

All head and no heart: The LibDems still have some distance to go in rebuilding the party's identity and re-establishing a bond with voters

blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/all-head-no-heart-exploring-the-impact-of-the-2013-liberal-democrat-conference/

9/19/2013

*In the run up to the conference, over 40% of those polled believed that the Liberal Democrats had made no positive contributions to the coalition government, highlighting the party's struggle to demonstrate their achievements in government and garner support. Exploring the impact of the 2013 LibDem conference, **Katharine Dommett** writes that the party has not addressed the sense of betrayal experienced by many party supporters, which is accordingly unlikely to induce a dramatic reversal in the party's current fortunes.*



The leader's speech to party conference is a landmark in the political calendar. For months prior to the speech aides and policy advisors refine the ideas, develop the policy proposals and hone a message likely to cut through to and resonate with voters. Nick Clegg's speech to his party conference in Glasgow marked no exception, but this year he faced a particular challenge – needing to reassure a bruised and battered party, demonstrate the party's achievements in government and make the case for voting Liberal Democrat in 2015. As the conference closes and analysis of Nick Clegg's speech dominates news programmes, papers and social media, it appears that whilst the Liberal Democrats have gone some way in defending the party's record and offering a vision post-2015, they still have some distance to go in rebuilding the party's identity and re-establishing a bond with voters.

When considering the context of the 2013 conference it is important not to underestimate the scale of the challenge faced by the Liberal Democrats. Voting intentions for the party are currently recorded at on average just **11 per cent**, and party membership has fallen by 35% to just **42,501**; significantly depleting their activist base. Unlike their Conservative coalition partners the party are struggling to demonstrate their achievements in government and garner support. Indeed, YouGov polling conducted in the run up to the conference revealed that **44 per cent** of those polled believe that the Liberal Democrats had made no positive contributions to the coalition government, whilst only 19 per cent felt like they knew what the Liberal Democrats stood for.

In this context the Liberal Democrats kicked off their conference with a number of policy announcements designed to distinguish the party from their coalition partners. **Vince Cable** expressed his economic differences with George Osborne and concern over house price inflation. The party's green credentials have been emphasised by a **pledge** to introduce a 5 pence charge for plastic bags. And their differing priorities have been highlighted by contrasting the Conservative's married couples tax break with a **new policy** announcing free school meals for all children under the age of 7.

Clegg's speech also aimed to let people know "why it's better to have us round the table when the big decisions are made" by emphasising the party's role in blocking inheritance tax cuts for millionaires, profit-making in schools, new childcare ratios, regional pay and boundary changes. He also underlined the party's own policy achievements; emphasising the pupil premium, extra pre-school help, shared parental leave, advances in flexible working and tax free childcare.



Much work still to be done
Credit Credit: Liberal Democrats (Creative Commons BY ND)

These examples of influence have dominated media coverage in the wake of the conference (with comments such as ‘Dr No’ characterising Clegg’s speech), and have helped to address the party’s [unity/distinctiveness](#) dilemma by revealing what they have achieved in government and how they differ from the Conservatives. Whilst a crucial step in building a persuasive narrative for the 2015 election, the message emanating from the Liberal Democrat conference does not, however, address the sense of betrayal that many voters feel towards the party, or the sense of confusion over what they stand for.

For many voters in 2010 the Liberal Democrats were seen to be a centre-left party pursuing progressive policies on immigration, education and taxation. For these individuals the decision to enter coalition with the Conservatives and to support austerity, rising tuition fees, NHS reforms, welfare changes and nuclear power stations marked an ideological betrayal, causing many to end their support for the party. Yet, despite this the 2013 conference has done little to address feelings of betrayal. In discussing the party’s ideological position Clegg asserted in his conference speech that the Liberal Democrats should “Feel proud that we are right here, in the centre of Government and the centre of British politics, standing up for the millions of people in the middle”, and that “every insult we have had to endure since we entered Government, every snipe, every bad headline, every blow to our support: That was all worth it – because we are turning Britain around”. Such a defence of the party’s actions is likely to do little to win back voters who feel left-wing policies have been abandoned in favour of a previously alien agenda; raising questions about the conference’s ability to boost support for the party.

This approach also raises questions about the party’s identity. Whilst Clegg argued that “The Liberal Democrats are not just some subset of the Labour or Tory parties – we’re no one’s little brother. We have our own values, our own liberal beliefs”, public understanding of what the Liberal Democrats stand for is remarkably low (recorded at just 19 per cent in a [YouGov poll](#)). Although some attempt was made in Clegg’s speech to explain “Who I am. Why I’m a Liberal Democrat and why I’m standing here today”, for many the party’s identity remains unclear – a difficulty not aided by the [public disagreements](#) voiced by senior figures over the party’s policy direction. At this level it therefore appears that the Liberal Democrat conference has failed to clarify what the party stands for and is unlikely to have won back previous support.

For these reasons the conference cannot be seen as an unreserved success. Whilst significant progress has been made towards developing a distinct message for the party in coalition, it has not reconciled this new position with pre-2010 pledges and accordingly has not addressed the sense of betrayal experienced by many party supporters. In this way the party has, like many left-wing parties, aimed its message at the head not the heart; a tactic which runs the risk of ignoring the powerful role that emotion plays in political affiliation (for more see [The Political Brain](#)), and which is accordingly unlikely to induce a dramatic reversal in the party’s current fortunes.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author

Dr Katharine Dommett is a Research Fellow at the University of Sheffield. Her research looks at political parties, ideology and governance. Contact: k.dommett@sheffield.ac.uk; [@KateDommett](https://twitter.com/KateDommett)