

## Still solidly against Labour: Lib Dem Voting in the House of Commons, 2005-2006

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We have been publishing regular updates on the Lib Dems voting for several years now, and a remarkable change has come over the party. Having previously been more likely to vote with the Government than against it at the beginning of the Blair Premiership, the Lib Dems have now long transformed into a *bona fide* party of Opposition. Evidence from the last complete session, 2005-2006, shows that that transformation has continued.

Table 1 shows the Lib Dems' voting in the 2005 session. In total, they voted with Labour on 65 occasions (21% of whipped votes), and against Labour on 240 occasions (79%). In other words, they voted against Labour almost four times as often as they voted with them. This represents a yet further increase in their tendency to oppose Labour, even on the figures from the 2001 Parliament. Then, the Lib Dems voted with Labour on 25 per cent of whipped votes, and against Labour on 75 per cent. Even more striking is the change from the situation during the 1997 Parliament. Then the Lib Dems divided their favours evenly, splitting almost exactly 50/50 between backing and opposing Labour.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Liberal Democrat Whipped Votes, 2005-2006

	<i>With Labour</i>		<i>Against Labour</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>With Cons</i>	6	2	198	65	204	67
<i>Against Cons</i>	59	19	42	14	101	33
<i>Total</i>	65	21	240	79	305	100

*Note:* There were 343 votes during the 2005-06 session; there were 34 free votes, and four occasions when the Lib Dem line was to abstain. This leaves 305 votes for analysis.

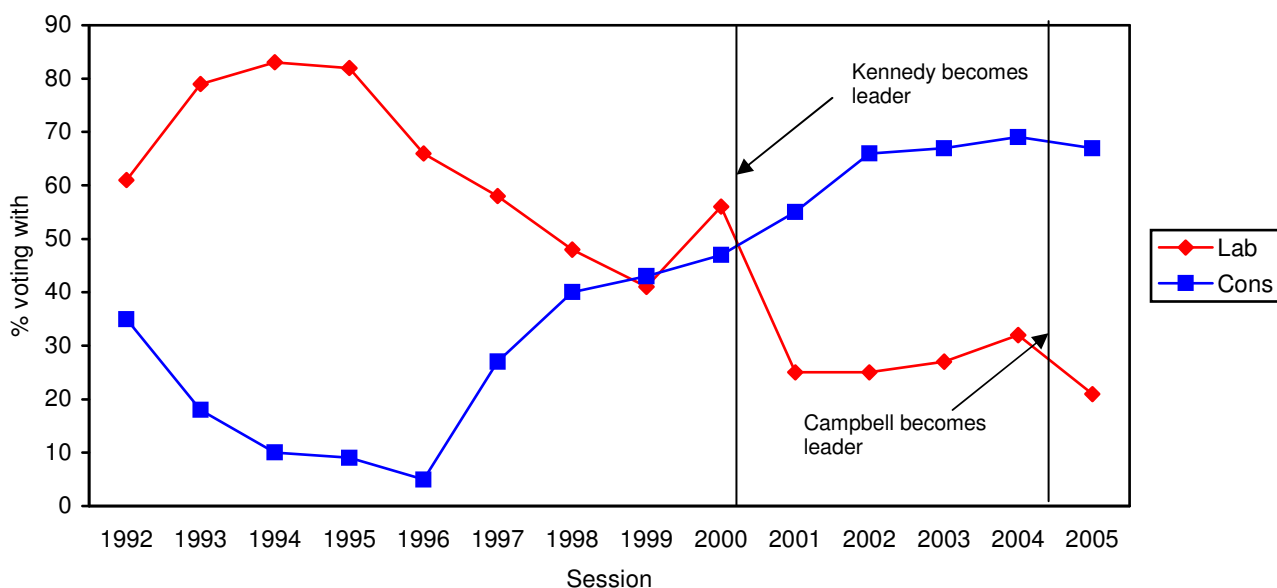
As Figure 1 shows, the Lib Dem's tendency to vote with the Conservatives has also been growing steadily year-on-year: from 27 per cent in the first session of the 1997 Parliament, to 40 per cent in the second, 44 per cent in the third, 47 per cent in the fourth, to 54 per cent in the first session of the 2001 Parliament, to 66 per cent in the second session, reaching 67 per cent in the third, and 69 by the final session. By the end of the 2001 Parliament, Liberal Democrat MPs were more than twice as likely to vote with the Conservatives as they had been at the beginning of the 1997 Parliament.

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<sup>1</sup> See P. Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions*, Politico's, 2002, p. 217. The split was remarkably even. Between 1997 and 2001, the Lib Dems voted with Labour on 557 occasions, but against Labour on 556 occasions.

**Fig 1. Liberal Democrat Voting in the House of Commons, 1992-2006**



These overall figures have in the past masked some differences between the different types of votes. In the last two Parliaments, the Lib Dems have generally been more supportive of the Government over the principle of its legislation than over its details – although even here, we had already witnessed a noticeable drop in their levels of support. A useful (if somewhat crude) measure of the stance a party takes on a bill is the way it votes at Second Reading (the vote on the principle of the bill) and/or Third Reading (the vote on the bill as finally constituted). Many bills (and more than most people realise) pass uncontested, without votes at either Second or Third Reading. Others are contested, but the party gives its MPs free votes on the measure. The remaining bills saw 26 Lib Dem whipped votes at either Second or Third Reading.<sup>2</sup>

**2. Liberal Democrat Whipped Votes, Second or Third Reading, 2005-2006**

	<i>With Labour</i>		<i>Against Labour</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>With Cons</i>	2	8	14	54	16	62
<i>Against Cons</i>	6	23	4	15	10	38
<i>Total</i>	8	31	18	69	26	100

As Table 2 (above) shows, the Liberal Democrats voted against more than two-thirds of the Government’s programme, voting against it 18 times at either Second or Third Reading (69%). This is in marked contrast to the last Parliament when the Liberal Democrats voted against the principle of just over half the Government’s programme, voting against it 60 times at either Second or Third Reading (52%). And, again, even that figure represents a sharp drop from their behaviour in the 1997 Parliament, when they backed Labour in 68% of Second

<sup>2</sup> We include reasoned amendments.

and Third Reading votes. So, in the space of just two Parliaments, the Liberal Democrats have gone from supporting two-thirds of the Government's programme to opposing two-thirds of the Government's programme.

### 3. Liberal Democrat Whipped Votes, Detail, 2005-2006

	<i>With Labour</i>		<i>Against Labour</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>With Cons</i>	2	1	115	63	117	64
<i>Against Cons</i>	37	20	28	15	65	36
<i>Total</i>	39	21	143	79	182	100

And where they really get stuck in is over the fine print – voting against Labour in just under four out of every five votes on the detail of Government legislation. Table 3 (above) shows the way the party voted on more detailed votes during the last session – those at report stage, committee stage (if taken on the floor of the House) or during consideration of Lords amendments.

The figures from this session are very similar to the figures for the last Parliament, where the Lib Dems cast just 92 such votes with Labour (19%), but 397 against (81%). This too is a sharp change from the first Blair Parliament; between 1997-2001 they voted with Labour in almost half of fine print votes (48%); the next four years saw that figure fall by almost 30 points, to 19%. The figures have now stabilised, although that is partly because they could not have got much more hostile.