

From Labour love-in to bona fide party of Opposition: Lib Dem voting in the House of Commons, 1992-2003

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Charles Kennedy's instruction to his frontbenchers that they could 'take the gloves off' when dealing with Labour will not have surprised anyone with a passing knowledge of the way the Lib Dems have been behaving in the House of Commons. For it is merely the latest reflection of the Party's changing behaviour over the past decade, which has seen the Lib Dems shift from being almost indistinguishable in their behaviour from Labour to becoming a *bona fide* party of Opposition.

Our most recent research shows that during the last full Parliamentary session, the party's MPs voted against Labour in 251 of the 352 Commons whipped votes in which they participated. That is, they opposed the Government in 75 per cent of votes. They voted with the Government in just 83 votes (25 per cent).

This is evidence of a remarkable transformation in their behaviour. By this stage of the last Parliament the Lib Dems had voted with Labour in around half of all votes (48 per cent). They may have been sitting on the Opposition benches but they were then just as likely to be found voting with the Government. Now, however, for every one vote cast with Labour they cast three against.

At the same time, the party's tendency to vote with the Conservatives has been growing steadily year on year: from 27 per cent in the first session of the 1997 Parliament, to 40 per cent in the second, 44 per cent in the third, 47 per cent in the fourth, to 54 per cent in the first session of this Parliament, and up to 66 per cent now. Liberal Democrat MPs are now more than twice as likely to vote with the Conservatives as they were at the beginning of the 1997 Parliament.

For much of the last Parliament one of the standard complaints about the Lib Dems – from the Conservatives, the media, and even some Liberal Democrats – was that the Party had become a mere adjunct of Labour, ever willing to do the Government's bidding. But the Lib Dems are now more likely to vote with the Conservatives than they ever were with Labour during the 1997 Parliament. If the complaint used to be that the Lib Dems were Labour clones, then those days are over. They are now much closer to Conservatives in their voting than to Labour.

Track the Lib Dems' voting back into the 1992 Parliament – when John Major was in Government – and the change in behaviour becomes even more marked. Immediately after Paddy Ashdown's abandonment of equidistance, they were (as the Figure below shows) practically indistinguishable from Labour. In some years in the early 1990s, they voted with the Conservatives in just one vote in every ten. Following the 1997 election, they became slightly less favourable towards Labour. And since 2001 they have been – for the first time in a decade – regularly more likely to side with the Conservatives than with Labour.

Lib Dems sometimes complain that this is an unfair way of looking at their behaviour. Because the practices and procedures of the Commons make it difficult for them to map out an independent policy position of their own, in most

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votes they are forced into making a binary choice between Labour and the Conservatives. And just because on one vote they might vote with the Conservatives against the Government that does not necessarily mean that they agree with the Conservatives. It might be just that on that individual vote they disagree with the Conservatives less than they do with Labour. Or they might be opposing the Government along with the Conservatives – but for very different reasons. But given that the Party does have to make that binary choice, over a mass of votes we can still draw meaningful inferences from their behaviour. We may prefer to travel by luxury jet, but life's a bitch, and so we're forced to use trains or buses. And if in one year we travelled by train 80 per cent of the time and by bus 20 per cent of the time; but in another year we travelled by bus 70 per cent of the time and by train just 30 per cent of the time, no one would doubt that there had been a change in our behaviour. And that's exactly the magnitude of the change to have come over the Lib Dems in recent years.

These overall figures do mask some differences between the different types of votes. The Lib Dems are more supportive of the Government over the principle of legislation than over its details – although even here, there has been a noticeable drop in their levels of support. The Lib Dems now back just 40 per cent of Government legislation in principle, by voting with the Government at a Bill's Second or Third Reading.

This last session, for example, saw them vote with the Government over the principle of legislation introducing regional assemblies, over reforming the police service in Northern Ireland, on aspects of local government reform and over the Communications Bill. But the list of issues over which they opposed is longer. The Party voted with the Tories against the Government over measures to bail out the nuclear power industry, over industrial development assistance, community care legislation, the fire services dispute, the Licensing Bill, the Consolidated Fund Bill and the Finance Bill.

And where they really get stuck in is over the fine print – where the Lib Dems vote against Labour in four out of every five votes on the detail of Government legislation. Even on those issues where the Party backed Labour at Second or Third Reading, they did not offer wholehearted support to the Government. Even on legislation on Northern Ireland – and despite still enthusiastically backing the peace process – the Lib Dems are now more willing than they once were to criticise the detail of Government legislation, including abstaining on the Northern Ireland (Elections and Period of Suspension) Bill and on the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill.

Crucially (as the Figure makes clear) although some of this change in behaviour can be attributed to Labour entering Government, there has still been a clear decline in the Party's relationship with Labour since then. And this cooling in relations began *before* Charles Kennedy became the Party's leader. It did not result from his becoming leader. Rather his election as leader – and the changed electoral strategy that has resulted – was as much evidence of the Party's changed stance as its cause. The same goes for his more recent announcements.

The gloves may only now be coming off officially, but the Lib Dems have been jabbing away fiercely at Labour for years. The Lib Dems have now become a *bona fide* party of Opposition. It is all a long way from those late-night faxes with which Paddy Ashdown lovingly used to bombard Tony Blair.

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