal Democrats. But despite the fact that the Liberal Democrats, like Labour, have been concerned to promote the role of women within the party organisation, they are still less successful than the Conservatives in recruiting women, who constitute as many as 49% of Conservative members. Despite the advances of feminism in recent years, the 'blue rinse' brigade are still the largest group of female party activists in Britain.

## **What is it like being a Liberal Democrat?**

Members are vital to the Liberal Democrats. Lacking major funding from either big business or trade unions, the party is reliant upon its members not only for finance but also as a manpower resource. One of the hallmarks of the 'community politics' style of campaigning promulgated inside the Liberal Party is extensive local campaigning using hand-delivered leaflets. Liberal Democrat by-election campaigns are now famous for their bussing in of large numbers of party workers from around the country.

But how active is the general membership of the party? Not perhaps as much as the image of the party suggests. Just under a half of all members responding to the survey say that they do not spend any time at all in party activity in the average month outside of election times<sup>11</sup>. And even amongst the remainder, a half spend three hours a week or less. Perhaps not surprisingly the burden of running the party falls on a relatively small number of people; 6% of our respondents reported spending twenty or more hours a month on party affairs.

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<sup>11</sup> Note however that this is probably an underestimate of the proportion of the party's membership which is passive. It is likely that those who are most committed and active in the party would have more motivation to complete the questionnaire. One indication that this is probably the case is that the proportion of new members (that is those who had not previously been members of either the Liberal Party or the SDP) who responded to our survey is lower than that recorded by central party headquarters. Only 35% of our respondents said that they had not been members of either of the two Alliance parties at the time of the merger, while the party's records indicate that 50% of the membership were not previously Liberal or SDP members. Crucially, such new members were less likely to be active than other members - as many as 57% said they were inactive compared with only 44% of former Alliance members.. It is likely that in later reports of the results of this survey that weighting will be employed to correct for this imbalance. But a check of what the results would be using a provisional weighting scheme suggests that none of the substantive conclusions we report here would be changed.

These levels of activism are in fact no higher than those in the Labour Party where exactly 50% of the membership is normally inactive (though both opposition parties' members are much more active than are Conservative members)<sup>12</sup>. But the balance and concentration of activity amongst Liberal Democrat members is rather different from that of Labour Party members.

**Table 2. What Activists Do**

% saying they have done the following activities  
frequently in the last five years.

	LibDem	Lab
Displayed election poster	64	65
Delivered election leaflets	63	57
Donated money to party funds	38	33
Attended party meeting	31	42
Canvassed voters	23	36
Stood in an election	16	9

Liberal Democrats are more likely to say that they frequently deliver leaflets than are Labour Party members<sup>13</sup>. In contrast, they are less

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<sup>12</sup>The level of activism amongst Liberal Democrats does however seem to be higher than it was amongst the Greens in the wake of that party's breakthrough in the 1989 European elections. In autumn 1990 32% of Green members said that they had been fairly, very, or extremely active over the last twelve months. In this survey 37% of Liberal Democrats said they were at least fairly active.

<sup>13</sup> Although the question reported here referred to election leaflets, it is clear that this activity is not necessarily confined to general elections. In response to a separate

likely to engage frequently in some of the more traditional forms of local party activity such as attending meetings and canvassing. The style of Liberal Democrat campaigning does indeed appear to have a distinctive character to it.

That distinctive style is also reflected in the party's commitment to fighting local elections. No fewer than 1 in 5 party members have been a candidate for the party in local elections. The Liberal Democrats may be a minority party at Westminster, but its membership can hardly be regarded as being insulated from the feelings of the electorate.

Clearly one challenge for any party with a substantial 'passive' membership is maintaining their contact with, and commitment to, the party. In many respects the party seems to have some success with this. True, its national publications are regarded a little lukewarmly. Asked to mark them out of 7, only 38% were prepared to give them a score of 6 or 7 for interest, and as few as 25% for persuasiveness. Even so, as many as 85% felt that the party did enough to keep them informed. 78% receive a newsletter from their local party and only 5% have no contact with their local party at all. Two-thirds see the party newspaper, *Liberal Democrat News*. Just 21% believe that the party leadership pays little attention to the views of ordinary members.

The party is certainly keeping in contact with its membership so far as money raising is concerned. No fewer than 89% had received an appeal for money from the federal level of the party within the last

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question about local party activity, 59% said they had helped to deliver local party leaflets in the last twelve months. In contrast, only around 1 in 4 had helped at coffee mornings or occasionally attended party meetings.

twelve months. One of the innovations the SDP brought to British politics was the construction of a computerised national membership list of party members which can be used to make direct mail appeals. The Liberal Democrats are clearly attempting to exploit this facility - and indeed more of its members report giving money frequently to the party than do either Labour or Conservative members.

We have seen that the level of activism in the party is similar to that of the Labour Party. But it is not so clear that the membership's depth of commitment to the party is the same. One of the weaknesses of the Liberal Democrats' electoral position is that their voters tend to feel less strongly attached emotionally to the party than do voters for Conservative or Labour and in consequence are less likely to be loyal to the party in the polling booth. This lack of emotional appeal is also apparent amongst the party's membership. Only just over 1 in 3 say that they would call themselves a 'very strong' Liberal Democrat. In contrast over a half of Labour members say that they are 'very strong' Labour.

Further, there is also evidence of a decline in the level of activism in the party in recent years. As many as 1 in 3 members said they were less active in the party now than five years ago<sup>14</sup> while only 1 in 5 said they were more active. Consistent with this, whereas 55% of those Liberal Democrats who were members of the Liberal Party or the SDP prior to the merger said they were at least fairly active in their former party, only 40% of them said they were at least fairly active in the Liberal Democrats now.

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<sup>14</sup> As the survey was administered in the spring of this year, five years ago would refer exactly to the period when the Liberal Democrats were founded.

One possible interpretation of these results is that some Liberal Democrat members have still not recovered their enthusiasm for the party in the wake of the party's early difficulties<sup>15</sup>. However, Seyd and Whiteley's surveys of Labour and Conservative members have also found a similar reported fall in the level of activism compared with five years previously. The level of party membership in Britain has been in steady decline since the 1950s so maybe all parties are suffering from a continuing growing disillusionment with political parties, a disillusionment from which even the Liberal Democrats are unable to escape.

But a more prosaic explanation is also possible. Given the age profile of Liberal Democrat members - and party members in general - ill health can be expected to have reduced the ability of some to maintain their level of activism over a period of five years. As many as 1 in 4 of those who said they were not very active or not at all active indicated that they were not more active because of bad health. It may be that not too much should be made of the apparent fall in activism.

One acid test of the real level of commitment to a party amongst its members is whether or not they intend to remain members. Just over three-quarters of our respondents said they intended to renew their membership when it is next became due, while another 18% said that they probably would. Only 5% said that they would definitely leave or indeed had already left. Of course those who are thinking about leaving were probably less willing to respond to our survey, but even so it seems likely that the party has a reasonably stable membership base. It

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<sup>15</sup>Note also that as many as 56% of our respondents said that the party's general election performance was not as good as they had expected.

certainly compares favourably with the Greens' membership in the wake of their European election success.<sup>16</sup> When surveyed in the autumn of 1990 only 64% of Green members said they intended to renew their membership, while as many as 1 in 8 said they had left or were on the point of leaving.

But why were those who were not sure that they would renew their membership dissatisfied? In many cases the reasons were personal such as age or ill health (21%) or not being able to afford the cost (19%). But what of the remainder? Do they have political differences with the party?

One issue which has troubled the party in the last year has been abortion. A vote by the party conference last year in favour of measures to ensure that the existing law on abortion is administered similarly through Great Britain was felt by some to break the convention that British political parties do not take a stance on moral issues. In particular the vote precipitated a statement by David Alton that he felt that he would be unable to fight the next general election as a Liberal Democrat candidate. But relatively few have been wont to follow David Alton's path. Less than 5% of those who might leave gave the party's stance on abortion as their reason.

Much more important has been the party's decision to support the government on the Maastricht bill. Its support in the so-called 'paving debate' last autumn was decisive in permitting the progress of the bill at

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<sup>16</sup> See also W. Rüdiger, M.N. Franklin and L.G. Bennie, *Green Blues* (Strathclyde Paper on Government and Politics, No. 95)(Glasgow: Department of Government, University of Strathclyde, 1993).



that stage<sup>17</sup>. This decision was cited as the reason why they might leave by no less than 1 in 5 of possible leavers. The Liberal Democrats are often seen as the most united of all the parties on Europe with a clear pro-community stance. The Liberal Party was after all the first party to favour Britain joining the EC while disagreement with Labour's then anti-EC stance was one of the reasons why the 'Gang of Four' left to join the SDP<sup>18</sup>. But on this evidence there seems cause to inquire into the current attitudes of Liberal Democrats a little further.

### **What do Liberal Democrats believe?**

There is indeed further evidence in our survey that the Liberal Democrats are not so enthusiastic about a stronger Europe than is often supposed. Given a wide set of options for Britain's future role in the EC only 48% favoured either the formation of a single European government or an increase in the powers of the EC, while as many as 44% favoured either the withdrawal of Britain from the EC or at least a reduction in the community's powers. Liberal Democrats are in fact scarcely more pro-European than the electorate as whole, 41% of whom were in favour of a stronger EC at the time of the last election and 43% a weaker one.

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<sup>17</sup> Nearly all of our respondents returned their questionnaires before the debate on the Social Chapter in July when the party did vote against the government. We are therefore in no position to judge whether that vote may have reconciled some of the potential leavers - or raised new doubts in the minds of others.

<sup>18</sup> For details of the formation of the SDP see Ian Bradley, *Breaking the Mould? The Birth and Prospects of the Social Democratic Party* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981).

This result does not appear to be a fluke of question wording. In response to a completely different question only 55% said the government should make Britain part of a federal Europe while 36% were opposed. Although in contrast to the Conservatives, Euro-enthusiasts are the largest group in the Liberal Democrats, the party does in fact contain a substantial group of Euro-sceptics. Europe is capable of dividing the Liberal Democrats just as it does both Labour and the Conservatives.

Apart from its pro-European stance, another distinctive feature of Liberal Democrat Party policy is its commitment to domestic constitutional reform. Surprisingly, support for this is not overwhelming in all respects either. True, 93% are in favour of proportional representation. But this is not necessarily accompanied by a rejection of British-style single party government. Only 35% feel that coalition governments are the best form of government for Britain while 26% actually disagree, the rest believing it does not make much difference either way.

When it comes to a Bill of Rights however support falls to 73%. But it is on devolution that support for official party policy is particularly weak. The Liberal Democrats and its predecessor parties have long favoured some form of devolution to the English regions as well as to Scotland and Wales. Yet only 60% agree that the government should 'create separately elected Parliaments for Scotland and Wales, and elected regional assemblies for England' while as many as 29% were opposed.

In contrast to Europe and constitutional reform, economic policy has rarely been seen as one of the party's distinctive cards. It is indeed this area of policy where the perception that the party is a 'centre' party has appeared most accurate. But our survey suggests that 'centre-left' would be a more accurate description.

In the first place a considerable proportion of the party clearly believe that the government has an important interventionist role to play in the economy, including owning key sections of industry. Nearly 2 in 3 believe that 'major public services and industries ought to be in state ownership', putting the party well to the left on this issue. Consistent with this stance, over half believe that the 'public enterprises privatised by the Conservatives should be returned to the public sector' while less than a quarter are opposed.

So far as taxation and spending are concerned, the membership are overwhelmingly in favour of the latter. No less than 95% favour increasing 'public spending on education and training even if it means raising taxes', while 96% oppose reducing taxes 'even if it means reducing spending on health and social services'. Education and health spending are of course popular throughout the electorate so perhaps these results are not as spectacular as they might seem. But as many as 51% of Liberal Democrats endorse the much more radical statement that 'income and wealth should be redistributed towards ordinary working people', while only 18% are opposed. As many as two-thirds believe that 'ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth'. There can be little doubt that for the most part Liberal Democrat members wear their hearts to the left and are more likely to

have something in common with Labour members than the Conservatives<sup>19</sup>.

It is only when it comes to the generation rather than the production of wealth that the party reveals any semblance of the traditional nineteenth century Liberal belief in the virtues of the market. 46% believe that 'the production of goods and services is best left to a free market' while only 27% disagree. But even then only 31% agree that 'private enterprise is the best way to solve Britain's economic problems' while 36% do not.

The party apparently has divisions on Europe and devolution that one might not have anticipated. But how far has it succeeded in healing the very real differences between its two predecessor parties? Its start was certainly inauspicious as the two camps argued about what the party should be called. But what of the situation now?

There are indeed few signs of the policy divisions between former Liberals and former Social Democrats. The most acrimonious debates between the two former Alliance parties were about nuclear weapons and nuclear power stations, with the Social Democrats more inclined to support both than the Liberals. And indeed those Social Democrats who joined the Liberal Democrats are still more pro-nuclear than the former Liberals. But only on civil nuclear power is the difference at all substantial<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> For example the 51% of Liberal Democrats who are in favour of the redistribution of income and wealth is much closer to the 65% who are similarly in favour in the Labour Party than the 22% amongst the Conservatives.

<sup>20</sup> Note also that there is little evidence here that unilateralism is strong in the party, even amongst former Liberals only 1 in 3 of whom endorse the view that 'Britain should have nothing to do with nuclear weapons'. In contrast, when asked the same question in 1990 nearly three-quarters of Labour members favoured this position.

**Table 3 Liberal and SDP Differences**

	% agree		
	Former members of:-		
	Liberals	SDP	Neither
Close all nuclear power stations as soon as possible	61	44	59
Abandon nuclear weapons as a deterrent	62	51	54
Britain should have nothing to do with nuclear weapons	33	25	30
Government should spend less on defence	61	63	59

On other issues there are few signs of substantial differences either. But ironically such as there are suggest that the SDP was a little closer to being a liberal party on the continental European pattern than was the former Liberal Party. Former Social Democrats are a little *less* likely to be on the left on socio-economic issues than former Liberals but *more* likely to take a liberal stance on moral issues. Thus, for example, only 44% of former Social Democrats believe that the privatised industries should be returned to the public sector compared with 55% of former Liberals. Meanwhile only 19% of former Social Democrats favour the reintroduction of the death penalty for murder compared with 26% of ex-Liberals.

Former Social Democrats are outnumbered by former Liberals by nearly three to one in the party. But in addition those Liberal Democrats who did not belong to either of the two old parties are more commonly similar in their attitudes to former Liberals than former Social Democrats<sup>21</sup>. The scars of the 1980s appear to have healed, but the temper of the new party is much closer to that of the former Liberal Party than that of the SDP.<sup>22</sup>

### **What is the future for the Liberal Democrats?**

The Liberal Democrats may have largely put the divisions of the 1980s behind them but many commentators now argue that the party faces a new challenge in the 1990s. The Conservative Party has won four general election victories in a row. Even when it fights a general election in the teeth of an economic recession it appears to be difficult to dislodge. Labour still seems to have some fundamental electoral weaknesses and be incapable of winning an overall majority. But at the same time as the failure of the SDP indicated, Labour's working class base is difficult to dislodge. Thus the apparently logical thing for the

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<sup>21</sup>For example, 53% of new members believe that the privatised industries should be returned to the public sector while 34% favoured the reintroduction of the death penalty for murder.

<sup>22</sup>Of course for a full understanding of what has happened as a consequence of the merger we need to compare the attitudes of those former Liberal and SDP members who are currently in the Liberal Democrats with those who did not join the Liberal Democrats. This was the purpose of the parallel surveys of former members of the two Alliance parties on which we shall be reporting later.

Liberal Democrats to do would be to enter an electoral pact with Labour and mobilise the anti-Tory majority.

The Liberal Democrats debated this issue at last year's conference. They passed a resolution which called for dialogue with other parties (not just Labour) but ruled out a national electoral pact. The party seemed to wish to keep the entrance to co-operation open but avoid putting up large signposts advertising to the public where it was. One fundamental problem for the party is of course that many of its voters say that they prefer the Conservatives to Labour - indeed by no less than 45% to 39% in England at the time of the last election - and any electoral pact or close co-operation with Labour could frighten those voters into the Conservative camp. Indeed although a number of local electoral deals and understandings were made with Labour before the last county council elections, the Liberal Democrat leadership have been keen to emphasise that it has reached post-election understandings on how to run a council with Conservatives as well as Labour.

We have already seen however that on socio-economic issues Liberal Democrat members lean towards the left and do not simply lie in the centre. And this is also where they see themselves. Asked where they would place themselves on a left-right scale in relation to British politics as a whole, over half put themselves to the left of centre and less than 1 in 5 to the right. Not that many put themselves on the far left - the average Liberal Democrat sees him or herself as just to the left of centre.

This positioning of themselves on the left-right scale is also reflected in their feelings about the Conservative and Labour parties.

We asked our respondents to score each party on a 'feeling thermometer', that is to give it a rating out of 100 indicating how 'warm and sympathetic' they felt towards the party. If they felt very warm and sympathetic they would give the party a score close to 100 while if they were firmly cold and unsympathetic they would the party close to 0.

And we find that on average Liberal Democrats proved to feel considerably more warm and sympathetic to Labour than to the Conservatives. The average score given to the Conservatives was just 19, indicating that most Liberal Democrats feel decidedly cool and unsympathetic towards the Conservatives. Feelings towards Labour are not warm, but at 37 the average Labour score was considerably higher<sup>23</sup>.

Thus some of the ingredients necessary for some form of co-operation with Labour do appear to be present. On both policy issues and in terms of general feelings Liberal Democrats appear to have considerably more in common with Labour than the Conservatives. Further, only a minority of party members feel that they can achieve political power on their own - less than 1 in 4 said that they felt that a majority Liberal Democrat government is likely within the next ten years while 9 in 10 think that the party is likely to hold the balance of power. But just how far are Liberal Democrat members prepared to go?

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<sup>23</sup>Note in the light of our earlier comments that the temper of the party is closer to that of the former Liberal Party than the SDP that the average score given to the old SDP was 56 but that for the Liberal Party, 71.



Quite a long way it seems (see Table 4). Informal discussions between members of the two parties before an election would now appear to be so widely supported that it is no longer likely to be worthy of comment, as evidenced by the lack of reaction to David Marquand's presence on Labour's Social Justice Commission. But even on formal talks proponents outnumber opponents despite the unease some Scottish Liberal Democrats have expressed about their experience in the Scottish Constitutional Convention.

**Table 4. Collaboration with Labour?**

	Support	Oppose
	%	%
Informal policy discussions	76	12
Formal policy talks	41	34
Locally negotiated general election pacts	58	28
National general election pact	24	58
Support Labour minority govt.	49	28
Join coalition govt. with Labour	57	24

There also appear to be majorities of nearly two to one in favour of doing a deal with Labour *after* the next election in the event of a hung parliament. Interestingly there is rather more support for forming a coalition government with Labour than supporting a minority Labour government. Perhaps some members with long memories look unfavourably upon the experience of the Lib-Lab Pact in 1977-78.

Others may feel that a coalition government would give the Liberal Democrats a better chance to negotiate for and implement some of its policy priorities and ensure that it is not outmanoeuvred. What however is clearly not acceptable is a national electoral pact. This is opposed by a majority of more than two to one<sup>24</sup>. This dream of some commentators is evidently a non-starter.

But the door to electoral pacts is not entirely closed. Only 39% say that the party should *never* enter into a pact with Labour. And well over half of our respondents were prepared to support 'locally negotiated pacts in which Liberal Democrats did not fight some constituencies at the next election while Labour did not oppose Liberal Democrats in others'. It should perhaps be borne in mind that there are precedents for such deals. Local pacts with the Conservative Party enabled Liberal MPs to be elected in Bolton and Huddersfield in the 1950s. The Liberal Democrats did not stand against the two SDP MPs, John Cartwright and Rosie Barnes, who defended their seats at the last general election. Such deals offer the prospect of reaping some of the rewards of a national pact while enabling the national party leaderships to distance themselves from claims that they imply a willingness to work together in government after the election. It would certainly seem that should the party leadership wish to permit such pacts they would not meet undue resistance from the majority of Liberal Democrat members.

Other evidence in our survey also suggests that the leadership may have considerable room for manoeuvre in determining party

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<sup>24</sup>The precise wording of the item was, 'Locally negotiated pacts in which Liberal Democrats did not fight some constituencies at the next election while Labour did not oppose Liberal Democrats in others'.

strategy. We asked our respondents to say whether they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements designed to reflect long-standing debates in the Liberal Democrats and the old Alliance parties about party strategy. But many party members support both sides of the debate! One such debate for example is whether the Liberal Democrats should be a centre party or a radical alternative to the Labour Party. No less than 59% agreed that 'the Liberal Democrats should be a centre party in between the Conservatives and Labour'. But at the same time 69% agreed with the objective that Jo Grimond set for the old Liberal Party that 'the Liberal Democrats should aim to replace Labour as the main opposition party in British politics'.

Another such debate has been between those who have emphasised the need for a 'community politics' approach based on local campaigning and those who favour concentrating on the world of Westminster and the national media. 64% agreed that 'the Liberal Democrats should place greater emphasis on local campaigning', but 68% also agreed that 'the Liberal Democrats must concentrate their efforts on national level issues if they are to win power'.

Thus to some extent the Liberal Democrat membership is inclined to face both ways on some of the strategic choices that appear to face it. In those circumstances they are likely to take whichever direction on which the party's leadership decides to strike out.

In any case Paddy Ashdown's leadership appears to be secure until at least the next election. Not the least of his strengths is the fact that he is currently the most popular of the three main party leaders. But eventually the party will be looking for a successor who under the

party's constitution will be elected by all the members of the party. Who at this juncture does it look likely to be?

**Table 5. The Popularity Stakes<sup>a)</sup>**

	Average Score on Thermometer	% Not know enough to rate
Paddy Ashdown	83	4
Charles Kennedy	73	18
Alan Beith	72	15
David Steel	71	7
Jo Grimond	71	18
Shirley Williams	69	7
Simon Hughes	68	23
Roy Jenkins	64	12
Cyril Smith	60	11
Tony Greaves	50	59
David Owen	45	10

a) This table shows (i) the average score (excluding those respondents who did not answer the question) given to a number of Liberal Democrat, Liberal and SDP politicians on a 'feeling thermometer' (see text) and (ii) the percentage of respondents who felt they did not know enough about the politician to be able to rate him or her.

Step forward the current President of the party, Charles Kennedy. True, 42% of our respondents were unwilling to name anyone, so many members clearly have an open mind to what is

currently still a highly hypothetical question. But nearly half, 47%, of those who did name someone opted for Kennedy. He received nearly double the support of his nearest rival, the present deputy leader Alan Beith (24%) who was defeated by Paddy Ashdown in the last contest. Only one other candidate could secure over 10% support, Simon Hughes the MP for Bermondsey and the party's green-tinged environment spokesman (12%).

Kennedy's popularity in the party is confirmed by the answers we received when we invited our respondents to apply the 'feeling thermometer' to a number of current and former Liberal Democrat and Alliance politicians. Unsurprisingly Paddy Ashdown came top of the pack with an average rating of 82. But second was Charles Kennedy with 73, just ahead of Alan Beith on 72. The most unpopular figure was the former SDP leader David Owen who could score only 45<sup>25</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

This report contains much that is good news for the Liberal Democrats. It suggests that the divisions between the Liberals and the SDP have indeed been healed. Its membership is as active as that of the Labour Party while the party seems to be maintaining contact with a

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<sup>25</sup>David Owen was also the politician about whom there was most disagreement, producing a relatively large number of high and low ratings. Tony Greaves, one of the party's leading local government campaigners and often characterised as being on the radical wing of the party, also evinced similar disagreement. But despite his frequent appearances at party conferences, only a minority of the membership felt they knew him well enough to be able to rate him, indicating the importance of media appearances to becoming widely known within the party.

large proportion of its passive membership. In short the problems that surrounded the party's birth do indeed appear to have been put behind it.

But we have also identified new challenges and difficulties that could face the party should it seriously approach the threshold of power. Its membership is not as united on some of the party's key policy positions, most notably on Europe and on devolution, as could have been anticipated and appear to have the potential to cause division. While the party does seem relatively willing to co-operate with other parties to secure power there is a clear danger that internal pressures could lead it to get out of touch with what a substantial proportion of its electorate is currently prepared to tolerate. Far from being a centre party the membership of the Liberal Democrats are clearly a left of centre party who would find it easier to do a deal with Labour than the Conservatives. But in recent elections at least the party's electorate has been of a more Conservative persuasion. Paddy Ashdown has done well to lead his party back into the central political game after the disaster of the 1989 European elections. But it will take just as much political skill to avoid the pitfalls that could accompany political success in future.