

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

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The recent announcement by Charles Kennedy that he intended to declare war on the Government – telling his frontbenchers that they could ‘take the gloves off’ when dealing with Labour – should not have surprised anyone. It is merely the latest reflection of the Party’s changing behaviour over the past decade, which as seen the Lib Dems shift from being almost indistinguishable from Labour to becoming a *bona fide* party of Opposition.

Our most recent research shows that of the 249 Commons whipped votes in which Lib Dem MPs participated during the current Parliamentary session, the party’s MPs have voted against Labour in 185 (74 per cent). They have voted with the Government in just 64 (26 per cent). This is evidence of a remarkable transformation in their behaviour.

At this stage of the last Parliament, by contrast, the Lib Dems 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 64 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. Then (as the Figure below shows), they were 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.

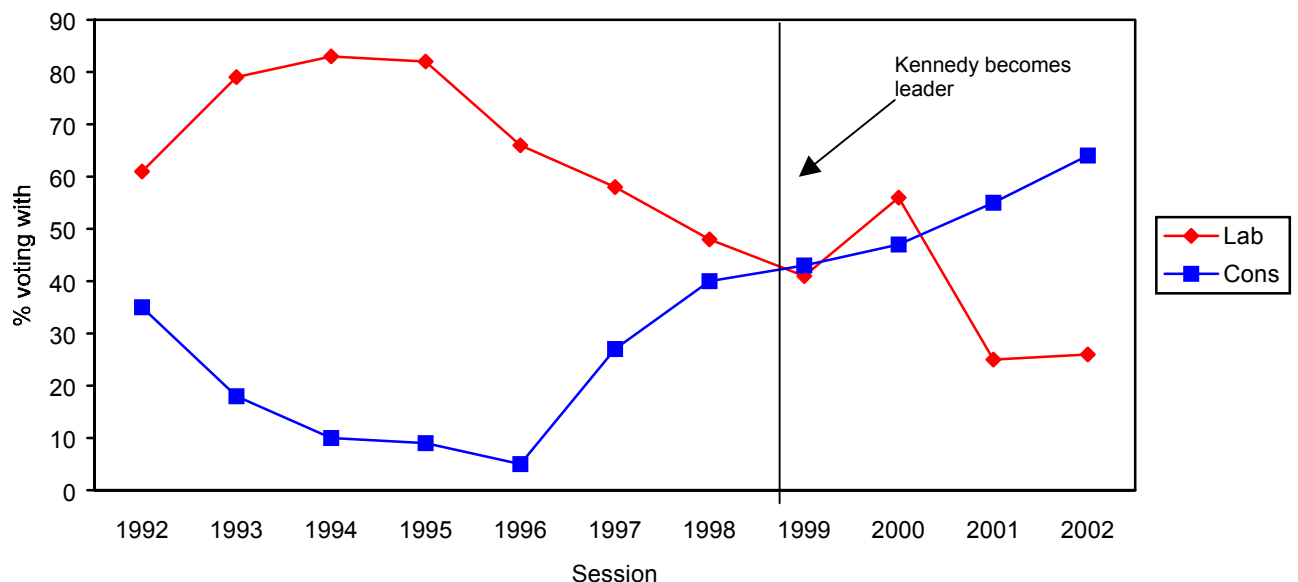
Lib Dems often complain that this is an unfair way of looking at their behaviour. Because the practices and procedures of the Commons make it difficult for them to map out an independent policy position of their own, in most votes they are

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. But given that the Party does have to make that binary choice, over a mass of votes we can still draw meaning from their behaviour. We may prefer to travel by luxury jet, but life's a bitch, and so we're forced to use trains and 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 35 per cent of Government legislation in principle, by voting with the Government at a Bill's Second or Third Reading. Where they really get stuck in, though, is over the fine print – voting against Labour in nearly four out of every five votes on the detail of Government legislation.

Crucially (as the Figure makes clear) 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 evidence of the Party's changed stance as much as its cause.

Liberal Democrat Voting in the House of Commons, 1992-2003



Note: the data for the 2002-2003 session is accurate up to the start of the summer recess on 17 July 2003.

The same goes for his more recent announcement. The gloves may only now be coming off officially, but the Lib Dems have been jabbing away at Labour for

years. As the Party gathers for its Autumn Federal conference, it has become a *bona fide* party of Opposition. It is all a long way away from those late-night faxes with which Paddy Ashdown lovingly used to bombard Tony Blair.

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