

Lib Dems - a party rooted in capitalism

Veneer of social reformism stripped away by Coalition attacks on the working class

Jim Thomson

Despite Liberal Democratic leader Nick Clegg's hopes, anger at his party and at Lib Dem cabinet ministers has grown massively since the 2010 general election. Workers and young people have not forgiven the Lib Dems for their betrayal in joining a coalition with the hated Tories.

This was shown absolutely with the May elections. The Lib Dems lost 747 councillors, including losing control of Clegg's home of Sheffield. By acting as a 'human shield' for the Tories the Lib Dems took most of the public's anger against the cuts. Moreover, the loss of the AV referendum further shows a vengeful electorate.

The Lib Dems have clearly not even moderated the worst of the Tory cuts. As their local government hammering shows, people blame the Lib Dems. Public sector cuts will increase homelessness, poverty and unemployment. The Lib Dem leadership are utterly complicit in these attacks, they agree with the neoliberal 'slash and burn' model of the public sector.

Only following their drubbing in the May elections are the Lib Dems trying to reinvent themselves as the 'social conscience' of the Coalition.

Progressive alternative?

Their accession to 'power' did, however, show some divisions in the party. The Lib Dems' leader until 2007, Charles Kennedy, was publicly against privatisation of services, he postured as anti-war (if only before troops were actually dispatched to Iraq), and the party spoke more about a 'fairer' voting system.

From the 1990s to Kennedy's removal, the Lib Dems had a public, although incorrect, image of being left wing on social and political questions. This built roots in many areas and among layers of the middle and working class, especially youth and students. Labour's rightward slide under Tony Blair, the removal of Labour's 'socialist clause', Clause 4, and Labour's adoption of Tory spending plans after 1997, further exaggerated the Lib Dems' 'progressive' image.

After Kennedy's removal in 2007 the Lib Dems' right-wing neoliberal wing, under Nick Clegg, Vince Cable, David Laws and Chris Huhne, gained power. They changed the party's direction, from one of outwardly progressive social democratic style politics to a more traditional economic liberalism, focused on 'freeing up' the economy, and with social aspects made secondary.

The party's policies changed but the Lib Dems' public image of being a 'nicer' option than New La-



A trade union mobile poster outside the Lib Dems' spring conference in Sheffield photo Sheffield SP

bour and the Tories stuck. People remembered Kennedy speaking on the Stop the War rally platform after the two million-strong demonstration against the Iraq war in 2003. In the absence of any speakers on behalf of a socialist organisation he was able to appear on the left.

Lib Dems were seen as opposing New Labour's domestic infringement of human rights in the name of the 'war on terror' and refuting tuition fees while still calling for student maintenance grants. After May 2010, though, this public image was shattered and the reality of the new Lib Dem neoliberal policies struck home.

The party went through a similar, though far less extreme, process to that experienced by lefts in the Labour Party who were witch-hunted as Blairism and New Labour took hold.

Orange Book

The Lib-Dem 'left', around Charles Kennedy and Simon Hughes, were mostly involved in the Beveridge Group, named after wartime Liberal Lord Beveridge, associated with some of the ideas of the welfare state. They put forward socially liberal ideas and tried to show their 'leftist' credentials over issues like Trident nuclear weapons, tuition fees, privatisation of services and progressive taxation.

However, under Clegg, those around the capitalist polemic The Orange Book, (Cable, Laws, Clegg etc) started a purge of the 'left'. While the Lib Dem left poses no radical alternative to capitalism, they carry some weight in areas where tra-

ditionally a working class alternative has been lacking, for example south-west England.

The right, an out-and-out capitalist faction, dedicated to the market over the public sector, has spent the last year hand-in-hand with the Tory axe-wielders. The right's document, Setting Business Free, says party policy should always "start with a bias in favour of market solutions".

The Orange Book, produced in 2004, claimed the market was more efficient and desirable than the public sector and proposed privatising some key public services. The sovereign debt crisis was the perfect excuse for these Lib Dem cronies of capitalism to bring in their savage, anti-worker, anti-equality ideas. Even their 'economics guru', Vince Cable, has recently been revealed as a former arms dealer.

It is important to realise that there is a historical context to the adoption of the Orange Book. The Liberals, before the Social Democrats joined them in the late 1980s, had suffered nearly six decades of ignominy. Deserted by the working class in the early 1900s, they were left behind by the electorate after World War One.

Throughout the 19th century, the Liberals (and Whigs before them) were often in power as a party representing the ruling class, if a slightly more progressive one than the Tories. Liberal governments passed Reform Acts but saw reform as political expediency or an attempt to cut across revolutionary tensions.

Throughout the 19th century, the Liberals were anti-working class, anti-democratic and anti-reform, until that was, it was absolutely nec-

essary for capitalism to act.

It is only later that their social programme extended to include social policies on women, religion, sexuality, social provision and universal health care.

Clegg's policies, shown in the Orange Book and in the Con-Dem coalition's programme, have tried to bring back classic liberalism in a context of modern globalised capitalism. Their shrinking of the state makes it a mere protection agency for capital. Moreover, their focus on cutting the deficit at the expense of jobs, homes and services shows a shift in Liberal thinking. Protecting capital is yet again more important than protecting people, families and communities.

Locally the Lib Dems have also shown, at best, their cowardice to stand up against the coalition, or, at worst, their support of the Tory view of austerity and cuts. In many areas Lib Dems voted for or proposed massive cuts. Nationally and locally the Lib Dems are tarnished with the same brush as the Conservatives, while their claims of holding back the Tories have been shown to be completely false.

But whether ministers tried and failed to negotiate successfully with Cameron or agreed with Tory policies is immaterial. The Lib Dems are complicit in making the fiercest attacks on services, communities and the NHS. Workers and youth are unlikely to forget this.

Not all ordinary Lib Dem members agree with the austerity cuts, neoliberalism, or even being in the coalition. Many feel betrayed by the Orange Book leadership. But the Lib Dems are no kind of alternative,

however guilty some members may feel.

We should make it absolutely clear that anti-cuts organisations will not hold back in fighting any councillor or council who is making cuts, Lib Dem, Labour or otherwise.

Which direction?

So far Clegg has fudged support for the coalition through a process of patronage and quashing debate within the party. But a split cannot be ruled out now the elections are over.

Currently Clegg has the support of MPs; the initial opposition by Charles Kennedy et al has died down. But there is anger in the rank and file who see themselves as more left than the leadership. For example the leader of the Lib Dems in Nottingham, following defeat in the 5 May local elections, called for Clegg to resign.

However, without a nationally recognised figurehead, like Kennedy or Ashdown, or a clear anti-cuts programme, it looks unlikely that the activists could leave and build a united new formation.

Most likely the Lib Dems will haemorrhage activist members, some to Labour or the Greens. However, the pressures of the economic crisis and the reality of the cuts that the Lib Dems are complicit in, could create the conditions for a breakaway from the parliamentary group. It would be no great stretch of the imagination to see Clegg and the Orange Book leadership joining the Conservative party, as perhaps a liberal wing.

Hatred of the cuts and of Clegg unites opposition, but will this manifest itself into an internal power shift? Many Lib Dems find these cuts disgusting, but liberalism offers no solution except working to make nicer, slower, more humane cuts, stuck within the confines of capitalism. Real opposition can only come from forces centred on the trade union movement and the ideas of socialism.



Lib Dems are likely to lose activist members photo Paul Mattsson



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