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THIRD FORCE IN BRITISH POLITICS:
A CHALLENGING ROLE FOR THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Magister in English literature and civilization

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Declaration

I, hereby, declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigation and that references to other authors' works are made whenever necessary.

Hiba Khedidja DERRAGUI

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Abstract

The future of the third force in British politics rests in the role of the Liberal Democrats to make an electoral breakthrough. If that role is important, then realignment in British politics is clearly possible.

Through a historicist approach along with an analysis of many data from the British Election Study surveys and qualitative data from newspapers, this dissertation examines the role of the Liberal Democrats in British politics and the challenges facing them.

The purpose of this dissertation is to assess the Liberal Democrats' record from the twentieth to the first decade of the twenty-first century, notably in terms of electoral performance and suggests the possibility of a long-term role for the Liberal Democrats as a realigning or at least persistently dealigning force.

This dissertation provides a succinct account of the history of the party. It also focuses on the Alliance between the SDP and the Liberals in the 1980s and the process of merger. It determines also the Liberal Democrats' position in the political spectrum through defining their ideology which is clearly rooted in social liberalism and considering their ability to achieve electoral performance in terms of votes and seats as well. It considers the party's relations with the Conservative and Labour parties. It explores the party's policy and strategy through an analysis of the party's manifestoes and policy documents and examines the outcome of the 2010 General Election which resulted in a hung Parliament. Finally it considers the Liberal Democrat- Conservative Coalition government which is still seeking to implement its ambitious programme despite shortcomings.

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Abbreviations

AV   Alternative Vote

CLP   Constituency Labour Party

CLPD   Campaign for Labour Party Democracy

CLV   Campaign for Labour Victory

EEC   European Economic Community

EU   European Union

MEP   Member of European Parliament

MP   Member of Parliament

NATO   North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NEC   National Executive Committee

PLP   Parliamentary Labour Party

PR   Proportional Representation

SDLP   Social Democratic and Labour Party

SDP   Social Democratic Party

SLDP   Social and Liberal Democratic Party

SMSP   Single Member Simple Plurality

STV   Single Transferable Vote

UKIP   United Kingdom Independence Party

VAT   Value Added Tax

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Introduction

Much has been written about the Liberal Democrats and their forerunners (the Liberal Party and the Liberal/SDP Alliance); however, their study still remains fascinating. Indeed, the most striking experience in British politics is, undoubtedly, that of the Liberal Democrats who experienced throughout the twentieth and most of the twenty-first century important fluctuations in their fortunes.

It is essential to consider the role of a third force in British politics in order to have a clear insight into British culture. This dissertation attempts to analyse the role of the Liberal Democrats in contemporary British politics. It aims also to improve the knowledge and understanding of the Liberal Democrats, their changing role in British politics, and the challenges facing them in the foreseeable future. It explains why and how the party has recovered. It is also interesting to investigate the party's mould breaking potential and its ability to convert policies into electoral support.

During the twentieth century, the Liberal Party was the second larger party in Parliament. Nevertheless, it had been replaced by the Labour Party whilst the Conservatives have been able to adapt to changing circumstances. The party moved from a landslide majority with 400 seats in 1906 to 40 MPs eighteen years later. The Liberal's decline has been explained differently. Some talked of the impact of the First World War, others focused on the schism between Lloyd George and Asquith. But probably the most convincing explanation was the rise of the Labour Party.

Yet, The Liberal Party has not disappeared completely; some predicted even a future Liberal revival. Indeed, there were waves of Liberal support known as 'Liberal revival' in the 1960s and 1970s. At the beginning of the 1960s the Liberals had only six seats in Parliament although in 1962, against all expectations, they won a by-election in Orpington. In the General Election of 1964 their representation had grown to nine seats and by February 1974 the party polled over six million votes.

When a new force entered the British political scene in 1981, the fortunes of the Liberal Party would be changed forever. In fact, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), created by former Labour politicians, and the Liberal Party joined in an electoral alliance between 1981 and 1987 which seemed to have a real breakthrough potential. Nevertheless, a combination of events including the Falklands War led to a decline in support for the 'Third Force'. Shortly after the 1987 General Election, in which the Alliance won only twenty-two seats, leading figures in both parties decided that the future lay in a formal merger of the two parties. After bitter debate within the SDP, the realignment of the centre-left in British politics was taking place.

The newly branded party, the Liberal Democrats consolidated their position in the 1990s and by 2001 they captured fifty-two seats. Nobody could have predicted this result a quarter of century earlier. Thus, under the leadership of Ashdown and Kennedy the Liberal Democrats became a real force in British politics. By 2010, the party, headed by Clegg was the 'kingmaker'; the Liberal Democrats were finally back in government.

The objective of this dissertation is to analyse the evolution of the 'Third Force' in British politics through five key themes:

- **The Liberal Democrats and the two-party system**

Commentators suggested that the period between 1945 and 1970, characterized by minority and coalition governments, party splits, the rise of Labour and the decline of the Liberals, had given way to a clear two-party system[1]. In fact, the Conservative and Labour Parties won the majority of votes in the eight general elections held between 1945 and 1970 whereas the Liberal Party had been marginalized. The Liberals obtained in 1951 six seats in the House of Commons (with 25 per cent of the vote). This two-party system was challenged during the

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[1] See Hugh Berrington, *Change in British Politics* (1984).

period between 1970 and 1979. Indeed, their were increases in support for third parties in opinion polls and by-elections[1]. For instance, in the 1974 General Election the Liberals obtained 19.3 per cent of the vote, their best post-war performance. Therefore, the existing two-party system was questioned by evidence of decreasing commitment to the two parties. Despite the challenges of a third party in the 1970s, the Conservative and Labour Parties continued to dominate the House of Commons[2].

The following challenge was not by the Liberal Party alone but by an Alliance between the Liberals and the Social Democratic Party (SDP). In fact, in 13 by-elections from March 1981 to May 1987 the Alliance obtained more than a third of the three party vote. Obviously, this challenge to the two-party dominance was more important than ever before especially when the Liberal Party and most of the SDP merged in 1988 to form the Liberal Democrats. The question is whether this challenge will disappear or does it represent a real and fundamental change in British politics. Accordingly, does the Liberal Democrats have a mould breaking potential?

- **The Liberal Democrats or the 'Alternative Opposition'**

At the end of the twentieth century, the Liberal Democrats presented themselves as an anti-Conservative Party fighting the Tories for their target seats while being less hostile to New Labour[3].It seemed that the party's strategy was to replace the Conservatives as the main opposition to Labour. Thus, for the Liberal Democrats opposition was essential. Even some Conservatives expressed their concern that the Liberal Democrats could become the 'alternative opposition'. But, even if Conservative support at general elections

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[1] Parliamentary by-elections occur following a vacancy arising in the House of Commons. They are often seen as a test of the rival political parties' fortunes between general elections.

[2] See John L. Irwin, _Modern Britain : an Introduction_ (1994).

[3] See Andrew Russell and Edward Fieldhouse, _Neither Left nor Right ? The Liberal Democrats and the Electorate_ (2005).

has decreased to less than one-third, the Liberal Democrats could not claim to have replaced the Conservatives in terms of votes or seats.

It is worth noting that the Liberal Democrats' predecessor, the Liberal/SDP Alliance of the 1980s could have been the new opposition to the Conservatives. In fact, in the 1983 General Election, the Alliance obtained 25 per cent of the vote (compared to Labour's 27 per cent). However, the Alliance failed to convert votes into seats. In fact, the Liberal Democrats have had the difficult task to accommodate their strategy to their voters who resemble more Labour voters in their political outlook but resemble more Conservative voters in their social and geographical background. Therefore, the party had to adopt different strategies in order to win Labour held seats and win Labour sympathisers in Conservative-Liberal areas.

On the other hand, in the middle of the 1990s with the continued unpopularity of the Conservatives which coincided with the popularity of Labour under the leadership of Tony Blair, it seemed that the Liberal Democrats' strategy might be to replace the Conservatives. In fact, cooperation between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, which ended because of Labour's inability or unwillingness to deliver anything substantial to the Liberal Democrats, may have prompted further the idea of alternative opposition. It was, then, clear that the Liberal Democrats wanted to be the voice of opposition.

A more ambitious objective for the Liberal Democrats is today to replace Labour after the successful displacement of the Liberals by Labour in the 1920s. Indeed, the new developments in British politics seem to suggest strongly this option. Thus, can the Liberal Democrats displace Labour, and do they have the potential to reverse the political situation to their advantage?

- **The Liberal Democrats' Electoral Credibility**

The main obstacle faced by any third party is electoral credibility. Indeed, the major problem for the Liberal Democrats has been the geographical spread of their support and therefore their ability to convince voters. The Liberal Democrats have always suffered from the discrepancies of the British electoral system. As an illustration, in the 1983 election, the Alliance gained 25.4 per cent of the vote (only 2.2 per cent less than Labour) but won only 23 seats (compared to Labour 209).

Accordingly, the Liberal Democrats as a third party have to counter this obstacle resulting from the electoral system by adopting electoral strategies. Therefore, the question is whether the party has been able to overcome the disadvantages of the electoral system and find electoral support. Or, perhaps, the Liberal Democrats will be able, in the long term, to introduce the Alternative Vote and alter, consequently, the mould of British politics. Therefore, could the party secure votes and seats sufficiently in order to bridge the credibility gap?

- **The Translation of the Liberal Democrats' Policies into Popular Support**

As a third party, the Liberal Democrats have to convert their policies into votes and seats in order to secure their position and even challenge Labour's position in British politics. The party has chosen radical and distinctive policies in its search for votes and seats. Indeed, the Liberal Democrat policy in recent years has brought a potential electoral support. The party has tried to brand its image in the hope that it would improve public awareness of what the party was about, and that its policies might be translated into electoral support. The question is what policies have the Liberal Democrats adopted in order to build electoral support?

- **The Liberal Democrats in Government**

The result of the May 2010 election left no party with an overall majority in the House of Commons. The Conservatives had won most seats, but not a governing majority. With an inconclusive vote, Parliament was hung leading to an unprecedented coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. Thus, Britain had its first coalition government in 65 years. British politics entered definitely a new era of convention-challenging[1]. Shortly after the election, the new Coalition government agreed upon an ambitious programme for radical reform including a referendum on electoral reform. The main question is, therefore, how far did the Conservatives concede to Liberal Democrat demands and more importantly to what extent could the Liberal Democrats implement radical reforms and produce a real change in British politics ? But ultimately, the major research question concerns the role of the Liberal Democrats as a third force in British politics. In a word, does the Liberal Democrats have a long-term role as a realigning or at least dealigning force?

In seeking an answer to the research questions, cited above, we will proceed according to a historicist approach. Indeed, a historicist approach to the present topic will certainly provide a better understanding of the Liberal Democrats. Since historicism is interested in examining the processes of change, it will be appealing to analyse the evolution and changes undergone within the Liberals Democrats and their impact on British politics through retrospection. Additionally, interpreting the events that marked British politics, in general, and the Liberal Democrats, in particular, leads to understanding the present-day developments. On the other hand, we do combine quantitative and qualitative methods in order to build our analysis of the Liberal Democrats. Indeed, data

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[1] See Chris Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party* (2010).

sources including British Election Study surveys were used along with qualitative data from newspapers.

In an attempt to find out convincing answers to the research questions, this dissertation which is split into three chapters, examines succinctly the evolution of the Liberal Democrats since their inception. It also seeks to link understanding of the Liberal Democrats' past with the present and a foreseeable future.

The first chapter is devoted to the historical evolution of the Liberal Democrats and their forerunners (the old Liberal Party and the Liberal/SDP Alliance) in an attempt to understand the changes which the party had undergone throughout the twentieth and most of the twenty-first century. Thus, this chapter will be developed into three sections. The first section produces a short survey of the old Liberal Party. Therefore, many episodes of its history have necessarily to be passed over briefly. Nevertheless, it highlights the causes that led to the decline of the Liberal Party in the early 1920s as well as the Liberal revival in the 1960s and 1970s. The second section tackles the electoral Alliance between the Liberals and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in the 1980s and its subsequent successes which might have produced a real breakthrough with a particular focus on the creation of the SDP as a result of a split within the Labour Party. The last section concerns the merger of both the Liberal Party with the SDP in 1988. It also analyses the consequent evolution of the party in terms of electoral performance.

The second chapter determines the party's position in the political spectrum through a long analysis of the party's ideology using data from previous researches. The party's members ideological beliefs are also determined along with those of the electorate. The following section considers the strategies used by the Liberal Democrats to convert electoral support into seats. It shows the strategies used by the Liberal Democrats to counter the obstacles engendered by the British electoral system and therefore build an

electoral credibility. The last section is related to the Liberal Democrats' relations with the other main parties. It focuses mainly on the Liberal Democrats' privileged relation with New Labour under the leadership of Tony Blair.

The third and last chapter looks at the Liberal Democrats' continual quest for a distinct and clear identity. The first section is entirely devoted to the party's policy and strategy. It encompasses the most important policies advocated by the party since its foundation. The second section is concerned with the outcome of the 2010 General Election and the formation of a coalition government with the Conservatives. The last section proceeds with the implementation of the Coalition Agreement and the subsequent shortcomings of the Coalition.

Chapter One

The Genesis of the Liberal Democrats

Any analysis of the history of the Liberal Democrats requires, first of all, an understanding of the two founding parties, the Liberal Party and the Social Democratic Party (SDP). Historically, the Liberal Party was successful during the late nineteenth century and was the second largest party in Parliament at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, after the First World War the party has been displaced by the Labour Party; thus, it became unable to adapt to evolving circumstances. After the Second World War the party nearly disappeared.[1]Its representation in Parliament declined significantly. It would be, nonetheless, an exaggeration to say that the Liberal Party disappeared completely from the political scene. Indeed, there were waves of Liberal support in the 1960s and the 1970s known as 'Liberal revivals'.[2]

By 1981 a new political force entered the political scene. The Social Democratic Party (SDP) was launched as a result of Labour's split and was formed by former Labour politicians known as the 'Gang of Four'. The SDP was destined to change the face of British politics.The emergence of the SDP created definitely a challenger for the centrist vote. When the Liberals and the SDP agreed to an electoral alliance which nearly overtook Labour, analysts thought that it would break the British political mould. However, many events including the recovery of the British economy and the Falklands War led to a significant decline of third-force support.[3]After six years of existence of the SDP and the Alliance, it was beginning to look like the mould of British politics would not be broken.

Although the Alliance continued between the election of 1983 and May 1987, its performance was insignificant. In fact, the distortions of the electoral system gave the Alliance 23 seats in Parliament in the 1983 General Election and 22 seats in 1987. There were important questions about the future of the Alliance – the two parties seemed similar in outlook and essential policies. In 1988 a formal merger occurred between the Liberal Party and the SDP even though some groups opposed the merger especially the leader of the SDP, David Owen who resented a full merger. On the other hand, the Liberal leader,

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[1] Gillian Peele, *Governing the UK: British Politics in the 21st Century* (2004),4th ed, p.63.
[2] John L. Irwin, *Modern Britain: an Introduction* (1994), 3rd ed, p.120.
[3] Ibid., p.122

David Steel was for a 'democratic fusion' of the Alliance partners.[1] Following long and difficult negotiations about the new party's name and Constitution, merger did occur on 3 March 1988.Despite financial difficulties and poor electoral performance, the party branded finally 'Liberal Democrats' could improve its position by the end of the 1990s. In the 1990s the Liberal Democrats started to form a real force in British politics by capturing seats from the Conservatives and winning by-elections, and by the 2001 General Election they won fifty-two seats, securing 18.3 per cent of the popular vote.[2]

1.1. The Birth, Decline and Revival of the Liberal Party

The Liberal Party existed since the 1860s and was one of the two great parties in British politics until the First World War. The success was reached in the landslide victory of 1906. Then, it was subject to a rapid decline, as a result of the rise of the Labour Party and the mobilization of party conflict around class-based issues. By 1922 the Liberal Party was reduced to the third place. The decline continued for years, so that by the middle of 1950s there were only six Liberal MPs. Nevertheless, the 1960s and 1970s saw a revival in the Liberal Party fortunes known as 'Liberal revivals'. For instance, the Liberals won more than six million votes in February 1974[3]. But theses apparent openings to the Liberals did not produce a real realignment, let alone a breakthrough in British politics.

1- Birth of the Liberal Party

In the 1830s the Whig and the Tory Parties started to disintegrate paving the way to both the Liberal and the Conservative Parties. Three political groups did exist by the end of 1832, the Whigs, MPs called 'Radicals' who sought reforms, and the Tories who started to be known as Conservatives.[4]

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[1] Andrew Russell and Edward Fieldhouse, *Neither Left nor Right? The Liberal Democrats and the Electorate* (2005), p.32.
[2] Roy Douglas, *Liberals: The History of the Liberal and Liberal Democrat Parties* (2005), p.315
[3] Stephen J.Lee, *Aspects of British Political History 1914-1995* (1996), p.50
[4] Roy Douglas, op. cit., p.8

It was the General Election of 1852 which allowed the formation of a new grouping, 'Peelites'[1], Whigs and Radicals[2] and which would eventually form a government in December 1852. The Peelites was a small but influential band of former Conservatives, including William Gladstone, who had broken with their previous party in 1846 over the repeal of the Corn Laws because of their ideological support for free trade. All of them agreed that Free Trade must be defended and extended.[3]This grouping would form the basis of the Liberal Party. In fact, in 1859 a meeting of Liberal MPs constituted of Radical, Peelite and Whig parliamentarians was held, it marked the birth of the Liberal Party in Britain.[4] The Liberal Party did inherit from the historic Whig Party the idea of liberty and that the government should act within fixed rules. Therefore, the Liberal ideology stood for free trade, religious tolerance, internationalism and individual freedom. The Liberals governed Britain for most of the following thirty years, benefiting from further extensions of the franchise in 1867 and 1885.

The 'Liberals' had no leader, but both Palmerston and Russell were willing to accept the leadership. After a vote of no-confidence in 1860 the Conservative government was defeated, Palmerston became Prime Minister and Gladstone Chancellor of the Exchequer. The new government engaged further reforms in the direction of Free Trade. In October 1865, Palmerston died and was succeeded by Russell who wished to bring more reforms. A reform Bill for the extension of the franchise was brought before Parliament; however, it soon ran into trouble and the government resigned. Consequently, Derby was called to form another Conservative government. A new reform Bill was introduced in March 1867.Like the Liberals, the Conservatives had great difficulty to pass the Bill; however, it passed and became known as the 'Second Reform Act' of 1867.This act provided for a redistribution of seats in favour of the more populous places. The number of voters was multiplied more than three fold.[5]

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[1] Sir Robert Peel created the original Conservative Party.
[2] They supported parliamentary reform, the right to vote and free trade.
[3]Roy Douglas,Ibid.,p.9
[4] Andrew Russell, op. cit., p.16
[5]Ibid., p.17

Derby resigned in February 1868 and was succeeded by Disraeli who governed with a Liberal majority in the House of Commons. A General Election was called in November 1868. Following the new registrations, the Liberals won a large majority[1] and Gladstone took office on 3 December 1868. This date marked, undoubtedly, the real birth of the Liberal Party. Cook[2] argues rightly that the Liberal Party 'came of age' with their General Election victory of 1868 and the formation of the first Gladstone government. By 1868 the Liberal Party could evolve into a major political force being able to attract Nonconformists and a rising working-class[3].

According to some commentators such as Andrew Russell, Gladstone can be viewed as the 'Father of the Liberal Party'.[4] In fact, 'The Liberal Party derived much of its character from the rising personality of Gladstone'. By 1868 a real change had occurred in British politics. Not only new parties replaced old ones, but organisation of parties had altered in order to attract the electorate. In fact, the development of formal organisation within the Conservative Party was clearly related to a change in the basis of its support. Party organisation changed after the passing of the 1832 Reform Act. Conservative associations were founded throughout the constituencies which dealt with registration and canvassing, and sometimes selected and financed candidates. The establishment of permanent central organisations for political parties followed as a consequence of the 1832 Reform Act. In 1860 a new body was set up, the Liberal Registration Association, later called the Liberal Central Association. It was destined to deal with different problems such as registration, provision of candidates, and financial assistance for candidates. Thus, the Liberals were considered as the pioneers of modern party organisation in Britain[5].

The Liberals achieved in 1868 an important victory. Yet, the Liberal government could not make any reform despite a majority of 100 seats. It was in 1886 that Gladstone brought forward Home Rule for Ireland. The consequence was a disaster for the party. In fact nearly one third of the

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[1] They received well over a hundred more seats than the Conservatives.
[2] Christopher Cook is a specialist of the Liberal Party. He wrote *A Short History of the Liberal Party*, first published in 1976 and reedited in 2010, *The Road back to Power*.
[3] Chris Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party: The Road back to Power* (2010), p.4
[4] Ibid., p. 16
[5] Roy Douglas, op. cit., p.19

Liberals voted against the Home Rule. Dissident Liberal MPs known as 'Liberal Unionists' sided with the Conservatives.[1] Moreover, Gladstone could not pass Home Rule when he was in office (1892-95) and was replaced by Roseberry in 1894.

Accordingly, the Liberals were defeated by the Conservatives in the 1895 General Election. They returned to office in 1905 under Henry Campbell Bannerman, and won a landslide victory at the 1906 General Election securing 400 seats. They remained in power until after the First World War; however, they lost some of their support in the two General Elections of 1910.[2] Indeed, the government reforms were continually blocked by the Conservative majority in the Lords. When Lloyd George's 'People Budget' of 1909 was blocked in the Lords, a General Election was called in 1910 and the Liberals lost over a hundred seats. People Budget introduced a super tax on high earners and taxation of land values to raise revenue for social expenditure and naval rearmament. The Battle with the House of Lords was one of the defining points of twentieth century British politics.

Asquith who had succeeded Campbell as Prime Minister in 1908 was once more blocked by the Lords. This ultimately led to a second General Election in December in which the Liberals returned as a minority government with the assistance of Labour and Irish Nationalist MPs.[3] Furthermore, the government confronted external and internal crises, the outbreak of the First World War, opposition from the Lords, problems in Ireland and the last but not the least difficult relations with the Labour Party.

2- Decline

As the war broke out, signs of the Party's decline were apparent. The war was not only to redraw the map of Europe but decisively to change the fortunes of the Liberal Party for the worse. It was obviously hard for the Liberals to compromise their Liberal values: freedom of trade, individual rights, and freedom of press[4].Policies needed in wartime were totally in opposition with

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[1]Ibid., p.20
[2] Stephen J.Lee, op. cit., p.52
[3] Roy Douglas, op. cit., p.13
[4] Ibid., p.11

Liberal principles. In 1915 things went worse for the Liberal Party. Two cabinet ministers resigned and Asquith accepted an all party coalition.

The party split over the introduction of conscription, division in the party culminated with the struggle between Lloyd George and Asquith, ending with Asquith's resignation as Prime Minister. Lloyd George became Premier and Asquith remained the leader of the party and as such controlled the party. Most senior Liberal ministers refused to join Lloyd George's first cabinet which was predominantly composed of Conservatives. The party became divided between Lloyd George and Asquithian wings. The conflict continued until 1935 and undermined strongly the party.

However, the General Election of 1918 marked a real change for the Liberals who secured only 163 seats in Parliament. Indeed, the General Election of 1918 was a victory for the Conservatives, the Lloyd George wing of the Liberal Party came second. The Asquithian wing of the party won just 28 seats and secured 12 per cent of the vote; whereas, the Labour Party secured 57 seats.[1] For the first time in their history, the Labour Party became the third largest party in the House of Commons.

Some commentators such as Andrew Russell considered Labour's performance at the 1918 General Election part of the process of Labour's triumph over Liberalism. One question still needs to be asked, why did the Liberal Party decline so easily? First, the party's decline started before 1914. In fact, between 1910 and 1914 the Liberal governments were confronted to conflicts with the House of Lords and militant trade unions[2]. Moreover, there was an obvious revolt against Liberalism especially with the opposition within Ulster to the Liberal policy of Home Rule. This led to an electoral decline; the Liberals lost their majority in December 1910 and continued to make more losses in by-elections.

Relations with Labour had also contributed to the decline of the Liberal Party. It was the Liberals who made Lib-Lab arrangement in 1900 allowing the growing movement to grow up within the party. Indeed, before the formation of the Labour party, candidates with backing of the Liberal Party and the

[1] Andrew Russell, op. cit, p.18
[2] Stephen J.Lee, op. cit.,p.39

Labour Representative League stood for Parliament. This league created in 1869 was to be replaced in 1886 by the Labour Electoral Association which in turn led to the creation of the Labour Party. Then, in 1903 both the Liberals and Labour made an electoral pact which gave Labour a block of 30 seats in the House of Commons. As a result, in contests against the Conservative Party, 29 Labour MPs were returned at the General Election of 1906. Alas, the Liberals ignored totally the threat that would come from the Labour Party.

Secondly, the First World War weakened considerably the party. Liberals split over the conduct of the war. Indeed, Asquith was seriously attacked from the Lloyd George faction of the Liberal Party. There were disagreements between the two men over the introduction of conscription, which Asquith opposed.[1] Furthermore, the two factions of the party[2] finished to weaken it considerably. In addition, Lloyd George contributed to the weakening of the Liberals. So, instead of reuniting the Liberal Party, he did choose to form an electoral agreement with the Conservatives known as the 'coupon', by which candidates supporting the coalition from either party were given a clear run. On the face of it the Liberals entered the 1918 General Election divided between the two factions. Finally, the War weakened definitely the Liberal Party whose ideology involving pacifism was, of course, against the involvement of Britain in the war.[3] The First World War provided Labour with the impetus which would materialize in 1922.

For some historians, the introduction of the 1918 Representation of People Act gave the last blow to the Liberals. They argued that the party split could not lead alone to decline. Unsurprisingly, the newly enfranchised voters supported Labour whose vote expanded to 2.4 million compared with 0.5 in January 1910, winning 73 seats. Whereas the Liberals won 2.7 million votes securing only 161 seats behind the Conservatives with 335.[4] Thus, Labour split the vote of the Liberals which went to the Conservatives. That said, the war had produced a real change in British politics and permitted Labour to break through.

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[1] Ibid., p.43
[2] Lloyd George's National Liberals and Asquith's Independent Liberals.
[3] Ibid., p.46
[4] Ibid., p.48

Following the First World War, the apparent decline of the Liberal Party continued. In 1922 the Liberals secured only 115 seats, they recovered slightly in 1923 when they won 158 seats. What characterized the 1920s was the reunification of the Liberal Party over the reintroduction of protection by Baldwin's government[1].The result was an immediate increase of the popular vote from 17.5 per cent in 1922 to 29.6 per cent in 1923.[2] This was interpreted by many Liberals as a recovery; however, Liberal's seats were reduced to 40 in 1924, 59 in 1929, 37 in 1931 and 21 in 1935. Their misfortunes continued in 1945 when they won only 12 seats.[3]

It can be argued, therefore, that the results of the 1923 election were misleading because Liberal seats were gained from the Conservatives who were committed to protectionism.[4] In retrospect, one can argue that the 1924 election constituted a disaster for the Liberal Party who was beaten by Labour. Indeed, the Liberals won only 40 seats; whereas, Labour lost some of the seats it gained from the Liberals to the Conservatives who recovered and were now committed to anti-socialism.

While the Liberal Party organisation had disintegrated during the years after 1914, particularly in the constituencies, Labour had strengthened its organisation and sharpened its political message. The electoral pact with the Liberals had been discarded in favour of a more aggressive strategy to capture the Liberal vote. Crucially, Labour was able to portray itself to millions of newly enfranchised women and working- class voters after 1918 as the most effective alternative to the Conservatives, while the Liberals were disunited and disorganised. The 'Social Democrats' in the Liberal Party, those most concerned with social issues of unemployment, poverty and health, steadily defected to Labour, a division which was partially to heal in the 1980s.

The Liberal decline was reversed neither in 1929 nor in the 1930s. Even if they obtained 59 seats in 1929, at the expense of the Conservatives, Labour won 288 seats. As Adelman maintains, '*the 1929 General Election therefore represents the end of the road for the Liberal Party as far as their attempt to re-*

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[1] Both Liberal factions united to fight Baldwin's proposal.
[2] Andrew Russell, op. cit., p.19
[3]Stephen J.Lee, op. cit. ,p.38
[4] The Liberals reunited only around free trade.

emerge as a potential party of government is concerned'.[1] The process of decline seemed irreversible at the beginning of the 1930s. Divisions within the Liberal Party increased in the 1931 election. There were 4 supporters of Lloyd George, 37 National Liberals under John Simon and 31 Official Liberals following Herbert Samuel. The followers of John Simon were pro-Conservative and anti-Labour, Lloyd George's supporters were pro-Labour and anti-Conservative and the followers of Herbert Samuel were anti-Conservative and anti-Labour. This situation undermined seriously their chance for a possible recovery or even to be an alternative to Labour or the Conservatives.

It is true that in the 1920s Liberal ideas flourished through the publication of policy statements such as *The Land and the Nation* in which Lloyd George argued for state intervention to ensure agricultural reforms or in economy the pamphlet *We Can Conquer Unemployment* published in 1929. 'Summer Schools' were organised to spread Liberal ideas, too. The historian Robert Skidelsky described the Liberal manifesto for the 1929 election as the most intellectually distinguished manifesto ever put before British voters. Nevertheless, the Liberals could not reverse the decline despite Lloyd George's effort to expand the Liberal centre by pushing the Conservatives right and Labour left.[2] In this sense, Jeremy Thorpe[3] *argued that the 'Liberals were squeezed out by the moderation of the National Governments and the growing realism of Labour'.*[4]

After the Second World War the Liberals were reduced to 12 MPs. The new party leader, Clement Davies refused to join the Conservatives; the party remained a third force in British politics although experiencing a deep decline.[5] And it was probably Davies's refusal to accept ministerial post in 1951 that contributed more than anything else to the survival of the Liberals at that time. The party could secure six seats only as a result of electoral pacts with the Conservatives. It was hit by further defections in the early 1950s including those of prominent figures such as Megan Lloyd George who became Labour MP. It can be argued that decline cannot be permanent. It is almost always

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[1] Stephen J.Lee, op. cit., p.52
[2] Ibid., p.50
[3] Leader of the Liberal Party between 1967-76.
[4] Stephen J.Lee, Ibid.,p.53.
[5] Andrew Russell, op. cit., p.19

followed by recovery. However, in the case of the Liberal Party, can the recovery of the 1960s and 1970s be considered as a permanent reversal of the decline?

3-The Liberal revival

The Liberal Party witnessed a period of recovery in the 1960s and 1970s. But these short-lived successes had never been transformed into a permanent support. From 1955 the party began to pour resources into promising by-election campaigns gaining momentum between general elections. In fact, 'Liberal revivals' concerned by-elections. For instance, the first by-election victory occurred in Torrington when Mark Bonham-Carter won in March 1958. He was the first Liberal by-election victor since 1929. However, in the 1959 General Election the Liberals lost Torrington.[1] Another success was the Orpington by-election in March 1962 which lasted about eighteen months. Although steady progress was made in 1964 and 1966 elections, the party could still claim only 12 seats in 1966, no better than in 1945. These gains were the result of the targeting of resources on winnable seats. Liberal support reached 25 per cent in the polls; other gains concerned Rochdale in October 1972 and others.[2] Their national vote increased to 28 per cent; however, their vote was reduced to 19.3 in the February 1974 General Election.[3] Thus, Liberal support had never been neither continuous nor definitive.

To explain the 'Liberal revivals' during the 1960s and 1970s some commentators argued that building a local base was necessary for Liberal success in national elections.[4] Indeed, the Liberals understood that in order to fight and win by-elections, they had to build a real grassroots. At the 1970 Conference, the Liberal Party became committed to 'Community politics'. An amendment to party tactics defined Community politics as '*a dual approach to politics, both inside and outside the institutions of the political establishment'*.[5] The concept was based on empowering local communities to achieve their own aims and objectives, putting the emphasis on local elections and local campaigning using regular newsletters frequently entitled *Focus*. According to

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[1] Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, _SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party_ (1995), p.287
[2] Sutton and Cheam, Isle of Ely, Ripon and Berwick-upon-Tweed.
[3] Ivor Crewe,op. cit.,p.285
[4] Andrew Russell, op. cit., p.23
[5] Ibid., p.20

Cyr[1], the Liberal by-election successes can be explained by a focus on local issues and community politics.[2] Therefore, it was clear for the Liberals that a political realignment could start at the local level if not at the national level. The importance of local roots had been proved in the Rochdale by-election victory in October 1972 when Cyril Smith was elected first to the borough council in 1952, then became mayor in 1966-67. Thus, the decision to concentrate on community politics in 1970 was a significant landmark in the development of the party.

It was Jo Grimond (1956-67) who took upon himself to revive the party's fortunes from the grassroots. He was the youthful MP for Orkney and Shetland, he was a superb communicator, especially on television and an inspirational leader with a clear sense of where he wished to lead the party. He was also in possession of the Liberals' only safe seat. Grimond gave a much sharper edge to party policy. Years of dispute over free trade were ended with a clear declaration in support of British membership of the Common Market. He devised a distinctive policy of opposition to a British nuclear deterrent. This led some to think at that time that a breakthrough would soon come. Under the leadership of Jeremy Thorpe (1967-76) the Liberal Party entered the 1970 General Election with great hope; however, the party's share of the vote fell and it lost seven sitting MPs. The by-elections of 1972 and 1973 revived somehow the party. The Liberals did even increase their share of the vote in the February 1974 election, six million votes were cast for the party, yet they won only 14 seats.[3] The British electoral system was once more working against the Liberal Party.

Then, Thorpe was proposed by Heath to form a Conservative-Liberal coalition, but he refused. Thorpe's condition was electoral reform, something Heath would not concede. Soon after a minority Labour government was formed and another election was called in October 1974, the Liberal Party lost two of the seats won in February. Accordingly, the predicted breakthrough did not occur in these circumstances. Allegations about Jeremy Thorpe's private life reached the public domain and led to his resignation from the party

[1] Arthur Cyr wrote in 1977 *'Liberal Party Politics in Britain'* in which he discussed the role of Jo Grimond in the Liberal revival. The book was reedited in 1988.
[2] Andrew Russell, op .cit., p.24
[3] Ibid.,p.24

leadership. David Steel (1976-88) was elected in his place in July 1976 by means of a ballot of party members[1].

One of Steel's first decisions was to lead his party into an electoral pact with the Labour government. The pact was built on the good relationships established between leading Liberals and pro-European Labour MPs during the referendum on Britain's continuing membership of the Common Market in 1975, and was made necessary by Jim Callaghan's loss of his Commons majority following by-election defeats. Steel saw an opportunity to practise his vision of multi-party government. The Lib-Lab Pact restored a degree of stability to British politics and contributed to improvements in the economic situation. It was brought to an end in October 1978, with many Liberals complaining that Steel had failed to extract sufficient concessions from the Labour government, particularly over electoral reform. However,the pact did help to boost the credibility of the Liberal Party[2].

Following Labour's defeat in 1979, and growing success of the left within the Labour Party, moderate Labour leader such as Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Shirley Williams and Bill Rodgers (soon to be known as the Gang of Four), who had worked with the Liberal Party during the European referendum and the Lib-Lab Pact, broke away from Labour to found the Social Democratic Party (SDP) on 26 March 1981. Jenkins, after serving as President of the European Commission had even considered joining the Liberal Party but was advised by David Steel that the formation of a wholly new political party might prove more effective.

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[1] This method was used for the first time.
[2] Ibid.,p.30

1.2. The SDP/Liberal Alliance of the 1980s

The SDP was launched in March 1981 when twenty- eight Labour MPs decided to break with their party. The Gang of Four left the Labour Party and founded a new one, because Labour was certainly divided on major questions of ideology, and it was these divisions that led to the formation of the SDP. But it was the European issue that divided the most Labour members. Indeed, when the Heath government decided in 1971 to apply for Britain entry to the European Economic Community, the majority of the parliamentary Labour Party rejected it. However, sixty-nine Labour MPs including Roy Jenkins, the party's Deputy leader, and three members of the shadow cabinet- Harold Lever, George Thompson and Shirley Williams voted with the Conservatives in favour of the EEC.[1]

On the other hand, tensions between right and left in the Labour Party had always existed. For some analysts *'with a different electoral system, the two wings of the Labour Party would almost certainly have been in different parties'.*[2] In fact, the Labour Party started to move to the left with the unions moving in the same direction in the late 1960s. This shift was visible, first, at the party's grassroots. The constituency Labour Parties became more left wing. They adopted a new set of criteria in selecting parliamentary candidates in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Because they had left- wing views, they selected only a left-winger as parliamentary candidate. The changes taking place at the constituency level became gradually apparent on the composition of the parliamentary Labour Party.

Indeed, the Labour Party in the House of Commons became more and more left-wing. The National Executive Committee (NEC) had the same fate. The NEC, which was the party's governing body, fell by the late 1970s into left-wing hands. This ultimate shift marked, undoubtedly, a drastic change on party policy[3]. The February 1974 manifesto had 'socialist aims' explained Tony Benn. Moreover, in the mid- 1970s left-wingers started asking for amendments to the party's Constitution that would give the left a say in Labour Party policy and

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[1] Ivor Crewe,op. cit., p.14
[2] Ibid., p. 15
[3] Ibid.,p.19

even in controlling Labour governments and MPs. By the end of the 1970s, the Labour Party was really in left-wing hands and the right became rapidly marginalized. Then, the right forces in the party founded between 1974 and 1979 two right-wing organizations- the Manifesto Group in the House of Commons and the Campaign for Labour Victory in the country- but both were unsuccessful.

Indeed, while the Manifesto Group of Labour MPs did succeed in electing some of its members to Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), it did not succeed in preventing the PLP from gradually becoming a more left-wing body.[1] Conversely, the Campaign for Labour Victory (CLV)[2], headed by Bill Rodgers, failed to rally forces in the party. From all of this, a feeling of alienation was born among Labour right-wingers and led ultimately to the birth of the Social Democratic Party.

In addition, Labour's defeat in May 1979 intensified the right-left conflict. In fact, the left represented by the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD) sought the introduction of three constitutional reforms[3] that would strengthen the left's position in the party.[4] Therefore, the 1979 party Conference passed a resolution which accepted two out of the three propositions: the mandatory reselection of MPs and that the election manifesto should be drafted by the NEC. To these seemingly democratic reforms, the right responded by advocating the extension to the party's organs of the principle of 'one member, one vote'.[5] However, left-wingers were adamant. They rejected vehemently the proposition.

Thus, the feeling of alienation, stemmed from the left's political beliefs, grew more and more among active right-wingers. Bill Rodgers, David Owen and Shirley Williams were former ministers. They felt really alienated from the party conference's decisions on major issues. They undertook jointly a series of steps leading to their defection and opening the possibility of Labour's split. On 6 June 1980, they issued a joint statement as a direct riposte to the left's calling

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[1] Ivor Crewe,Ibid.,p.25
[2] It declared that the Labour Party must be based on parliamentary system and believe in democratic socialism.
[3] First, mandatory reselection of Labour MP; second, the election of the party leader by the annual Conference; third, the drafting of the party's election manifesto by the NEC.
[4] Ivor Crewe,Ibid.,p.29
[5] It could be applied to the selection of parliamentary candidate, to the election of party conference delegates and to the election of the party leader.

on the next Labour government to withdraw from the Common Market.[1] A broader statement in the form of an 'open letter' was published on 1 August in both the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mirror*. The letter signed by the three former ministers attacked principally the left's doctrine of nationalization and the constitutional changes proposed by the left, and defended in particular parliamentary democracy and Britain's membership of the European Community. In parallel, much earlier Roy Jenkins, who was appointed President of the European Commission in 1976, gave at his return the BBC *Dimbley Lecture* in November 1979 in which he called for the formation of the 'radical Centre'[2].

The left's reaction to this letter was very critical; and the signatories were given the name 'the Gang of Three'. What anticipated the decision of the Gang of Three to leave the Labour Party and found a new one was, undoubtedly, the decisions of the 1980 Wembley Centre Conference. Indeed, the radical changes advocated and campaigned for by the left were passed.[3] The triumph of the left meant for the Gang of Three and other right-wingers the search for a new alternative, most likely the formation of a new party. The defection of many Labour's leading members was inevitable and predictable, too.

Accordingly, a new political party, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which consisted of 14 MPs (13 former Labour MPs and a Conservative MP), was founded on 26 March 1981. The launching of the SDP was led by the 'Gang of Four'- Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Bill Rodgers and Shirley Williams. Jenkins wanted a broad movement capable of breaking through to government, electoral reform and smashing the Labour and Conservative duopoly[4].Thirteen other Labour members defected to the SDP in the second half of 1981; two others joined it in 1982. Jenkins was elected leader of the SDP.[5] This new party was soon seen as a threat for the two-party system. Indeed, in 1981 the Conservative and Labour parties were unpopular with the British electorate.[6]

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[1] Ibid.,p.35
[2] Roy Douglas, op. cit., p.287
[3] Mandatory reselection and the proposal that the franchise for electing the party leader should be widened to include trade unions and CLPs were carried.
[4] *The Observer*, 1 September 1991
[5] Andrew Russell, op .cit.,p.31
[6] Ivor Crewe, op. cit.,p.132

Public dissatisfaction with the Thatcher's government was due to the economic recession. On the other hand, the Labour Party in the opposition faced bitter internal split. By the end of 1981, the standing of both parties was really low. This might have offered the SDP the best chance for a breakthrough. Although 'partisan dealignment' had presented opportunities to the Liberals in the past, it had never been consolidated into a permanent electoral breakthrough. Electoral support to the Liberals known as 'Liberal revivals' concerned by-elections and lasted from the late 1950's until the beginning of the 1970s. However, Liberal support never lasted more than two years. For instance, the Liberals won the Torrington by-election in March 1958, reaching 19 per cent in the polls, but in the 1959 General Election they lost Torrington and their national vote was down to 5.9 per cent.[1]

Therefore, the emergence of a new centre party represented to the Liberals an opportunity for realignment in British politics. Indeed, in the gestation period of the SDP, it was not inconceivable that Labour dissidents would simply join the Liberals or set up a new centre party which included the Liberals.[2]

For the SDP's founders an alliance between the Liberals and the SDP might well afford a real breakthrough for both parties. This decision was inevitable. There were similar approaches to policy on matters as Europe and electoral reform, and the exigencies of the electoral system, encouraged close cooperation from the outset. Although the Alliance failed to break through the two major parties, it did succeed in winning 25.4 per cent of the vote in 1983, the best performance by a third force since 1929.

In the early months of 1981, the Liberals and the SDP issued a joint statement *'A Fresh Start for Britain'* in which they agreed to fight alternate by-elections.[3] They also agreed to fight elections on a common platform with joint candidates. Representatives of both parties discussed arrangements to divide constituencies between them[4].

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[1] Andrew Russell, op. cit.,p.24
[2] Hugh Berrington,ed *Change in British Politics* (1984),p.84
[3] Andrew Russell, op. cit.,p.31
[4] Roy Douglas, op. cit.,p.288

The electoral performance of the Alliance was significant in terms of the share of the vote. However, the British electoral system did prevent the Alliance from winning more seats. The Alliance did better in by-elections. The two parties gained eight seats in by-elections between July 1981 and March 1987. Indeed, the Labour Party with eight and a half million votes won 209 seats; whereas the Alliance with over seven and three quarter million votes, won 23. Furthermore, there were disparities even within the Alliance. The 322 Liberal candidates polled 4.22 million votes and won seventeen seats; the 311 SDP candidates polled 3.57 million votes and won six seats. However, this tempo could not be sustained by the Alliance. In fact, it lost four of its eight earlier gains and its share of the vote receded to a mere 20 per cent.[1]

As economy was improving in early 1982, Conservative support in the Gallup opinion poll stood at 30 per cent, four months later, it stood at 45 per cent.[2] The Alliance, which could secure eight million votes (25.4 per cent of the vote), won just 23 seats. Even if the centre vote- the SDP and the Liberals-doubled in 1983[3], it was considered as a protest vote since almost half voters considered themselves as Conservative or Labour supporters or as being non-partisan.[4] It was clear that the discriminatory nature of the First-Past-the-Post was once more working against the Alliance.

In order to understand the Alliance's failure to sustain electoral support one needs to have a view on the Centre vote and understand both the British electoral system and the electorate as a whole. First, the Liberal Party failed in the 1960s and 1970s to consolidate its advances since the Liberal vote or as it is called the Centre vote was highly subject to turnover. For instance, in the 1974 election, 32 per cent electors supported the Liberals in either February or October or both, but fewer electors voted Liberal in each of the two elections. In other words, there was a discrepancy between the opinion polls estimation of the Liberal vote and the actual Liberal vote which did never reach 20 per cent in post-war general election. Moreover, most Liberal voters returned to their original party while the two main parties could rely on their voters from

[1] Ivor Crewe, op. cit.,p.142
[2] Andrew Russell, op. cit.,p.31
[3] It amounted to 14 per cent like the Liberal vote in 1974.
[4] Ivor Crewe, op. cit.,p.144

one general election to the next. This is why the Liberal vote -if it actually existed- was referred to as the 'soft Centre'.[1]

Of course, the Liberals attributed their failure to the electoral system; the first-past-the-post system discriminates small parties. Then, even if the Liberal Party obtained an important share of the popular vote, it would win very few seats in Parliament. The Liberal electoral support is not concentrated but rather spread across the country. Secondly, the British electoral system discourages even people from voting for the Liberals. Indeed, many Liberal sympathizers knew that their Liberal candidate could not win, so they did not vote Liberal. They thought it a wasted vote.

However, this reasoning is not totally true. Since partisanship is based on the social and ideological divisions in the electorate, the Liberal Party did not represent an actual ideological constituency. Indeed, there were ideological variations among Liberal voters who tended to switch their votes because they thought that the Liberal Party did lack a real ideology. Therefore, the Liberal vote could not be labelled as 'constant' or 'continuous'. Some surveys showed in the 1960s and 1970s that *'Liberal voters in general were a microcosm of the nation'.*[2] In addition, the Liberal Party lacked the support of any organized group or social category. The Liberal Party appeared as a moderate party, located between the two major parties. Liberal voters were not motivated by Liberal policy, they did not share policy views that separate them from both Conservative and Labour voters. On the contrary, they occupied the middle ground of politics, voting for either the Liberals or a major party.

To reverse this situation at its advantage, the SDP had to persuade voters that the new Alliance did have a chance to win, and constitute a real ideological base in the electorate. It was assumed that the SDP should speak to everyone not to specific groups. It was clear that the Alliance had to convince large number of voters thanks to its image not its specific policies.[3]

Following the 1983 election, Jenkins resigned as SDP leader; his successor David Owen shifted the party's approach to politics. For Owen the SDP, and by extension the Alliance needed a distinctive policy. To convince the

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[1] Ibid.,p.286
[2] Ibid.,p.287
[3] Ibid.,p.288

electorate, one needs a real ideology. In 1987 the Alliance share of the vote fell by 2.9 points to 22.6 per cent, it lost 12 per cent of its 1983 supporters to the Labour Party and 8 per cent to the Conservatives. Similarly, the Alliance won 18 per cent, their number of MPs fell to 22 former Conservative voters and 12 per cent of former Labour voters. Still, Alliance voters remained non-partisan. Only 2 per cent of the electorate thought of themselves as Liberal, SDP or Alliance supporters[1].

Moreover, a social analysis of the Alliance electorate in 1983 and 1987 show clearly that the Alliance did lack a distinctive social base. It suggested that Alliance voters did not belong to any specific social group. This is true only to a certain extent because the Alliance was seen as the party of a middle-class minority. Indeed, the Alliance vote showed that the Alliance did have an appeal to middle classes such as managers in the public sector. For instance, 42 per cent of the 'salariat', managers and professionals with degrees voted Alliance in the 1983 election. The Alliance vote was also higher among the public-sector salariat such as the civil service and the local government. One can only suggest that the Alliance was really attractive to the public-sector salariat between 1983 and 1987. It came behind the Conservatives in terms of the electorate preference but not the first. If the Alliance survived beyond 1987, it would have probably attracted a larger number of voters among the public-sector salariat.

Thus, the Alliance's failure to build a base within the electorate can be explained partly by a visible lack of policy despite David Owen's efforts to bridge the credibility gap. Furthermore, a Gallup poll in 1983 revealed that 50 per cent thought that the Alliance had vague policies. In 1987 almost 44 per cent still regarded its policies as vague.[2] The Alliance was only seen as an alternative to the main parties, the Labour Party in particular. It could not create a partisanship or even an electoral breakthrough. Again, the Alliance's failure to mobilize support and, therefore, to consolidate its position as a parliamentary force like the two major parties undermined seriously its position as a third force. The Alliance's failure to mobilize electoral support was mostly due to the fact that electors, just like Liberal supporters in the 1960s and 1970s, thought that the Alliance could not win. The Alliance failed to

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[1] Ibid.,p.291
[2] Ibid.,p.293

convert most of their supporters into voters. In addition, during the 1987 election campaign the Alliance was divided by having two leaders. The campaign started as the 'two Davids' campaigned in opposite directions[1].This was the sombre reality of the Alliance by the end of 1987.

Despite this fact, politicians from both the SDP and the Liberal Party publicly called for a merger between the two parties. As early as 1981, Jenkins' hope was to create a new entity and form a government with the Liberals[2].In fact, Jenkins and Williams, along with Paddy Ashdown and Alan Beith[3] from the Liberals were for a merger. David Steel was also in favour of a merger and worked consistently for this; whereas, Owen was fiercely opposed to a merger that would tarnish the identity of his own party.[4] He was more determined to maintain a separate identity for his party, a more right-wing. He resigned in August 1987 and was replaced by Robert MacLennan[5]. The latter was one of only three MPs who broke with the Labour Party in 1981 and who were still in the House of Commons. Despite divisions over the issue of merger the SDP's members voted for merger[6]. The Liberal Party welcomed merger at its annual conference as the resolution to begin merger talks was passed by 998 votes to 21[7]. Negotiations between the SDP and the Liberal Party began in September 1987.

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[1] Matthew Taylor, ''The Birth and Rebirth of the Liberal Democrats'', in The Political Quarterly, Vol.78, N°.1, January-March 2007, p.21
[2] The Observer, 1 September 1991.
[3] He was the first to favour this option.
[4] Andrew Russell, op. cit.,p.35
[5] He was MP for Caithness and Sutherland.
[6] 57.4 per cent were pro-merger, 42.6 per cent were anti-merger.
[7] A majority of 977 with just nine abstentions.

1.3. The Founding of the Liberal Democrats in 1988

Following negotiations between the SDP and the Liberals, the two leaders, David Steel and Robert MacLennan issued a mini-manifesto which contained many policies. The new party came into being on 3 March 1988.However, discussions proved to be difficult; in fact, no agreement was reached on the new party's Constitution and name. Even the mini-manifesto contained policies that the Liberal membership was unlikely to support, such as the commitment to NATO[1]. SDP negotiators feared that the unilateralist wing of the Liberal Party would succeed in forcing the party to go unilateralist. Moreover, David Owen along with two of the party's MPs, John Cartwright and Rosie Barnes remained opposed to the merger and considered the SDP as a centre radical alternative to Labour[2], which explained the continuing SDP fight for the seat in the Richmond by-election of February 1989[3]. However,it declined into irrelevance in 1990. Peter Jenkins did rightly write in *The Independent*:

> *There is no room for a fourth party in the British two-party system. There is not enough room for a third party. An Owen party consisting of himself and two MPs can have no electoral future whatsoever the Owenite claim to be the exponents of a 'new politics' is nonsense. There is no possibility of practising 'multi-party politics' under the British system[4].*

It is worth mentioning that Owen opposed merger since he had always pointed out differences between the SDP and the Liberals on policy-especially defence. Moreover, he had left Labour partly in opposition to its unilateralism. After all, by refusing to accept merger, Owen contributed to the destruction of the movement he created in 1981.

On 18 December 1987 the draft constitution was published. It included in its preamble a commitment to a full role in NATO. A federal structure was proposed for England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. The *Guardian* commented

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[1] Andrew Russell, op. cit.,p.33
[2] Bill Coxall, *Contemporary British Politics : an Introduction* (1992),p.55
[3] It was won by the Conservative William Hague, the SDP came second.
[4] *The Independent*, 31 August 1987.

on the new constitution: *"...On balance, the new order represents a sizeable shift towards the sort of political realism which most voters seem to respect..."*[1]

Finally, agreement on the new party's Constitution was reached. In fact, the new constitution resembled broadly the SDP's more than that of the Liberals'. The new party was to have a federal structure and constituency parties would elect members every two years to the party's conference. The leader was to be elected by the entire membership, on the basis of the single-transferable vote method of proportional representation[2].

There were also disagreements over what form the new party's policy stance should take. Maclennan, with the help of two advisers Dixon and Gilmour, was given the responsibility to write the policy document. He saw this as an opportunity to give the new party a sense of direction and a distinct ideological identity. The policy document presented by Maclennan entitled 'Voices and Choices for All' on 13 January 1988 was widely known as 'the dead parrot document'. Much of it was to cause serious controversy within either party. It included the extension of VAT to food, children's clothes, fuel and newspapers, and a support for Trident nuclear missiles. All of those proposals were likely to be unpopular with the members of both parties. Des Wilson, the former party President described the policy declaration as 'politically inept'[3].

Against this background, a new negotiating team took place. The Liberal team included Des Wilson, Jim Wallace (the Liberal Chief Whip) and Alan Leaman (the Vice-Chairman of the Party's Policy Committee). The SDP team was made up of Edmund Dell (a party trustee), Tom McNally and David Marquand (Both former Labour MPs). The negotiating team was assigned the task to rescue the merger. Indeed, on 18 January the new policy document dropped the controversial proposals of 'Voices and Choices'.

Ultimately, a special Liberal Assembly held at Blackpool on 23 January resulted in an overwhelming victory for merger with 2,099 to 385 and 23 abstentions. The SDP, which met at Sheffield on 30 January, voted 273 for

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[1] *Guardian*, 19 December 1987.
[2] Ivor Crewe, op. cit.,p.427
[3] Chris Cook, op cit., p.195

merger to 28 against, with 49 abstentions. Finally, the party was launched with 19 MPs and a declared membership base of 100,000[1].

Of course, this situation affected bitterly the new party which was still arguing on a name; even though the title 'Social and liberal Democratic (SLD) Party' was chosen with Steel and Maclennan as joint interim leaders.[2] Thus, the early days of the new party proved to be difficult. For instance, the party made a disastrous performance in the Kesington by-election on 14 July 1988 polling only 10.7 per cent of the vote[3]. Indeed, the new party's performance in the 1988-89 by-elections was trivial. The SLD did not perform better in the 1988 and 1989 local elections. They gained only 83 seats and lost 190. Such was the actual situation of the SLD by the end of 1989. It can be argued that, despite the disappointing results of 1988 and 1989 and mostly those of the European elections in 1989[4] which were a real humiliation; since they failed to elect a single MEP, the party headed by Paddy Ashdown[5] was able to recover and choose finally a name 'the Liberal Democrats' on 26 October 1989[6]. The new party under Ashdown did choose more easily a new logo 'the bird of freedom' in May 1990.Indeed, the party elected a leader who would mark the Centre-left of British politics.

Yet a long process had preceded the adoption of the party's name. First, the party had been formed under the title 'Social and Liberal Democrats' in order to please both the Liberal and SDP members. The party's official name changed to 'Democrats' under the auspices of the new leader Paddy Ashdown. Still, the Liberals opposed vehemently the name of 'Democrats' and campaigned incessantly for the retention of the old 'Liberal' label. Ashdown as a Deputy leader, Alan Beith threatened even to resign the Whip if the name was not changed. On the face of it, Paddy Ashdown threatened to resign if the constitutional requirements were not scrupulously respected. It follows that the party newly branded 'Liberal Democrats' did not realize an upsurge in support. The membership of the new party was much smaller than that of its

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[1] Ibid., p.198
[2] Andrew Russell, op. cit.,p.33
[3] Chris Cook, op. cit., p.201
[4] The SLD won 6.4 per cent of the vote.
[5] He was elected leader of the party in July 1988. He resigned in 1999. He was first elected to Parliament for Yeovil in 1983. He was Liberal spokesman on Trade and Industry from 1983 and Alliance voice on Education from 1987 until his election as leader.
[6] Ibid.,p.71

predecessors combined. Some members joined the continuing SDP; others joined the even smaller independent Liberal Party[1] and many drifted out of politics. However, the merger of both parties provided a new lease of life for the new party and brought a more efficient organization and new methods of campaigning using media. Ultimately the merger permitted the grassroots of the Liberals to exercise greater influence.[2]

The party's position started improving in October 1990 when the Liberal Democrat candidate David Bellotti with a swing from the Conservatives of 20.1 per cent won the Eastbourne by-election. Against all expectations, the Eastbourne constituency had been a Conservative stronghold since 1906. This victory did galvanise the party of Ashdown and offered new hopes to the Liberal Democrats[3]. This was followed by two other by-election victories in March 1991 in Ribble Valley on the highest swing (24.8 per cent) from the Conservatives recorded in a by-election since Bermondsey in February 1983, and in November in Kincardine and Deeside, a Conservative-held marginal seat which reduced the Conservatives on a swing of 11.4 per cent to the third largest party in Scotland. These gains were built-up at local elections. Local issues did help the Liberal Democrats to win those seats. These gains revealed clearly the personality of Paddy Ashdown to make plans for the long-term future and his ability to overcome the barriers of the First-Past-the-Post. He even confided in June in his diary, *'the next General Election should be a development election for us...I wanted to use the two or three years after it to build the party*[4]. Indeed, Ashdown made clear at the Blackpool party conference in September 1990 his vision of the party as one of a radical and reforming one. The Liberal Democrats would be a party of promoting social justice, committed to Europe, to the protection of the environment and constitutional reforms including Proportional Representation, home rule for Scotland and Wales and the reform of the House of Lords[5].

Thus, the Liberal Democrats as their predecessors looked to one saviour, by-elections which had rejuvenated the party in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

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[1] The continuing Liberal Party was launched in 1989 by those party members unhappy with the merger. It contested elections throughout the 1990s.
[2] Gillian Peele, op. cit.,p.73
[3] Chris Cook, op. cit., p.206
[4] Paddy Ashdown, <u>The Ashdown Diaries : Volume One 1988-1997</u> (2000), p.90
[5] Chris Cook, op. cit., p.205

The Liberals and then the Alliance had demonstrated an extraordinary ability to win parliamentary by-elections in even the worst circumstances.

At the 1992 General Election, the Liberal Democrats did increase their representation in the House of Commons; they secured 17.8 per cent of the vote and won twenty seats under the leadership of Paddy Ashdown. In fact, the 1992 General Election saw a perceptible realignment in British politics. The Liberal Democrats had become the third largest party Britain had seen since 1935 despite few gains in terms of seats[1]. Only three of the twenty Liberal Democrat MPs had won a majority of votes cast in their constituency. Thus, the 1992 election was hardly the breakthrough that had been hoped for. From 1992 onwards, the party consolidated its position at the grassroots[2] as well in its ability to win by-elections[3]. But the challenge for the party was to avoid the wasted-vote and convert most of their potential sympathizers into voters.[4] They did fail to replace Labour as the main challenger in Conservative-held seats. In the next by-election at Newbury in May 1993 the Liberal Democrats won a seat from the Conservatives in traditionally Conservative territory.[5] On 22 July another by-election was held, the Liberal Democrats won a safe seat, Christchurch in Southern England from the Conservatives by 33.164 votes[6].Soon the Liberal Democrats pushed the Conservatives into third place in in opinion polls. These victories were followed by other by-election victories on June 1994 and July 1995. But ultimately these by-election victories can be explained in terms of the impressive gains made by the Liberal Democrats at local councils establishing a permanent base in local government. Thus, the actual change occurred significantly in the local elections in May 1993, ending the era of a two-party monopoly. These successes were reflected in opinion polls. On 9 July 1993, *The Daily Telegraph* Gallup Poll put the Liberal Democrats in second place with 26.5 per cent, two points ahead of the Conservatives[7]. Against this background, *The Times* commented at the 1993 party conference:

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[1] Four gains and six losses.
[2] The number of elected Liberal Democrat councilors in the boroughs grew significantly.
[3] Chris Cook, Ibid., p.213
[4] Andrew Russell, op. cit.,p.1
[5] John L. Irwin, op. cit.,p.22
[6] The Conservatives had won the seat at the GE of 1992 by a majority of 23.015 votes.
[7] Chris Cook, op. cit., p.217

> *"The government is unpopular, the Opposition is in disarray, and the Liberal Democrats are making sensational gains in by-elections and riding high in the opinion polls. It must be time to predict that the third party will break the mould at the next general election. But, as Liberal Democrats begin their party conference in Torquay, they may well recall that they have been here before. So there are reasons for Liberal Democrats to be less than triumphant this week. Yet behind the ephemeral support in the opinion polls- hovering around 25 per cent at the moment- lies a slightly more concrete expression of voters' views. At local government by-elections, the centre party has been doing far better than either big party, picking up seats from Conservatives in the shires and from Labour in inner cities. Since January it has gained three times more seats from the Tories than Labour has[1]"*.

In the 1994 European elections the party won two seats realizing the first breakthrough after a humiliating fourth place in 1989[2]. As the *Guardian* commented:

> *"Today's Liberal Democrats are not the Liberals of old. They now possess-the only boon from the severed Alliance- a structure of serious decision-making. They are a proper party. And this, for 1992, has produced a proper manifesto. Like all such documents, of course, it has its left-over sections and dodgy figurines: and the unreality of a leap straight into Downing Street naturally produces matching unreality in the promising game. But, for emphasis and for symbolism, it's the best show in town[3]"*.

This showed clearly that the Liberal Democrats were able to capture Conservative seats despite the apparent appeal of New Labour. Therefore, under Ashdown's energetic leadership membership recovered and the Liberal Democrats re-established themselves on the political scene.

By 1997 the Conservatives were no longer in government. On the other hand, New Labour became the major force in British politics winning a landslide victory at the 1997 General Election. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats won 46 seats in the 1997 General Election, the best result since 1929. This electoral performance was significant for a third party despite a slight decline in the share of the vote. The concentration of the Liberal vote represented an upsurge in the number of MPs. The Liberal Democrats gained almost all the

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[1] *The Times*, 20 September 1993.
[2] Chris Cook, op. cit., p.213
[3] *Guardian*, 6 April 1992.

seats they targeted. They lost only one seat to the Conservatives (Christchurch by-election seat). This victory had been achieved through swing to the Liberal Democrats (seats gained from Conservatives)[1]. In 2001 the Liberal Democrats did meet the challenge of increasing both their share of the vote and their seats in Parliament. Fifty-two Liberal Democrats were elected in Parliament.

Thus, despite the discriminatory nature of the Single Member Simple Plurality (SMSP) electoral system, the Liberal Democrats succeeded in increasing simultaneously their national share of the vote along with their number of seats in Parliament. This has never been the case since 1974. Nevertheless, it was not the predicted breakthrough. They even improved their representation in Parliament in the 2005 General Election and most significantly in the 2010 General Election when they accepted to share power with the Conservatives in a coalition government.

In this chapter, we have examined the Liberal history from the emergence of the old Liberal Party in the nineteenth century to the founding of the Liberal Democrats by the end of the twentieth century. The Liberal Party remained one of the two main parties in Britain either as the government or as the opposition until the First World War. However, it underwent a rapid decline which culminated with the establishment of Labour as the main challenger to the Conservatives. Decline continued so that by the middle 1950s there were only six Liberal MPs. Then, a revival in the Liberal Party fortunes did occur during the 1960s and even the 1970s when the Liberals were able to win by-elections thanks to their commitment to community politics. Most of the 1980s was occupied by the Alliance between the Liberals and the newly established SDP which had started as a breakaway from Labour. The Alliance did to a certain extent bridge the credibility gap realizing almost significant advance in 1983 and 1987. Following long negotiations the two parties agreed to merge and form in 1988 what would become the Liberal Democrats. In the 1990s the Liberal Democrats began to establish themselves as a real force in British politics capable of increasing their representation in Parliament through building a solid local base and by-election successes.

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[1] Chris Cook, op. cit., p.234

Chapter Two

The Liberal Democrats' Position in the Political Spectrum

Since 1992 the Liberal Democrats have consolidated their position in the political spectrum even if their early years as a new party did not produce important electoral support. Nevertheless, the new party has been able to build on the groundwork inherited from T.H Green[1] and Hobhouse[2] in the early twentieth century, and then revived in the 1960s by Jo Grimond. Therefore, the party was ideologically able to challenge the two larger parties and present itself to the electorate as the alternative opposition.

This chapter considers the party ideology which is deeply rooted in liberalism and social democracy. Both are two sides of the same coin. It will argue that the Liberal Democrats do have an ideology which stemmed from the liberal ideas of L.T Hobhouse and T.H Green. However, the old liberal heritage which is marked by the struggle for liberty and equality is not in contradiction with social democracy which stresses social justice and personal freedom.

Once we have defined the Liberal Democrat ideology, we analyse the party members' ideological beliefs and any variations which could be explained by the different groups forming the Liberal Democrats. Furthermore, an analysis of the ideological beliefs among the electorate would help us later to understand the Liberal Democrats' electoral strategy.

Then, we consider how the Liberal Democrats tend to maximise their share of the vote and convert it efficiently into seats despite the bias of the electoral system towards the main parties. The Liberal Democrats have always questioned the Winner-takes-all approach embedded in British politics.

The Liberal Democrats made a remarkable advance in the 1997 General Election securing 46 seats, more than any third party had won at a General Election since 1929. The question is how the Liberal Democrats contrived to make this massive advance? The probable answer was that the Liberal Democrats did choose the right strategy of 'tactical voting' which had been used earlier in by-elections and which aimed to escape the centre party squeeze.

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[1] Thomas Hill Green (1836-1882) was one of the British thinkers behind the philosophy of ethical socialism, a variant of liberal socialism, which stresses social justice while opposing possessive individualism.
[2] Leonard Trelawny Hobhouse (1864-1929) was one of the leading proponents of social liberalism.

We will argue also that this strategy of targeting winnable seats which was not new since it had begun in local elections and extended gradually to parliamentary contests was carried out successfully in the General Elections of 1997 and 2001 through financial funding and campaign efforts. Another electoral strategy was used in 2005, it centered on two targets, the 'decapitation strategy' against the Conservatives and attack on New Labour-held-seats.

Finally, we explore the Liberal Democrats' relations with Labour and the Conservative Parties. We will develop the Liberal Democrats' new positionment in British politics, i.e. the abandonment of 'equidistance' which was clearly understood from Ashdown's Chard Speech in May 1992[1]. In fact, the Chard Speech heralded the demise of the traditional stance of equidistance, according to which the Liberal Democrats were no further in policy term from the Conservatives than they were from Labour. Ashdown called for realignment in British politics *'to assemble the ideas around which a non-socialist alternative to the Conservatives can be constructed'*[2].The new stance marked the beginning of cooperation between the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party and culminated with the birth of 'The Project'[3] which led to the creation of a Joint Cabinet Committee whose mission was to discuss constitutional reform. Cooperation prompted by the two parties' leadership rather than by party members. Blair's ambition had been to find ways of realigning the centre –left. Both Blair and Ashdown were willing to push cooperation and produce realignment in British politics.

'The Project' though ambitious could not progress or even continue beyond 2001.The Liberal Democrats began to see their future differently from the 2001 General Election onwards. Indeed, the Liberal Democrats were able to realize by-election victories. These victories could largely justify Charles Kennedy's claim that *'there is no such thing as a no-go area for the Lib Dems'*[4]. There was even among Liberal Democrats a prospect of becoming the alternative government in the foreseeable future. This idea does not seem today ridiculous since the new developments taking place in the political scene.

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[1] Andrew Russell, op. cit., p.40
[2] Ibid., p.40
[3] Ashdown referred to the plans to increase cooperation with Labour as 'the Project'.
[4] Roy Douglas, op. cit.,p.316

Opportunities seem to be open to the Liberal Democrats who form today a coalition government with the Conservatives.

2.1. The Party's Ideological Sources

It is clear from the party's name that the Liberal Democrats inherited from their predecessors two distinct political traditions: liberalism and social democracy. This suggests that Liberal Democrat ideology would be based on these two strands of political thought[1]. But this is not surprising since the party was formed from two parties, one Liberal, the other Social Democratic. On the other hand, the party is often referred to as the 'Liberals', and many members describe themselves as 'Liberal' who believes in 'Liberalism'.[2]Thus, what label can be accurately applied to Liberal Democrat ideology? Does the party have really a philosophy of its own?

According to some commentators, the Liberal Democrats have no values or philosophy. Simon Jenkins[3] claimed that:

> "*The British Liberal Democratic party is a mystery. It is a vacuum round a void inside a hole. No one can describe a distinctive feature of Liberal Democracy. It has no cause, theme, culture or strategy, beyond a yearning for the eternal coalition of proportional representation".[4]*

However, this kind of comment should be definitely dismissed in the light of the ideological beliefs which underlie Liberal Democrat policy. The main issue is, therefore, to find out the nature of Liberal Democrat ideology on the one hand, and analyse the party members' ideological beliefs on the other.

Firstly, the Liberal Democrat ideology is based on liberalism. In fact, the Liberal tradition of 'Libertarianism' emphasizes, particularly, individual freedom, economic libertarianism which implies free trade, market solutions to economic problems and, finally, internationalism which stands for the removal

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[1] Paul Whiteley, Patrick Seyd, and Antony Billinghurst. ,*Third Force Politics : Liberal Democrats at the Grassroots*,(2006),p.48

[2] Richard S. Grayson, *"Social Democracy or Social Liberalism ? Ideological Sources of Liberal Democrat Policy"* , in The Political Quarterly, Vol.78, No.1, January- March 2007, p.32

[3] A British newspapers columnist and author of several books on politics, history and architecture.

[4] *The Times*, 17 May 2002.

of trade barriers between countries particularly in Europe[1]. Secondly, the Social democratic tradition underlies the party ideology,too.This tradition emphasizes equality and redistribution of wealth to tackle inequality through progressive taxation. Of course, ideological variations exist within the party since the latter is made-up of three different groups, ex-Liberals, ex- Social Democrats and other members who joined the new party in 1988 and which had no previous political ties.

Although the Liberal Democrat policies have been often described as based on social democracy, the party did draw on its Liberal heritage.[2] Consequently, the party is seen as a social liberal rather than a social democratic one. Social Liberalism, which is clearly explained in L.T. Hobhouse's *Liberalism*[3] in 1911, emphasizes freedom and sees two threats to freedom: economic inequality and over-mighty state power. Hobhouse attempted to reconstruct a 'positive' conception of liberalism unlike Mill[4] whose conception of liberalism was merely concerned with removing the obstacles to human freedom and progress[5]. Mill's conception of liberty justified the freedom of individual in opposition to unlimited state control. According to Hobhouse, the role of the state is *'to secure the conditions upon which its citizens are able to win by their own efforts all that is necessary to a full civic efficiency'*[6]. He clearly clearly defined the notion of an active civic state. Hobhouse's positive conception of the state did not conflict with the true principle of personal liberty but is necessary to its effective realization[7]. So, the Liberal Democrats show concern with inequality by tempering the power of the state and this attitude flows more clearly from social liberalism according to Grayson[8].

Some other could see the impact of 'Croslandism' on the Liberal Democrat thinking. Indeed, *The Independent* accused the party of 'pure Croslandism'.[9] One could readily examine Crosland's 1956, *The Future of*

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[1]Paul Whiteley, op. cit.p.50

[2] Richard S. Grayson, op. cit., p.33

[3] It was a restatement of Classical Liberalism.

[4] John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was the most influential British thinker of the nineteenth century.

[5] Richard S. Grayson, "*The Struggle for the Soul of Liberalism*", in New Statesman,12 July 2010, p.32

[6] Ibid, p.32

[7] Richard S. Grayson,*"Social Democracy or Social Liberalism? Ideological Sources of Liberal Democrat Policy"* in The Political Quarterly, Vol.78, No.1, January- March 2007, p.37

[8] Richard Grayson is head of politics at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is one of three vice-chairs of the Liberal Democrat Federal Policy Committee.

[9] Richard S. Grayson, Ibid.,p.34

Socialism (Tony Crosland was the greatest British Social Democrat thinker) and see any influence on the Liberal Democrats' thought. *The Future of Socialism* states the differences between socialism and social democracy. The book stresses individual freedom and social justice. For Crosland social justice promotes freedom. Moreover, he argued for a set of reforms which would promote personal freedom such as freedoms on divorce, abortion, homosexuality, censorship and women's rights. Obviously, the Liberal Democrats' manifestos tend to promote social justice. But should we see there any influence of Crosland?

It is clear from the party's values document, *Our Different Vision* (1989) that the Liberal Democrats are really concerned with the values of liberty, equality and opportunity. The document emphasizes individual freedom and equal opportunities for all. It also calls for a spread of income between individuals and transfer of wealth while not using the word 'redistribution'.

In addition, the party issued in 2002 a document: *It's About Freedom.* This new paper stresses the overall aim of the party 'freedom'. It also argues that '*what Liberal Democrats focus on is the extent to which poverty and lack of opportunity restrict freedom*'[1]. In short, equality comes below freedom. This is exactly Crosland's claim that equality promotes freedom. Moreover, the importance of social justice in securing freedom has been reiterated in the 2006 party policy review document *Trust in People: Make Britain Free, Fair and Green*[2].

From all these points, one can assume that the Liberal Democrats' thinking on freedom and equality is closely linked to Crosland's thought and even to L.T. Hobhouse's *Liberalism*. The conclusion that could be reached is that there is seemingly a much common ground between the Liberal Democrats and social democratic thinking. However, it would be hazardous to describe the Liberal Democrats as exclusively Social Democrats. Indeed, the Liberal Democrats do have a distinct position to the state. While the Social Democrats were advocating decentralisation, Hobhouse was clear about the benefits of the State in advancing Liberalism.

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[1] Richard Grayson, Ibid., p.35
[2] Ibid., p.35

In addition, the Liberal Democrats campaigned, starting from 1992, for the reduction of the power of the State. They have been more concerned about increasing local democracy and civil liberties. This leads us to a first conclusion that the Liberal Democrat ideology is much rooted in social liberalism than in social democracy. Indeed, priority is given to freedom and equality of opportunities between individuals ensuring more social justice and tempering the power of the state at the same time.

The position of the Liberal Democrats has been clearly defined by the late 1990s. The position on the centre left was reaffirmed under the leadership of Charles Kennedy[1] who was devoted to forge a strong, independent and progressive party[2].Then, the Liberal Democrats developed this strand of thought known by the end of the nineteenth century as 'New Liberalism' which was based on individual freedom and equality.[3] However, the Liberals lost their sense of purpose as a consequence of the schism between Lloyd George and Asquith. The Social Liberalism of T.H Green was, therefore, ignored. It was then Jo Grimond who revitalised the party and gave it a clear purpose. His work was continued by Jeremy Thorpe and Charles Kennedy[4].

As mentioned earlier, Hobhouse's *Liberalism* is rooted in economic justice. For him, the struggle for 'liberty' is the struggle for 'equality'. Of course, the thinking of the New Liberals, like T.H.Green, L.T.Hobhouse, and John A. Hobson would lay the foundations of the welfare state. Ultimately, Lloyd George became one of the New Liberals who passed welfare legislation after the 1906 General Election. This constituted a real shift from classical liberalism to modern liberalism. Later in the twentieth century two Liberals, John Maynard Keynes laid the economic foundations, and William Beveridge designed the welfare system. Much later in the twenty-first century, the Liberal Democrats formulated the principles of Social Liberalism based on individual freedom with an emphasis on the importance of equality and state action.

On the other hand, it remains important at this stage to examine the party members' ideology keeping in mind the fact that the party is made-up of three different groups as we have said earlier. Party members should have a

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[1] He was the second leader of the Liberal Democrats.
[2] Richard Grayson, *"The Struggle for the Soul of Liberalism"*, in <u>New Statesman</u>, 12 July 2010, p.32
[3] Contemporary Social Liberalism has its origins in the New Liberalism of the early 20th Century.
[4] Neal Lawson and Neil Sherlock, <u>*The Progressive Century : The Future of the Centre-Left in Britain*</u> (2001),p.5

clear ideology in order to define a coherent agenda for the electorate. Thus, is there a set of ideological beliefs which underlie and differentiate the attitudes of party members?

Firstly, Paul Whiteley[1] made an investigation about ideological structuring among grassroots Liberal Democrats using four different factors: lifestyle liberalism, equality and redistribution, free market liberalism and attitudes to the European Union. An analysis of the attitudes of grassroots Liberal Democrats according to these factors revealed the presence of radical liberal and social democratic egalitarian traditions. For instance, redistribution of income is favoured along with increasing taxes in order to rise public spending. Furthermore, the study showed, on the base of the economic liberalism factor, that Liberal Democrats favour free trade and private enterprise. Attitudes towards the European Union reveal, not surprisingly, that Liberal Democrats support Britain's membership of the single currency. This has always been the attitude of the Liberal Democrats towards the European Union. Two-thirds of Liberal Democrats support further European integration. Finally, the study revealed the absence of any correlation between the factors. As an illustration, members who favour freedom in lifestyle do not support free market liberalism. This means clearly that party members could have different views about the same issues[2].

Another investigation undertaken by Paul Whiteley concerned the distribution of members' attitudes in relation to the four previous factors. The study revealed on the base of the equality and redistribution factor that a large majority of Liberal Democrats favour redistribution while few oppose it. This means that egalitarian attitude is very present in the grassroots party. The Liberal Democrats tend also to favour free market, a tradition that is clearly rooted in the nineteenth century liberal thought[3].

Therefore, the analysis of Paul Whiteley did help us to identify and understand the four different attitudes of Liberal Democrat ideology. We have also reached the conclusion that ideological variations did exist in the grassroots party. Now, the main issue is to explain these ideological variations.

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[1] He is professor of Government at the University of Essex, and Co-Director of the British Election Study.
[2] See Paul Whiteley, _Third Force Politics : Liberal Democrats at the Grassroots_ (2006), pp.50-52
[3] Ibid., p.52

Firstly, ideological beliefs are more likely shaped by the social background of the members. Indeed, differences in age, social class and income, as well as education do have an influence on political ideology. For instance, on lifestyle issues older members tend to be more Conservative than younger ones. The middle-class, educated and affluent members tend to be relatively radical on lifestyle issues. Secondly, the political roots of the party members do have an influence on their political beliefs. As we have seen, the Liberal Democrats are made-up of three different groups: ex-Liberals, ex-Social Democrats and members who joined the Liberal Democrats as their first party.This situation would certainly generate differences between members. As we have pointed out earlier, the old Liberal Party drew on individualism and freedom; whereas, the SDP drew on a more egalitarian tradition. Thirdly, attachment to the party could have an influence on ideological beliefs. Members who are strongly attached and loyal to the party are probably more committed to Liberal Democratic principles than those who are weakly attached. Fourth, ideological beliefs are also shaped by the attitudes of members towards politics. Some members are less flexible than others regarding the party's principles. Others are more pragmatic willing to compromise principles for electoral reasons[1].

Whitely has also conducted a study on the sources of ideological diversity in the Liberal Democrat grassroots. He has confronted the four different components of Liberal Democrat ideology[2] with each of the four factors cited earlier. Starting with lifestyle liberalism, middle-class and educated members are more conservative on lifestyle issues. Furthermore, strongly attached Liberal Democrats are more radical than weakly attached Liberal Democrats on lifestyle issues. Finally, women tend to be more conservative than men.

The second dimension which is related to equality and redistribution revealed that the social backgrounds of the members determine their attitudes. For instance, affluent members are opposed to further redistribution whereas educated people tend to favour it. In addition, political experience tends to determine attitudes to redistribution. Members who have an SDP background are more inclined to favour redistribution than members who have

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[1] Ibid., p.53

[2] Lifestyle liberalism, equality and redistribution, free market liberalism, attitudes to the European Union.
See Paul Whiteley,Ibid., p.55

only been members of the Liberal Democrats. Moreover, strongly attached members who are loyal and more ideologically driven are more inclined to favour redistribution than weakly members.

The third dimension which is related to economic liberalism revealed that affluent members have pro-market views while graduates tend to underestimate the role of the market in politics. Furthermore, pragmatic members are less inclined to favour the market than the less pragmatic members. Regarding the fourth dimension, attitudes to European integration, the social background of the members does have a strong influence on their attitudes. Members who are affluent, middle class and educated are inclined to support further integration. Former SDP members are in favour of European integration[1].

In view of these findings, we may conclude that the social background of the members can explain ideological variations among the party members since it operates in all factors. Conversely, attachment to the party is important to explain these variations. However, political experience is less determinant since it operates only in economic liberalism. This analysis leads us to the conclusion that ideological beliefs in the party are visibly influenced by a combination of factors: social background, political experience, attachment to the party and attitudes towards politics.

So far we have identified the nature of Liberal Democrat ideology and examined the party members' ideological beliefs. Usually, parties are located on a single ideological left-right dimension. Indeed, the Liberal Democrats are often described as a party of the centre. This refers to the notion of 'equidistance' which implies that all parties are located on a left-right scale.[2]

Many Liberal Democrats rejected the terminology left-right continuum of politics being identified in relation to their opponents. Others accepted to be perceived as left of Labour with the abandonment of equidistance. But more significantly the official stand was to see the party as 'neither left nor, right but forward' offering a distinct and radical alternative[3].

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[1] Ibid., pp.55-57
[2] Andrew Russell, op .cit.,p.179
[3] Ibid., p.189

Once again Whiteley has conducted another survey which showed the members' self- placement on the left-right continuum in politics. It revealed clearly that average members place themselves in the median position when they are asked the question *'Compared with other Liberal Democrats where would you place your views...on a left- right scale?'* In contrast, they place themselves on the left when they are asked the question *'Where would you place your views in relation to British politics as a whole?'*[1].

In addition, this study examined the correlations between the left-right scale and the four ideology factors (lifestyle liberalism, equality and redistribution, economic liberalism and European integration). It revealed that members who oppose redistribution are on the right of the political spectrum whereas members who oppose economic liberalism are on the left. This clearly reveals the existence of two political traditions: social democracy and liberalism. Besides, members who are for further European integration are on the left of the ideological spectrum. It is clear that the four ideology factors are closely linked to the left-right conception of politics. Evidence is that the Liberal Democrat ideology cannot be located on a simple left-right dimension. Indeed, as we have seen previously there are ideological variations among party members. Conversely, the Conservative Party does not follow a conservative ideology. Its ideology is rather a mixture of neo-liberal economic policies combined with moral and social conservatism.

Now, it is interesting to identify ideological beliefs in the electorate as a whole. Therefore, the focus will be on the four ideology factors identified earlier and see if they are present among Liberal Democrat voters. According to some analysts like Converse[2], most of the electorate lack real ideological beliefs and have no coherent attitudes about political issues. Others such as Butler and Stokes[3] went even further arguing that only 25 per cent of the electorate thought in left right terms. Nevertheless, recent researches demonstrated that voting behaviour is largely shaped by ideological beliefs[4].Therefore, to what extent party members ideological beliefs are replicated in the Liberal Democrat

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[1]Paul Whiteley, op. cit.,p.61
[2] Converse Philip E., *The Nature of Belief Systems* in David E. Apter (ed.), Ideology and Discontents (1964) pp.206-61
[3] David Butler and Donald Stokes, *Political Change in Britain: The Evolution of Electoral Choice* (1974)
[4] Paul Whiteley, op. cit., p.63

electorate? To answer this question, we use data from the 2001 British Election Study[1] with a particular reliance on the four ideological factors identified earlier. One can notice that attitude indicators used in this survey are approximately the same as those of the membership survey even if they are fewer.

Looking at the four ideological factors, lifestyle indicators concern censorship, tolerance and British values. The redistribution indicators are about redistribution and fair shares. The market indicators are related to free enterprise and attitudes to trade unions. The European Union indicators concern further European integration. The major symbol of increased integration with the European Union is the Single European Currency.

Table 2.1 Attitude indicators among Liberal Democrat voters in 2001

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
A	16	41	25	11	7
B	14	48	14	19	5
C	16	45	29	8	2
D	1	11	19	56	14
E	15	54	16	14	1
F	9	27	32	27	5
G	4	24	42	26	4
H	1	7	21	52	20
I	8	31	43	16	2

Lifestyle indicators
A: Young people today do not have enough respect for traditional British values.
B: Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards.
C: People in Britain should be more tolerant of those who lead unconventional lifestyles.

Redistribution indicators
D: Ordinary working people get their fair share of the nation's wealth.
E: There is one law for the rich and one for the poor.
F: In a true democracy income and wealth are redistributed to ordinary working people.

Market indicators
G: Private enterprise is the best way to solve Britain's economic problems.
H: There is no need for strong trade unions to protect employees' working conditions and wages.
I: Big international companies are a threat to democratic government in Britain.

European Union indicators

	Definitely join	Join if conditions are right	Stay out for 4–5 years	Rule out in principle
J	9	52	23	16

	Strongly approve	Approve	Neither approve nor disapprove	Disapprove	Strongly disapprove
K	12	44	17	17	9

J: Thinking of the single European currency (euro), which of the following statements would come closest to your own view?
K: Overall, do you approve or disapprove of Britain's membership of the EU?

Source: 2001 British Election Study

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[1] Clarke et al., Political Choice in Britain (2004)

Analysing attitudes of Liberal Democrat voters in 2001, the study revealed, to a certain extent, a similarity in ideological structuring among Liberal Democrat voters to that among party members (Table 2.1). For instance, on the attitudes to redistribution, voters were divided on the proposition that a true democracy should be concerned with the redistribution of income and wealth. They also disagreed with the idea that there is no need for strong trade unions to protect wages and workers; at the same time they largely disagreed with the idea that private enterprise is the best way to solve Britain's economic problems. Finally, attitudes to the European Union revealed that voters supported the idea of joining the single currency but not unconditionally[1].

Moreover, a comparison between the first study related to party members ideological beliefs and those of voters demonstrated a clear similarity. Indeed, members, who think that income and wealth should be redistributed, do agree that government should spend more money to get rid of poverty. Similarly, voters think that in a true democracy income and wealth should be redistributed to ordinary working people. In addition, members who think that censorship is necessary to uphold moral standard, disapproved homosexuality and abortion. In a similar way, voters who think that censorship is necessary disagreed with the idea that people should be tolerant of unconventional lifestyles.

Accordingly, this study revealed, despite variance in indicators, the existence of similarity in the attitudes of party members and those of Liberal Democrat voters. This analysis of the Liberal Democrat ideology has clearly demonstrated that the Liberal Democrats do have an ideology and political traditions which go back to the origin of liberalism and social democracy. In addition, ideological beliefs do exist among the party members and are duplicated within the electorate. Of course, the Liberal Democrat Party differs from the two main parties since it is made up of different groups which have different political traditions. This explains mainly variations of ideological beliefs among the party members. Traditionally, party location in the political spectrum is a matter of left-right scale which is determined by the notion of 'equidistance'. The Liberal Democrats have always been identified as a centre party; however, their position has evolved throughout the years sometimes

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[1] See Paul Whitely, op. cit., p.65

maintaining equidistance and another time abandoning it. Ultimately, the party leader, Nick Clegg[1] declared as early as 2011 that his party belonged to the radical centre. He rejected the left-right terminology claiming that his party's politics is that of the radical centre.

Having examined the Liberal Democrat ideology, the major question to be addressed now is: How could the Liberal Democrats counter the British electoral system and increase simultaneously their share of the vote, and above all, their seats in Westminster?

2.2. The Party's Search for Votes and Seats

As argued in chapter one, in single member plurality system- also known the First-Past-the-Post in which the candidate who gets more votes than any other candidate is declared the winner, small parties are discriminated against. The problem faced by any third parties is to convince voters that they can win. Duverger[2] pointed out that *'majoritarian electoral systems tend to precipitate two-party systems, as voters, fearful of wasting their vote, are forced to make a choice between the two most likely winners'.*[3] Duverger's main proposition is that plurality electoral systems tend toward party dualism whereas proportional representation is associated with multipartyism. For Duverger, the numbers of parties are reduced by the 'mechanical' factor, the 'under-representation' of the third party, and the 'psychological' factor, voters' realization that they waste their votes if they vote for a third party[4]. But if a minor party has a geographically concentrated support it might be able to overcome this disadvantage. Thus, a party can elect MPs with a small share of the total vote if it concentrates support in a limited number of constituencies. For instance, the Scottish Nationalists and Welsh Nationalists win seats by concentrating their vote in Scottish and Welsh strongholds[5].A minor party can

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[1] He was elected on 18 December 2007.
[2] Maurice Duverger was a French jurist and sociologist. He devised a theory which became known as Duverger's Law. He identifies a correlation between a First-Past-the-Post system and the formation of a two-party system.
[3] Maurice Duverger, _Political Parties : Their Organisation and Activity in the Modern State_ (1954), p.423
[4] Joseph A. Schlesinger, ''*Maurice Duverger and the Study of Political Parties*'', in French Politics, April 2006, Volume 4, n° 1,p.59
[5] Richard Rose, _Politics in England : Change and Persistence_, 5th ed. (1989)p.254

win an impressive share of the vote, but if that vote is spread more or less around the country, it cannot win seats in Parliament.

Because Liberal Democrat support is geographically spread, the party has been unable to convert votes into seats. In fact, during the 1970s popular support for the Liberals did grow, still they were not able to win as much constituencies. For instance, in 1974 the Liberals made a breakthrough securing 19 per cent of the popular vote, still they won only 14 seats (2.2 per cent of seats).Moreover, in the 1983 and 1987 elections the party did fail to gain more than 23 and 22 seats despite securing respectively 25.4 per cent and 22.6 per cent of the vote.[1] Because in the First-Past-the Post or more commonly the winner-take-all, the candidate who receives the most votes is elected. There is no requirement of a majority and no element of proportional representation[2]. The First-Past-the-Post electoral system manufactures a majority of seats in Parliament for a party winning less than half the vote. Moreover, the distribution of seats in the House of Commons does not reflect each party's share of the vote. The leading party wins a bigger share of seats than votes, and the second party usually wins much the same share of seats and votes. The third party's share of seats has no relation to its share of the vote. This is the case of the Liberal Democrats who won in 2001 18.3 per cent of the popular vote and 7.9 per cent of the seats in the House of Commons.

Thus, in 2005, Labour won 355 seats with 35.2 per cent of the popular vote, whereas the Liberal Democrats won only 62 seats with 22.1 per cent of the vote. This shows clearly the benefits of the British electoral system to the winner and its disadvantages to the third party[3]. The Liberal Democrats have always questioned the fairness and representation of the British electoral system and called for its reform and replacement. Meanwhile, the party has attempted to counter the weakness of the First-Past-the-Post by targeting winnable seats and winning by- elections.

As argued in chapter one, by-elections represented an opportunity for the Liberal Democrats and their predecessors to break the mould in a two-

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[1] Charles Hauss, *From Comparative Politics: Domestic Responses to Global Challenges* (2009), 6th ed, p.110
[2] It is a system in which each party receives a percentage of seats in a representative assembly that is roughly comparable to its percentage of the popular vote.
[3] Mark Kesselman, *Introduction to Comparative Politics: Political Challenges and Changing Agendas* (2009), 5th ed, p.151

party system[1]. Therefore, the Liberal Democrats' challenge remains to convince voters that the party represents a real electoral force and ultimately to overcome the wasted vote argument explained by Duverger. The main question is how could the Liberal Democrats overcome the disadvantages of the simple plurality system and win more seats in Parliament?

Firstly, the main concern of the Liberal Democrats was to increase their national share of the vote and win Westminster seats. It was clear for Paddy Ashdown[2] that the prospect of forming a coalition government is most likely linked to the Liberal Democrats' capability to hold the balance of power in Parliament. Since the 2001 General Election the Liberal Democrats focused on maximizing their representation in Parliament through electoral tactics of maximizing vote share nationally by establishing electoral credibility. The Liberal Democrats have to convince voters that they can win.

Secondly, the Liberal Democrats as a third party in a two-party system have countered efficiently the simple plurality system. In fact, the system tends to create a disproportion between votes and seats. It is a system of disproportional representation. It is intended to concentrate responsibility for government by giving one party an absolute majority of MPs without an absolute majority of votes[3]. For instance, in 1983 the Alliance secured 25.4 per cent of the popular vote winning 23 seats; whereas in 2001 with 18.3 per cent of the popular vote, the Liberal Democrats secured 52 seats in Parliament. In addition, the Liberal Democrats suffered from tactical swing of voters. However, they could benefit from tactical votes by convincing voters that the Liberal Democrats are the most capable to win. Indeed, the shift in votes occurs principally at the expense of the Liberal Democrats because neither a fall in Conservative strength represent a gain in Labour strength nor does a rise in Labour strength represent a threat to the Conservatives.

Furthermore, local campaigning remains the best way to persuade voters. Indeed, recent studies revealed that local campaigns could increase significantly the share of the vote. Furthermore, another research conducted at

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[1] Andrew Russell, op. cit.,p.203
[2] The first Liberal Democrat leader (1988-99)
[3] Richard Rose, op. cit.,p.255

Lancaster University after the 2001 General Election[1] demonstrated that stronger campaigns by the Liberal Democrats gave better results than weaker campaigns on the one hand. On the other, a strong campaign would increase significantly the share of the vote of the Liberal Democrats in comparison with the Labour and Conservative parties[2].

Of course, this study revealed that local campaigning has been more important for the Liberal Democrats than for the other major parties essentially for winning a marginal seat. Thus, local campaigning has been very important for the party to achieve electoral success. In fact, the party's electoral successes in local government has been translated immediately into the party's representation in the House of Commons in the 1997 General Election[3].Even if some commentators such as King[4] denied the importance of local campaigning in influencing voting behaviour in a general election, there is evidence that suggests the relevance of such view. Indeed, researchers proved that local campaigns are important. For instance, Denver and Hands[5] conducted a study of campaigning in the 1992 General Election and they concluded:

> *"This study of constituency campaigning in the 1992 general election has shown very clearly, we would suggest, that the easy generalisation made in many academic studies- that, in modern conditions, local campaigning is merely a ritual; a small and insignificant side show to the main event- is seriously misleading"[6].*

A second argument is the one made by Curtice and Steed[7] which suggests that local campaigning benefited to the Liberal Democrats because they targeted marginal or winnable seats. They conceded that the Liberal Democrats were more successful in the seats they targeted in 1997 than in other seats. Thus, they concluded that local campaigns have always been crucial for the Liberal Democrats.

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[1] Denver, D. et.al, *The Impact of Constituency Campaigning in the 2001 General Election* in L. Bennie, C.Ralligns (eds.) British Elections and Parties Review, volume 12: The General Election (2002)
[2] Paul Whiteley, op. cit.,p.114
[3] Ibid.,p.115
[4] Anthony King *'Why Labour Won-at-Last' in Anthony King (ed.) New Labour Triumphs : Britain at the Polls* (1998), p.179
[5] Denver, D. et.al, *The Impact of Constituency Campaigning in the 2001 General Election* in L. Bennie, C.Ralligns (eds.) British Elections and Parties Review, volume 12: The General Election (2002)
[6] David Denver and Gordon Hands, *Modern Constituency Electioneering* (1997),p.305
[7] John Curtice and Michael Steed, *'The Results Analyzed'* in David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh (eds), The British General Election of 1997 (1997)

Thirdly, targeting enabled the Liberal Democrats, who have limited resources, to secure more seats even with a lower share of the national vote. Under a simple plurality system, minor parties with geographically concentrated support can overcome the disadvantage of the electoral system; because the Liberal Democrats and their predecessors support is geographically spread, they have adopted a targeting strategy on winnable seats. Again, the Liberal Democrats have to build a strong local campaign in order to retain an important support and convince the electorate that voting for them is not wasted. Moreover, the Liberal Democrats have to concentrate their efforts on a smaller number of winnable seats because they have little financial resources. Therefore, the Liberal Democrats have to work more than the other major parties in order to build an electoral credibility.

The Liberal Democrats started to adopt the strategy of targeting in 1992. They realized that they must be able to overcome the disadvantages of the First-Past-the-Post. Indeed, in the 1983 General Election the Alliance despite securing eight million votes (almost 25.4 per cent of the vote) won only 23 seats (almost 3.5 per cent of the seats). Of course, this led to think about a strategy that would increase their representation in Parliament without necessarily increasing their vote share. In the 1997 General Election they adopted this strategy of targeting only winnable seats without increasing their national vote. Indeed, their share of the vote fell by 1 per cent compared to the 1992 election[1] but they won 46 seats in comparison with 20 seats in 1992.

The explanation is that where the Liberal Democrats were second to the Conservatives in 1992, they had more chance to win capturing former Labour votes. And where Labour was seen as the challenger, the Liberal Democrat vote was likely to collapse[2]. Another explanation is that the resources had been better used. Not only did the Liberal Democrats win the seats they were targeting, but also other seats.

This strategy worked at the 1997 General Election because the Liberal Democrats were targeting and funding key seats. This strategy was decided three years earlier. A programme known as the 'target voters in target seats' (TVITS) was introduced; it helped the party to identify the characteristics of

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[1] It dropped from 17.8 per cent in 1992 to 16.8 per cent in 1997.
[2] Roy Douglas, op. cit., p.307

potential voters in certain target seats. Moreover, a study of voters' reactions permitted a shift in policy emphasis, for instance, from questions like constitutional reform to education and health.[1]

The 1997 General Election constituted, undoubtedly, a turning point for the party. In fact, the Liberal Democrats won 46 seats, realizing victories outside traditional Liberal heartlands particularly in South East England. Furthermore, the party was able to benefit from the high level of anti-Conservative tactical voting with a slightly lower share of the vote (16.8 per cent) than in 1992.However, many seats had been won with a tiny majority which rendered 11 seats vulnerable to a swing of 2.5 per cent to the Conservatives at the next election[2]; so marginalised seats represented a tactical problem to be faced by the Liberal Democrats. In 2001 the Liberal Democrats performed better securing 52 seats in Parliament. In this election, the Liberal Democrats were targeting more seats than ever before; most of them were considered as marginal seats.

The strategy of targeting implies for a minor party like the Liberal Democrats financial funding in target seats, providing guidance and ensuring campaign visits from high personality of the party, the party leader himself. Campaign visits proved to be efficient in 1997 and 2001 regarding the benefits made by the Liberal Democrats when Ashdown and Kennedy respectively made campaign visits. Guidance was also provided to key seats for each region in 2001. Assistance and advice were provided from the campaign director's team in Cowley Street and in each region. Campaign leaflets were also published and delivered locally.

The Liberal Democrats concentrated their efforts on winnable seats. The University of Lancaster Study[3] demonstrated that the Liberal Democrat campaign in target seats was stronger than that in non-target seats. They concentrated their efforts on target seats and were able to compete with their

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[1] Ibid., p.314
[2] Chris Cook, op. cit.,p.239
[3] Denver, D. et.al, *The Impact of Constituency Campaigning in the 2001 General Election* in L. Bennie, C.Ralligns (eds.) British Elections and Parties Review, volume 12: The General Election (2002)

rivals. This strategy adopted in 1997 and 2001 increased significantly the performance of the Liberal Democrats[1].

Now, it is interesting to consider the efficiency of the targeting strategy for the Liberal Democrats. Indeed, as far as the 1997 General Election is concerned, targeting was oriented towards 34 key seats, 30 of which were held by the Conservatives, one by Labour and three by the Liberal Democrats. The targeting strategy adopted by the Liberal Democrats was successful since they won 24 out of 34 seats[2]. They could successfully capture seats from the Conservatives as well as reduce the tendency to lose support to Labour. This strategy of targeting worked out because the Liberal Democrats were able to realize a swing of voters to their advantage[3].

This strategy of targeting worked even better in the 2001 election. In fact, the targeting concerned 58 seats, 29 of which were held by the Liberal Democrats, 20 held by the Conservatives and 9 were held by Labour. The Liberal Democrats won 35 seats out of the 58 target seats securing an average increase in vote of 4 per cent in these seats. This shows clearly that the Liberal Democrats could win support from Conservative and Labour voters in target seats compared to other seats. At this stage, it should be noted that the targeting strategy adopted by the Liberal Democrats was successful in increasing significantly their seats in 1997 and 2001 through financial funding and campaign efforts. In 2005 the party's strategy was the so-called 'decapitation strategy' directed towards the Conservatives who faced very strong Liberal Democrat challengers combined with a campaign against Labour-held seats. The result was the best since eighty years; the Liberal Democrats won 62 seats[4].

Holding these views, a question arises about the future of the targeting strategy used by the Liberal Democrats in the General Elections of 1997 and 2001. Despite the success of targeting, party strategists suggested in the run-up to the 2001 General Election that the party was not only concerned with capturing more seats but also increasing the share of the vote. In other words, the party was seeking national credibility which would be provided by an

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[1] Andrew Russell, op. cit.,p.203
[2] 40 per cent of the share of the vote.
[3] Andrew Russell, Ibid.p.201
[4] Chris Cook, op. cit., p.275

increase in the share of the vote. The main concern of the party is after all to adopt a strategy that would maximise the national share of the vote and attract more voters across the country. Nonetheless, targeting remains important in securing more votes in marginal seats.

In the 2005 General Election the Liberal Democrats proved their ability to capture Labour seats, though they had always been unable to mount a challenge to Labour. They won eleven seats from Labour, no less than 12 per cent of 2001 Labour voters switched to the Liberal Democrats[1]. Moreover, in 2006 New Labour, for the first time, lost a by-election to the Liberal Democrats, this victory was followed by another the following year in Leicester South. The question is, therefore, how did the Liberal Democrats manage in an era of Labour 'rule' to prosper?

The party showed its ability to win safe Labour seats. One explanation is that there has been a 'realignment' of party support in 2005. Probably, the shift of Blair's New Labour to the right conjugated with the Liberal Democrats' commitment to higher taxes which put them to the left of Labour could explain Labour supporters swing to the Liberal Democrats[2].

We can argue with hindsight that the Liberal Democrats were a vehicle of protest for Labour supporters, as they had been a home for disaffected Conservatives. Indeed, there were clear discontents about government's record as well as it decision to join in the invasion of Iraq. The Liberal Democrats uniquely voted against the decision to go to war. Of course, the important swing in the vote benefited the Liberal Democrats in 2005 which explained the important gains (62 seats).For instance, according to the 2005 election study, no less than 55 per cent of 2001 voters declared their disappointment of Britain's involvement in Iraq, with 25 per cent doing so strongly. Over a quarter of 2001 Labour supporters who strongly disapproved of Britain's involvement switched to the Liberal Democrats[3].

Accordingly, the Liberal Democrats were able to capture the support of Labour voters who were dissatisfied with the government's record. The party

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[1] The Liberal Democrat vote rose on average by five points in seats that Labour were defending compared with only two points in those that the Conservatives were trying to hold.
[2] Ibid., p.119
[3] Ibid., p.120

has once more proved its ability to profit from discontent with Labour as well as disaffected Conservative. It remains a party of the centre left fighting much the same territory as Labour and criticizing its performance though remaining relatively ideologically close to Labour. A question arises from this analysis, what would be the party's strategy at the 2010 General Election. And what should the party do in the event of a hung parliament after the next election?[1]

All in all, targeting of resources on winnable constituencies showed how the detrimental effects of the First-Past-the-Post electoral system on a third party could be countered. Indeed, tactical voting had been important to the Liberal Democrats. In all seats which the Liberal Democrats gained from Conservative, the Labour vote decline. The Liberal Democrats have successfully increased their share of the vote along with their seats in the House of Commons. Despite the discriminatory nature of the First-Past-the-Post, the Liberal Democrats did succeed between 1992 and 2001 in increasing their representation in Parliament through a strategy of targeting and funding winnable seats. Having improved their status in the House of Commons, the Liberal Democrats were by that time aware of their position in the British political scene and needed a better positionment , hence the abandonment of equidistance which marked the beginning of cooperation with New Labour.

2.3. The Party's Relations with New Labour and the Conservatives

At the end of the twentieth century, the Liberal Democrats presented themselves as an anti-Conservative party fighting the Conservatives for their target seats while being less hostile to New Labour[2]. In fact, New Labour had much in common with the Liberal Democrats. They were both devoted to free enterprise, fiscal responsibility and welfare state with a wide range of public services. Their main differences were the Liberal Democrats' attachment to

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[1] John Curtice, ''*New Labour, New Protest ? How the Liberal Democrats Profited from Blair's Mistakes*'' in The Political Quarterly, Vol 78, No 1, January-March 2007, p.119
[2] Andrew Russell, op. cit.,p.179

proportional representation in elections to the House of Commons and adoption of the single European currency[1].

Blair's election as Labour leader in 1994 transformed the political scene as some politicians predicted that New Labour would destory the Liberal Democrats. However, in the run-up to the 1997 election the party developed and secured more seats than ever before in Parliament. Moreover, the party positioned itself to the left of New Labour as its policies were directed towards investing in public services and increasing income tax. It was probably the Liberal Democrats' commitment to public spending that posed the problem of differentiating them in the party system. Considered as a centre party - midway between Labour and the Conservatives - the Liberal Democrats moved significantly toward Labour, this significant shift occurred after the 1992 General Election when the Liberal Democrats fought the election as a party of the centre. However, Labour's shift towards the centre and the abandonment of Clause IV, which had committed the party to a policy of general nationalisation, left the Liberal Democrats faced with the choice of abandoning equidistance, and subsequently moving to the left or maintaining equidistance[2].Finally, they abandoned the position of 'equidistance'[3] in 1995 and started cooperating under the leadership of Paddy Ashdown with New Labour[4].Indeed, both the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats abandoned 'equidistance' – the idea that they were as distinct from each other as each from the Conservatives. Traditionally, both parties had adopted this policy of equidistance. The 'Lib-Lab Pact' of 1977-78 represented an exception since it was not popular in both parties[5].

As early as 1992, Ashdown in a speech at Chard[6] had signaled the end of the Liberal Democrat policy of equidistance between the two main parties, and indicated that he would be prepared to work with Labour in order to remove the Conservatives' seemingly endless hegemony in British politics. This position

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[1] Aaron Reitan, *The Thatcher Revolution : Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair, and the Transformation of Modern Britain, 1979-2001* (2003),p.130
[2] Andrew Russell, op. cit.,p.185
[3] The Liberal Democrats were no further in policy terms from the Conservatives than they were from Labour.
[4] Gillian Peele, op. cit.,p.227
[5] Roy Douglas, op. cit.,p304
[6] The speech was given to an audience of fifty in a small town in Ashdown's constituency.

recalled Grimond's call for a realignment of the left in the 1950s, the formation of the Lib-Lab Pact in the 1970s, and the alliance with the SDP in the 1980s.

It is worth noting that equidistance had been important to the Liberals who really knew that some of their voters preferred Labour to Conservatives while others preferred Conservatives to Labour. Consequently, any shift in their position toward any of them was likely to drive a lot of people into the opposing party. It was already evident from Ashdown's Chard speech that the Liberal Democrats were keen to abandon equidistance. Ashdown talked of the need to: *'work with others to assemble the ideas around which a non-socialist alternative to the Conservatives can be constructed'*[1].

It can be argued that the Liberal Democrats strategy might be to replace the Conservatives. Of course, this new stand could be explained in terms of the unpopularity of the Conservatives and the popularity of Labour. The Liberal Democrats saw an opportunity of winning Conservative seats. Subsequently, meetings between Liberal Democrats and Labour politicians started, Robert Maclennan, for the Liberal Democrats, and Robin Cook, for Labour, negotiated a crucial agreement which included a programme of constitutional reform, particularly in relation to devolution.

When Tony Blair became leader of the Labour Party in 1994, he was quick to send conciliatory messages to the Liberal Democrats. Ashdown's diaries published in 2000 and 2001 revealed the extent of discussions between him and Blair about a formal coalition between their parties. In fact, before Blair became Labour leader, Ashdown confided in his diary that his appointment would be a blessing for the Liberal Democrats, but he continued *'he'll steal our clothes and appeal to our voters'*. Positively, Labour would become *'less frightening to potential Lib Dem voters who flood to the Tories for fear of Labour in the last few days before every election'*[2]. Blair even told Ashdown that he believed both parties *'should change the culture of politics so we can work together'*[3]. Both leaders agreed that they should seek to mend the schism that split apart the progressive forces in British politics in the early years

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[1] Andrew Russell, op. cit.,p.40
[2] Paddy Ashdown, *The Ashdown Diaries : Volume One 1988-1997* (2000), p.262
[3] Ibid., p.276

of the twentieth century, giving the Tories more chance to govern than they deserved.

Paddy Ashdown referred to cooperation with Labour as 'the Project'. The Project progressed significantly in the run-up to the 1997 election with Blair's decision to have Liberal Democrats in his cabinet regardless of the size of his victory. He even went further, he told Ashdown *'I need you to know that I see this as a means of transition to an end position where you come into the show. Who knows what the ultimate destination for all this might be? It could be merger some way down the track. Or may be not'*[1].

However, Labour's landslide in 1997 prevented such arrangement. Instead, the Liberal Democrats adopted a position of 'constructive opposition' towards the Labour government which was not always popular with the Liberal Democrat rank. Some even argued that probably Blair's long-term objective was to absorb the Liberal Democrats into a broad party of the moderate left[2]. It was clear from Blair's words that his ambition was really to boost further cooperation with the Liberal Democrats. His long term objective might be a possible merger between both parties while Ashdown was more cautious and keen to reform the electoral system which would represent fairly the voters' wishes. Nevertheless, with hindsight one can only argue that the ambitious Project as conceived by Blair and Ashdown could not progress.

The 'Project' was destined to realign British politics. It was clear for Blair and Ashdown that *'the divorce of Liberal and Labour had served only as handmaiden to a Conservative century'*[3].Ultimately, cooperation between both parties included sitting on a cabinet committee[4] with Labour ministers. *The Daily Telegraph*, commenting on the Joint Cabinet Committee, declared *'It was a historic step towards a Lib-lab Pact'*[5], and the *'first formal step towards a potential alliance aimed at keeping the Tories out of power for a generation'*[6].

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[1] Paddy Ashdown, Ibid., p.560
[2] Gillian Peele, op. cit.,p.230
[3] Neal Lawson and Neil Sherlock, *The Progressive Century : The Future of the Centre-left in Britain* (2001), p.2
[4] The five senior Liberal Democrats on the Committee were Paddy Ashdown, Alan Beith, Menzies Campbell, Lord Holme and Robert Maclennan.
[5] *Daily Telegraph*, 22 July 1997.
[6] *Daily Telegraph*, 23 July 1997.

Many Liberal Democrats viewed this process with suspicion. They wanted to keep the distinctive identity of the party. At a party conference in March 1998, party activists opposed any kind of coalition with Labour.

In July 1997, five Liberal Democrats were appointed to the cabinet committee established to examine constitutional reform, including the introduction of proportional representation for elections, a key Liberal objective since the 1920s. Lord Jenkins of Hillhead and leader of the Liberal Democrat peers was appointed to head the commission set up in December 1997 to examine this issue and in October 1998 recommended 'AV plus' – with its retention of constituencies and a top-up party list to replace SMSP in Westminster though no further progress was made. The report was welcomed by Ashdown as 'a historic step forward'[1] even if it was not the actual Liberal Democrats' preferred option[2]. It is worth noting that Labour's 1997 manifesto included a commitment to review and hold a referendum on the electoral system. Yet Blair told Ashdown during their discussions that he was not persuaded by the need for reform[3]. Because the report of the Jenkins Commission did not really suit both parties, the Project could not progress any longer. It would have been better for the Liberal Democrats to hold a national debate on the conclusions of the Jenkins Commission on electoral reform. This would have definitely open new perspectives for the Liberal Democrats.

Nonetheless, significant measures were taken in other areas, namely the devolution of power to Scotland and Wales and the reform of the House of Lords. In fact, in May 1997 a Referendum Bill for Scottish and Welsh devolution was published. The Referenda took place in September 1997. Scotland voted for the establishment of a Parliament by a majority; however, Wales also voted for an Assembly by a narrowest majority[4]. Cooperation included also voting tactically against the Conservatives in 1997 and 2001.Furthermore, a joint statement was issued on 11 November 1998 between the leaders of both parties. In this statement, they announced their commitment to extend their cooperation and to work on matters other than constitutional ones. On 16 November 1998 the party's Federal executive Committee voted 14 to four in

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[1] *Guardian*, 30 October 1998.
[2] Chris Cook, op. cit., p.243
[3] Andrew Russell, op. cit.,p.42
[4] Roy Douglas, op. cit. p.310

favour of extending the Joint Labour-Liberal Democrats Cabinet Committee, still, Ashdown faced criticism within the party[1].

Many observers from the Liberal Democrats interpreted the joint statement as the end of cooperation between the two parties and marked ultimately the demise of the Project. After the resignation of Paddy Ashdown in January 1999, the new leader Charles Kennedy continued to collaborate with Labour informally at the electoral level. Voters from both parties were to vote tactically against the Conservatives in 2001. However, the Joint Cabinet Committee was disbanded in September 2001 proving its inability to make a change on contemporary British politics[2].

According to Ashdown, he did choose the best timing to retire as a leader. In fact, he led the Liberal Democrats through a series of elections in 1999. The party increased its representation in the European Parliament from two to ten MEPs; the elections to the new Scottish Parliament were successful resulting in a Labour- Liberal Democrat coalition government[3]. In Wales a coalition with Labour was also established in 2000. Ashdown confided in his diaries that the next leader would have enough time to prepare the next General Election. However, with the benefit of hindsight, it can be said that Ashdown's resignation was due to the failure of the Project. One Liberal Democrat considered that Ashdown really trusted Blair; but that he was duped by Blair. Over all, Blair failed to reform the House of Lords and the voting system.

What followed was that the newly elected leader, Charles Kennedy[4] was less inclined to work with Labour, focusing instead on replacing the Conservatives as the principal party of opposition. According to the Ashdown Diaries, all five of the leadership contenders opposed the Project, and Simon Hughes, who was Kennedy's nearest challenger, tried even to stop the joint statement. Kennedy himself had been skeptical about the abandonment of equidistance. He did declare that the Liberal Democrats are an independent political party who could secure votes and have power. He also refused the use of words like coalition.

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[1] Chris Cook, op. cit., p.244
[2] Andrew Russell, op. cit.,p.44
[3] They won 17 seats.
[4] He was elected in July-August 1999.

However, the work of the Joint Cabinet Committee has been extended into European defence and security policy, as well as United Nations reform. For instance, Nick Harvey, the Liberal Democrat Spokesman on Health did contribute to the NHS plan launched in summer 2000 by Labour government. But the committee disbanded in 11 September 2001. Predictably, Blair has failed to deliver his promises.

Since the 2001 General Election the close cooperation between the Liberal Democrats and Labour has stopped. In 2001 the party leader, Charles Kennedy signaled the end of the 'Project' and a shift back towards equidistance[1].Charles Kennedy declared in September 2003 that 'the distancing is complete'[2]. The distance became even wider between both parties when the British Government decided to support the Bush administration which declared war on terrorism after the 11th September 2001 attacks on the United States[3]. For Kennedy, this marked the beginning of effective opposition. In short, the 'Project' was an approach that promised a realignment of the centre left. If that had been achieved, the 'Project' would have seen Liberal Democrats in government, for the first time since the beginning of the twentieth century.

On the other hand, Liberal Democrats' relations with the Conservatives had not been as important as those with Labour. Indeed, in May 1995 Paddy Ashdown declared that his party would not support a minority Conservative after the next election, thus confirming the abandonment of 'equidistance'. Ashdown wanted clearly the defeat of the Major government, declaring that *'every vote for the Liberal Democrat is a vote to remove this Conservative government and their policies that they stand for*[4]. However, some commentators such as David Marquand, who was in 1992 a Liberal Democrat and then rejoined Labour, criticised the electoral strategy of the Liberal Democrats who advocated left-of-centre policies while being supported by centre and right-of-centre voters. He claimed that the party should have *'come clean to voters; it was a left-of-centre party and should not have masqueraded as an equidistant centre party*[5]. Nonetheless, the party elite viewed in the

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[1] Andrew Russell, op. cit., p.196
[2] *The Times*, 6 September 2003
[3] Roy Douglas, op. cit. p.315
[4] Bill Jones, <u>Half a century of British Politics</u> (1997),p.55
[5] Gillian Peele, op. cit., p.102

abandonment of equidistance Labour's move to the right which left more space for the Liberal Democrats on the left of centre[1].

In a word, it can be noticed that the Liberal Democrats have decided by the past to reject equidistance and present themselves as an anti-Conservative party. With hindsight, this strategy of abandoning equidistance and increasing ties with Labour did serve the interests of the Liberal Democrats who succeeded in the 1997 General Election to double their representation in the House of Commons[2]. This is clearly reflected in Kennedy's words in an interview with the *Guardian*, *'This is a new era, clearly the Project served the party well, but it has run its course and we will move on…I don't see the future in co-operation with Labour if all we achieve is the perception that we are bit part players in someone else's show*[3].They even increased their seats in 2001 to 52. However, it presented a paradox since the Liberal Democrats appealed to dissatisfied Conservatives. Yet, in the light of the new developments in British politics, one can only suggest that cooperation with Labour ended once the Liberal Democrats had decided to ally themselves with the Conservatives and form a coalition government after the 2010 General Election. In fact, some analysts had foreseen, rightly, a Liberal Democrat- Conservative Government.

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[1] Andrew Russell, op. cit., p.183
[2] They won 46 seats.
[3] *Guardian*, 21 January 2002.

Chapter Three

The Liberal Democrats' Struggle for Identity

and Distinctiveness

The Liberal Democrats tended to suffer from an indistinct image; voters were often unclear what the party stands for. Subsequently, the Liberal Democrats have always been anxious about establishing a clear Liberal Democrat position, different from those of the other main parties. They have been seeking to create a distinctive policy position proper to the party which would allow them to win seats.

From 1992 onwards the Liberal Democrats engaged in a strategy of differentiation based on policy preferences. The Liberal Democrats have always advocated distinct policies such as environment, Europe and electoral reform. Whereas New Labour's and the Conservatives' approach to public spending and taxation became similar after 1997, the Liberal Democrats expressed their commitment to additional public spending on health and education. The Liberal Democrats did succeed through their strategy of promoting distinctiveness and developing a new policy agenda to increase their share of the vote along with their representation in Westminster in the different general elections taking place in the twenty-first century. They remained true to their ideological beliefs despite few gains and being still hampered by the British electoral system.

In the aftermath of the 2005 General Election, the Liberal Democrats had undertaken a policy review which was meant to develop and clarify the philosophy of the party. Even if the results of the election (62 seats) were considered as a success for many, some Liberal Democrats believed that the party should have done better. Hence, the necessity to undertake a policy review whose stated objective was to *'prepare the party for government after the next election'* probably in a coalition in the wake of a hung parliament[1].

Obviously, this policy review was essential for the Liberal Democrats in the years leading up to the 2010 General Election; as a result their strategy was proved right. The election returned, indeed, a hung parliament with no party having an absolute majority. The Liberal Democrats won fifty-seven seats despite increasing their share of the vote to 23 per cent, confirming their position as the third largest party in the House of Commons, behind the Conservative Party with 307 seats and the Labour Party with 258.

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[1] *Liberal Democrats, Meeting the Challenge*, Consultation Paper No.77, London, Liberal Democrats, August 2005, p.3.

As a consequence, the party formed a coalition government with the Conservatives, with Nick Clegg as Deputy Prime Minister and other Liberal Democrats in the Cabinet. Following negotiations, a Coalition Agreement was issued which outlined the full programme of government. Therefore, in forming a coalition government with the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats have sought to introduce a very ambitious agenda for political and constitutional reform. The real challenge would be the implementation of these reforms and definitely the future of this unprecedented coalition.

3.1. The Party's Policy and Strategy

One of the difficult tasks facing the Liberal Democrats in a two party system is, undoubtedly, to keep a distinctive identity. In fact, some commentators such as Crewe and King[1] argued that the Liberal Democrats, like their predecessors suffered from a failure to communicate a distinctive identity. The *Guardian* observed at the time of Steel's announced retirement in 1994:

> *At the moment most voters only know three things about Lib-Dem policy, if they know anything; they know that the Lib-Dems stand for proportional representation, for green policies and for spending more on education. Self-evidently that is not enough. Most people would be stretched to say what the Lib-Dem education policy contains beyond more money up front. And even an expert would have difficulty outlining the party's distinctive economic stance[2].*

Considered as a third force in British politics, the Liberal Democrats have struggled to impose their identity on the electorate. The Liberal Democrat's strategy was during the campaigns of 1992, 1997 and 2001 a strategy of differentiation[3].

As the Liberal Democrats are unable to mobilise support on the basis of social classes, they must appeal to voters on the basis of policy preferences. Not only do the Liberal Democrats need popular policies but they also need distinctive policies from those of their main competitors. Distinctiveness is, therefore, the key to success. But the main problem of the Liberal Democrats remains to avoid to be squeezed from both left and right. This problem can be

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[1] They wrote *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (1995)
[2] *Guardian*, 25 June 1994.
[3] Andrew Russell, op. cit., p.115.

countered by appealing to voters on the basis of new policies such as environmental and constitutional issues[1].

However, the Liberal Democrats' search for distinctiveness is not new since they were in 1988 already willing to create a distinct image for their party. A paper entitled *Our Different Vision* represented the basis for the 1992 manifesto *Changing Britain for Good*. Indeed, the latter focused on few but distinct issues known as the five 'Es'- *Enterprise Economy, Education, Environment, Europe and Electoral Reform*[2]. These issues were seen somehow as the ownership of the Liberal Democrats.

Moreover, Ashdown[3]did establish a series of key policy positions including a more market-oriented economic policy than the Liberal/SDP Alliance had possessed, a proposal to invest in public services including a penny on income tax for education, a strong environmental platform and a set of pledges on constitutional reform, several of which were implemented by Labour after 1997[4]. Thus, the party could, thanks to an ambitious programme, win in 1992 twenty seats securing 17.8 per cent of the vote.

Indeed, the Liberal Democrats have stressed, in recent years, their commitment to constitutional reform, to high-quality public services, to internationalism and to environmentalism. They have also stressed their commitment to additional public spending on welfare, the National Health Service and education, even though that commitment might entail a rise in direct taxation. Their emphasis on civil liberties, constitutionalism and public spending put the Liberal Democrats in some ways to the left of New Labour[5].

In the run up to the 2001 General Election campaign voters agreed that the key issues would be education, health, crime and policing, and social justice. They added issues directly linked to the Liberal Democrats such as freedom, European integration, the environment and constitutional reform. These can be considered part of the party's political identity. More strikingly, the party focused in 2001 on the issue of honesty. This issue has been applied

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[1]Ibid., p.116
[2] Ibid., p.190
[3]He was then the chairman of the party's Federal Policy Committee.
[4]Duncan Brack, ''*Liberal Democrat Leadership : The Cases of Ashdown and Kennedy*'', in The Political Quarterly, Vol.78, No.1, January-March 2007, p.82
[5]Gillian Peele, op. cit.,p.231

in the field of taxation. In fact, Ashdown did express the necessity to raise some taxes as early as 1990. Thus, by 2001 the Liberal Democrats policy of hypothecated taxation[1] became a defining characteristic of the party as well as a mark of differentiation from the two main parties. The Liberal Democrats claimed that they were honest vis-à-vis the electorate in contrast to the Conservatives and Labour's pledges of reduced taxation[2].

Accordingly, the Liberal Democrats' strategy for 2001 was above all to promote distinctiveness. They were seeking to be perceived as an independent party distinct from the Labour Party with which they developed close political ties under the leadership of Paddy Ashdown. Indeed, they did succeed to gain six more seats and increase their share of the vote by avoiding to be squeezed between the Conservatives and Labour[3].

According to the 1997 British Election Survey most Liberal Democrat voters generally agreed with the party position on most issues[4]. Health and education were particularly important as well as popular with the electorate. Although this survey revealed that Liberal Democrat voters agreed with the party on most issues, the Liberal Democrats won in 1997 only 24 per cent of the votes amongst voters agreeing with their policy[5]. The results of this survey can be examined in more detail below.

Table 3.1   Vote of individuals agreeing with Liberal Democrat position on selected issues, 1997

	Con vote (%)	Labour vote (%)	LD vote (%)	Others (%)	N No.
EU integration (in favour)	18	59	20	4	1007
Education (for hypothecated taxation)	23	51	21	5	1694
NHS spending (increase)	27	50	18	3	2640
Prohibitive car tax (agree)	23	50	22	4	528
PR for British elections (agree)	23	49	23	5	1410
Prioritise employment over inflation	25	52	18	5	1994
Homosexual rights (not gone far enough)	16	56	24	4	515
Total (BES)	29	49	17	5	

Source: 1997 *British Election Study* Survey cross-section.

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[1]It is the dedication of the revenue from a specific tax for a particular expenditure purpose.
[2] Andrew Russell, op. cit., p.191.
[3] They won 52 seats securing 18.3 per cent of the vote.
[4]These issues included EU integration, education, health, car tax, Proportional Representation and unemployment.
[5] Andrew Russell, op. cit., p.124

Britain and Europe

The Liberal Democrats are seen as a pro-European party. They are advocator of the single currency. Liberal Democrat voters like most of the British electorate were split on the issue. In 1997 a large majority of pro-Europeans voted Labour, whereas the Liberal Democrats were only two points ahead of the Conservatives[1] (Table 3.1).

Public Services

In 1997 the Liberal Democrats had a distinctive policy of hypothecated taxation in order to fund education and the National Health Service. For example, the Liberal Democrats manifesto of 1997 promised an investment of £ 2 billion per year in education, funded by an extra 1 penny in the pound on the basic rate of income tax. Attitudes of Liberal Democrat voters were analysed concerning increased spending on the NHS and support for hypothecated tax plans of raising income tax to fund education. Half of those who were for an increase in income tax to pay for education voted Labour and only 21 per cent voted Liberal Democrats. Similarly, those who favoured increased spending on the NHS voted Labour or Conservative rather than Liberal Democrats (Table 3.1). Although Liberal Democrat voters were in favour of these policies, the Liberal Democrats did not perform well as expected[2]. This was due probably to the fact that the Liberal Democrats shared with the Labour Party much of the social agenda.

The Environment

The Liberal Democrats are a party committed to environmental issues. The 1997 manifesto stated clearly a commitment to tax pollution (a 'carbon tax'). However, there were only few Liberal Democrat voters who supported car taxation to protect the environment. In addition, half of voters who favoured taxes on car voted Labour and only 22 per cent voted Liberal Democrats (Table 3.1). This shows clearly that the environmental issues are not important for the electorate[3].

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[1] Ibid., p.125
[2] Ibid., p.126
[3] Ibid., p.127

Constitutional Issues

The party has always advocated constitutional reform. In fact, institutional reform was a characteristic of Liberalism. The Liberal Democrats are committed to the reform of the electoral system. The 1997 manifesto promised to introduce Proportional Representation for all elections. It also promised to modernise the House of Commons and to transform the House of Lords. The 2001 manifesto promised to reform the voting system and to devolve more power to nations, regions and local government. Although nearly 70 per cent of Liberal Democrat voters agreed that Proportional Representation should be introduced for all elections, only 23 per cent voted Liberal Democrats; whereas, 49 per cent voted Labour (Table 3.1).

The Economy

In 1997 the Liberal Democrats promised to reduce inflation by joining a single currency, and to tackle unemployment through a system of working benefits. However, only 18 per cent of Liberal Democrat voters who prioritised employment over inflation voted Liberal Democrats; whereas 52 per cent voted Labour and 25 per cent Conservatives[1] (Table 3.1).

Social Liberalism

Liberal Democrats were split on the issue of the extension of homosexual rights since less than one-third believed that rights for homosexuals had not gone far enough. Thus, only 24 per cent of those who favoured this policy voted for the Liberal Democrats while 56 per cent voted Labour[2] (Table 3.1).

All in all, these results, taken from the 1997 British Election Survey, do suggest that while Liberal Democrat voters did agree with the party on most key issues, the party did fail to mobilise electoral support. It can, thus, be argued that even if the Liberal Democrats' policies were popular, voters were less inclined to vote for them. The failure may be due to the electoral system

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[1] Ibid., p.127
[2] Ibid., p.128

since the latter tend to favour a two party system in which voters are forced to choose between the two potential victors. The Challenge facing the Liberal Democrats remains to convince their supporters that they can win and to capitalise on popular policies.

Now, it is interesting to investigate the position of electors on many issues. The British Election Study in 1997 allowed the analysis of respondents' perception of the position of the three main political parties. Crucially, the analysis permitted to classify respondents according to the party with which their views were closest on each issue. The issues concerned: taxation and spending, EU integration, inflation and unemployment, the redistribution of wealth and nationalisation[1].

Table3.2 Proximity to party's positions on five key issues (%)

Respondent's own view is . . .	Tax vs. Spend	EU integration	Inflation vs. unemployment	Redistribution	Nationalisation
nearest to perceived view of Conservatives	12	22	12	18	14
nearest to view of Labour party	25	16	23	24	17
nearest to view of Liberal Democrats	19	14	14	13	20
nearest to both Conservative and Labour parties	2	3	2	1	2
nearest to both Conservatives and LibDems	3	3	5	3	2
nearest to both Labour and Liberal Democrats	21	17	22	24	26
same distance from all Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats	12	17	16	11	11
Insufficient information	6	9	7	7	9
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: 1997 *British Election Study* survey cross-section.

The analysis has revealed, without ambiguity that a large number of voters could not distinguish between the three parties (Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats) and failed to place themselves closest to any party on the issues cited above. For instance, on the issue of taxation and spending 19 per cent of voters considered themselves nearest to the Liberal Democrats compared to the Conservatives (12 per cent) and Labour (25 per cent) (Table 3.2).

Furthermore, 21 per cent considered themselves nearest to both Labour and Liberal Democrats and 12 per cent were equally close to all three parties. The same results were scored concerning the other issues. On each issue the Liberal Democrats scored no more than 20 per cent or no less than 13 per cent. In addition, on every issue almost the same proportion of voters were found

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[1] Ibid., p.135

between Liberal Democrats and Labour, and between 6 per cent and 9 per cent were equally close to all three parties (Table 3.2). Again, this analysis suggests that voters could not distinguish between the parties' position on the major issues. It also suggests that a great number of electors were nearest to two parties or more than were closest to the Liberal Democrats. Accordingly, the Liberal Democrats have had to adopt distinctive policies that would differentiate them from the other main parties particularly from Labour.

The previous analysis has demonstrated that only approximately 15 per cent of voters placed themselves closest to the Liberal Democrats. Nevertheless, another analysis taken from the 1997 British Election Study revealed that even when voters agreed with the Liberal Democrats' policy position on some issues, only a minority actually voted for the Liberal Democrats.

Table3.3 **Tax vs. spending: proximity and vote**

	Cons (%)	Labour (%)	LibDem (%)	Other/ none	Total (n)
Own view nearest to perceived view of Conservatives	68	22	8	3	12 (331)
Own view nearest to view of Labour party	17	65	13	5	25 (703)
Own view nearest to view of Liberal Democrats	25	41	28	6	19 (518)
Own view nearest to both Conservative and Labour parties	38	42	13	7	2 (55)
Own view nearest to both Conservatives and LibDems	58	23	15	4	3 (78)
Own view nearest to both Labour and Liberal Democrats	16	55	23	6	21 (593)
Own view same distance from all Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats	31	49	14	6	12 (328)
Insufficient information	32	54	10	4	6 (174)
Total % (n)	29 (791)	49 (1364)	17 (482)	5 (143)	100 (2780)

Source: 1997 *British Election Study* cross-section.

For example, on the issue of taxation and spending, the previous analysis demonstrated that 19 per cent of voters were closest to the Liberal Democrats (Table 3.2). This analysis has shown that only 28 per cent of these voted for the Liberal Democrats. On the contrary, when 25 per cent of respondents placed themselves nearest Labour (Table 3.2), 65 per cent voted Labour (Table 3.3). Moreover, when voters were equally close to the Liberal

Democrats and the other two parties, they voted for Labour or the Conservatives rather than the Liberal Democrats[1]. In short, a minority of voters did identify themselves with the Liberal Democrats on key policy issues. Nonetheless, most of those voters did not vote for the Liberal Democrats. Therefore, the Liberal Democrats did fail to convert support into real vote.

Another interesting question is the one related to party motivation and policy-making. According to Rose and McAllister[2],

> '*a theory of unprincipled electoral competition implies that parties will alter policies and personalities in a continuing effort to catch the votes of an electorate open to the most ephemeral and transitory campaign influences*[3].

Indeed, sometimes parties are inclined to react to the movement of other political parties. The Liberal Democrats' decision to drop equidistance was explained rather in terms of Labour's move to the right which opened more space for the Liberal Democrats[4]. Presumably, any shift of the Liberal Democrats from their ideological core of liberalism would harm the party considerably. Thus, the Liberal Democrats see major benefits of retaining their principles in the long term despite few gains in the short term.

The Liberal Democrats' continual quest for a clear identity and distinctiveness made it essential for them to retain their beliefs that defined politics in general whilst developing a distinctive policy position. Moreover, holding distinctive positions, the Liberal Democrats tend to refute a simple left-right agenda. Indeed, a new policy agenda would include necessarily issues such as the environment and internationalism to which the Liberal Democrats are attentive. In addition, the Liberal Democrats' strategy may be directed towards more radical issues that distinguish them from the Conservative and Labour Parties.

It is definitely not surprising that the Liberal Democrats decided to undertake a policy review from the summer of 2005 to the early autumn of 2006. Despite a successful performance at the 2005 General Election in which

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[1] Ibid., p.137
[2] R.Rose and McAllister,I *Voters Begin to Choose : From Closed-Class to Open Elections in Britain* (1986)
[3] Andrew Russell, op. cit., p.116
[4] Andrew Russell, Ibid., p.183

the Liberal Democrats won sixty-two seats, they were convinced that the party should have done better given the unpopularity of both Blair's government and the Conservatives[1].

On the face of it, the need for a review of party policy and strategy was already apparent even before the General Election given recent developments in British domestic and foreign affairs since 2001. These developments concerned particularly the policy of tax and spend. In fact, in 2002 Gordon Brown's[2] decision to increase public expenditure in education and health pushed the Liberal Democrats to reflect on their own proposals concerning tax and spend. In addition, the Liberal Democrats have always been committed to environmental issues as stipulated in the preamble to the party's Constitution *'Each generation is responsible for the fate of our planet and, by safeguarding the balance of nature and the environment...'*[3]. Thus, they were the most concerned about the effects of global warming on the planet. Another significant event for the Liberal Democrats, who are committed to devolution and localism, was the rejection in the North East of England via a referendum in November 2004 of an elected regional assembly[4].In foreign policy, there was concern about Britain's involvement in the Iraq war and also concerns about migration especially with the EU enlargement. All these developments rendered a review of party policy more than necessary. More importantly, David Cameron's[5] moderate Conservatism represented a real threat to the Liberal Democrats who had recently made important advances electorally.

The main objective of the policy review, entitled *Meeting the Challenge*, was to improve the party's philosophy contained in the 2002 policy paper *It's About Freedom* as well as modifying policies advocated during the 2005 General Election. *Meeting the Challenge* was more ambitiously designed to

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[1] The Conservatives and Labour polled 33 and 36 per cent of the popular vote respectively.
[2] James Gordon Brown was the Prime Minister of the UK and leader of the Labour Party from 2007 until 2010. He served as Chancelor of the Exchequer in the Labour Government from 1997 to 2007.
[3] *The Liberal Democrat Constitution*.
[4] Peter Dorey and Andrew Denham, ''*Meeting the Challenge ? The Liberal Democrats' Policy Review of 2005-2006*'' in <u>The Political Quarterly</u>, Vol.78, No.1, January-March 2007, pp.68-69
[5] He was elected leader of the Conservative Party in December 2005.

'*prepare the party for government after the next election*'[1] and more probably as partners in a coalition in the wake of a hung parliament.

After the General Election of 2005, a memorandum was presented by Kennedy's political adviser, Tim Razzall in which he outlined the party's campaign strengths and weaknesses. Firstly, a consultative paper, approved by the party's Federal Policy Committee, was published in August 2005. It marked the opening of debates over future party policy and strategy. It was essential to provide the party with a 'narrative' rooted in liberal values. Therefore, party members were invited to respond to the consultation paper by 12 December. The latter comprised three parts, namely: the main economic, environmental, international and social trends impacting upon Britain during the next two decades ; the challenges facing the Liberal Democrats ; and party principles and policies.

The first part concerned the need to establish a balance between civil liberties and national security in response to 'authoritarian' measures implemented by the Blair government to respond to terrorism and crime. The second part, dedicated to the challenge facing the Liberal Democrats, stated that the party must provide the electorate with a narrative which contained policies clearly defined. The main challenge was to improve the party's electoral performance and the possibilities of a 'hung' parliament in 2010. It was clear that the policy review would constitute the basis of the Liberal Democrats' programme in the run-up to the general election[2].

The last part outlined the party's principles and policies. It focused on freedom, fairness, localism, internationalism, sustainability and prosperity. Thus, the consultation paper was discussed during the party's annual conference. Strikingly, the section on 'Principles and Policies' was subject to debate amongst delegates. Regarding the principle of 'freedom', some delegates pointed out that the Liberal Democrats seemed sometimes unclear in their defence of individual freedom like when they were supporting the ban on smoking in public places. Some other delegates were more concerned with the issue of taxation. For instance, economic Liberals were for indirect taxation and

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[1] *Liberal Democrats, Meeting the Challenge*, Consultation Paper No.77, London, Liberal Democrats, August 2005, p.3
[2] Peter Dorey and Andrew Denham, op. cit .,p.71

taxes on consumption, while social Liberals continued to view direct taxes on high earners as both economically sustainable and morally justifiable in order to facilitate equality. Thus, some party members saw liberty and equality as linked whereas others denied this link[1].With regard to the policy challenges facing Britain, the main issue which kept party members attention was inequality and social exclusion. This issue prompted a vivid debate between social Liberals and economic Liberals about redistributive taxation and fairness.

Regarding the political challenges facing the Liberal Democrats, many delegates alluded to the threat posed by the Conservative Party new positioning on the centre ground of British politics. Others expressed their concern about the party being seen as pro-European. Finally, the review resulted in the publication of a policy document entitled *Trust in People: Make Britain Free Fair and Green[2]*, in July 2006. This document, which incorporated the proposals of party members, reiterated the main challenges facing Britain. However, *Trust in People* lacked any specific policy pledges that would have opened a long debate at the conference. Nevertheless, one crucial policy proposal retained the attention at the conference; it concerned the structure of the tax system. Indeed, the policy document proposed reductions in direct taxation[3] and increases in environmental taxes. The abolition of the 50 per cent rate on income tax appealed to the party's economic liberals while rising to £ 50,000 the threshold at which employees began paying 40 per cent tax, abolishing the 10 per cent tax rate and cutting the 22 per cent basis rate to 20 per cent appealed to the social democrats. In addition, increases in environmental taxes particularly aircraft fuel emissions appealed to Liberal Democrat environmentalists.

Over all, we can say that the Liberal Democrats' policy review was preparing the next General Election. It was an exercise which prepared the party to fight a decisive election with a longer-term objective to prepare the party for a coalition government in the wake of a 'hung' parliament.

Subsequently, the 2010 manifesto, which was launched on April 14th, offered distinctive policies for the electorate. Indeed, the Liberal Democrats did

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[1] Ibid., p.72
[2] It was endorsed at the Liberal Democrats' annual conference in September 2006.
[3] The abandonment of the 50 per cent income tax rate for those earning above £ 100,000.

advocate different policies on the banks, on the environment and on the war in Iraq. All the party's programme revolved around the issue of fairness. The Liberal Democrats' goal was to restore fairness, which is an essential British value, into national life. The manifesto proposed four steps to a fairer Britain: fair taxes by freeing 3.6million low earners and pensioners from income tax; a fair chance for every child by investing £ 2.5 billion in schools; a fair future guaranteed by the creation of jobs and making Britain greener; and fair ideal by cleaning up politics including fair votes and an elected House of Lords[1].

Of course, all these pledges made the Liberal Democrats distinct from the two main parties. For instance, the manifesto proposed the most radical tax reform which should help redistribute wealth and power to alleviate the worst excesses of inequality. The reform concerned cutting taxes for millions paid for by closing loopholes at the top and increasing taxes on polluting aviation. Crucially, the manifesto pledged that those on incomes below £10,000 would pay no tax. The party pledged to cut spending more slowly than either the Conservatives or Labour. As noted earlier, this reform had been already included in the party's policy document *Trust in People* published in 2006 following the policy review. With such an ambitions programme, the Liberal Democrats led by Nick Clegg fought the most decisive election of the twenty-first century.

3.2. The Liberal Democrats and the 2010 British Election

The Liberal Democrats led by Nick Clegg entered the 2010 British Election with great hope. As early as 2008, the party leader[2] stated that the policy for the 2010 General Election '*is to reform elections, parties and parliament in a constitutional convention*'[3]. Predictably, the British General Election has resulted in the most extraordinary British government of modern times. For the first time in British politics since February 1974 no party won an overall majority of the 650 seats. The Conservatives won 306 seats[4], 96 more than the

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[1] *The 2010 General Election Manifesto.*
[2] Nick Clegg was elected in December 2007 over Chris Huhne.
[3] *Guardian*, 10 March 2008.
[4] The Conservatives won another seat in Thirsk and Malton where the election was postponed to 27 May, due to the death of the UKIP candidate during the campaign.

2005 General Election; Labour were down by 90 seats, winning 258 whilst the Liberal Democrats won 57 seats[1], five fewer than 2005 (Table 3.4).Of course, these results demonstrated clearly the ability of the Liberal Democrats to increase their share of the vote which was higher than at any post-war election except 1983 when the Liberal/SDP Alliance polled 25.4 per cent of the popular vote[2].

Table 3.4**Summary: 2010 and changes 2005-2010**

	CON	LAB	LD	Others	Total
Seats won	306	258	57	29	650
Change	+96	-90	-5	-1	0
Votes (000s)	10,703.7	8,606.5	6,836.2	3,541.2	29,687.6
% vote	36.1%	29.0%	23.0%	11.9%	100.0%
Change	+3.7%	-6.2%	+1.0%	+1.5%	0%
Candidates	631	631	631	2,257	4,150
Deposits lost	2	5	0	1,886	1,893

Source: 2005 and 2010 British Elections

Therefore, the main question is how was the Liberal Democrats performance at the 2010 General Election in comparison with the previous elections? The Liberal Democrats were certainly disappointed by these results after the enthusiasm engendered in the opinion polls. According to the *Guardian*, it was a decent but a disappointing result[3].

An analysis of the results of this election does suggest that the Liberal Democrats performed slightly well in England, the South West and Scotland (Table3.5). Therefore, the Liberal Democrats retained their strength in heartland seats particularly in England and the South West. This can be explained by the existence of traditional regional patterns of voting. This meant that the Liberal Democrats could resist the rise of the two major parties particularly in areas of Protestant non conformists like the South West and where local identities are stronger such as Scotland. Yet the Liberal Democrats lost few seats in their heartlands such as England and the South West in comparison with 2005. They were also able to win seats outside their traditional heartlands such as London and the South East (Table 3.5). Nevertheless, the Liberal Democrats performed poorly in the North East and the East Midlands where the party was particularly

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[1] Nine per cent of the total.
[2] Chris Cook, op. cit.,p.311
[3] *Guardian*, 8 May 2010.

strong between 1886 and 1910[1].Of course, patterns of support changed with the rise of capitalism on the one hand, and the emergence of the Labour Party, on the other.

Table 3.5 **Summary: 2010 and changes 2005-2010**

	Seats won *(a)*		Votes		
	Number	Change	000s	%	Change
UK	57	-5	6,836	23.0%	+1.0%
Great Britain	57	-5	6,836	23.6%	+0.9%
England	43	-4	6,076	24.2%	+1.3%
Wales	3	-1	295	20.1%	+1.7%
Scotland	11	-	466	18.9%	-3.7%
N Ireland	0	-	-	-	-
North East	2	+1	281	23.6%	+0.2%
North West	6	+1	708	21.6%	+0.3%
Yorks & Humb	3	-1	552	22.9%	+2.3%
East Midlands	0	-1	463	20.8%	+240.0%
West Midlands	2	-	540	20.5%	+1.9%
Eastern	4	+1	693	24.1%	+2.2%
London	7	-	752	22.1%	+0.2%
South East	4	-2	1,125	26.2%	+0.8%
South West	15	-3	963	34.7%	+2.2%

Source: 2005 and 2010 British Elections

Strikingly, the Liberal Democrats gained 8 seats, five from Labour and three from the Conservatives. However, they lost 13 seats, twelve to the Conservatives and one to Labour. This demonstrated once more that the Liberal Democrat voters are more similar to Conservative voters in their social (middle-class) and geographical background. Thus, the Liberal Democrats always fight the Conservatives in shared Conservative-Liberal areas[2]. The Liberal Democrats did lose some important seats to the Conservatives such as Oxford West, Richmond Park and the rural Welsh Montgomeryshire constituency; however, they still retained some strongholds. They realized their greatest percentage of the vote in Orkneys and Shetland (62 per cent), Westmorland and Lonsdale (60 per cent) and Bath (56.6 per cent). Their safest seats by majority were Sheffield Hallam (Clegg's seat, 15,284), Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Kennedy's constituency, 13,070), Yeovil (13,036), Westmorland and Lonsdale (12,264), Twickenham (12,140), Norfolk North (11,626), Bristol West (11,366) and Bath (11,198)[3].

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[1] Andrew Russell, op. cit., p.164
[2] Ibid., p.4
[3] Chris Cook, op. cit ., p.313

Besides, discontent with the Labour government resulted in a clear swing in the vote which benefited mainly the Conservatives. In terms of swing, there was a 1.4 per cent swing to the Conservatives from the Liberal Democrats but a 3.6 per cent national swing from Labour to the Liberal Democrats[1]. Ultimately, the Liberal Democrats continue to be hampered by an electoral system that rewards parties with support concentrated in geographic and social strongholds. It took 119,000 votes to elect a Liberal Democrat; 34,000 to elect a Conservative and 33,000 to elect a Labour MP[2]. The *Guardian* made an interesting comment on the election:

> *"...Through the campaign, the Liberal Democrats looked set to be the chief beneficiaries of the nation's rage against the old politics. For the first time in a generation, the third force dared to hope that it would break the mould. In the event that did not happen, and they ended the evening with fewer MPs than they had at the start"*[3].

The particularity of the 2010 General Election was that for the first time in British electoral history the three British party leaders, Brown, Cameron and Clegg[4] agreed to participate to three live debates on television. These debates changed completely the election campaign[5]. Indeed, the first television debate on 15 April resulted in an upsurge in Liberal Democrat support in the opinion polls after the impressive performance of Nick Clegg overtaking even Labour. Some even put the Liberal Democrats in the first place. The Liberal Democrats started to be seen as a threat for both the Conservatives and Labour and a prospect of a hung parliament was not far. At the second television debate Clegg performed appealingly. Yet after the final television debate the polls gave the Liberal Democrats second to the Conservatives; whereas others placed them third behind Labour[6].

During the campaign, the Liberal Democrats received an outstanding support from the *Guardian* on 30 April under the headline '*The Liberal moment has come*' and also on 1 May 2010. On 2 May the *Observer* brought its support

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[1] Ibid., p.311
[2] Ibid., p.316
[3] *Guardian*, 8 May 2010
[4] Leaders of Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats respectively.
[5] Richard Mullen, ''*British Politics after the Election*'', in Contemporary Review, Vol.292, 2010
[6] Chris Cook, op. cit., p.310

to the Liberal Democrats. This is an extract of the article entitled *'Nick Clegg is the candidate of change':*

> *"There is only one party on the ballot paper that, by its record in the old parliament, its manifesto for the new one and its leader's performance in the campaign, can claim to represent an agenda for radical, positive change in politics. That party is the Liberal Democrats. There is only one way clearly to endorse that message and that is to vote Liberal Democrat"[1].*

The results of the election were amazing. The Conservatives had 36.1 per cent of the popular vote, Labour had 29 per cent and the Liberal Democrats had 23 per cent[2], 1 per cent points higher than their 22 per cent share in 2005. Other smaller parties[3] had 11.9 per cent. Obviously, no party had managed to win an overall majority of 326 seats. Two solutions were possible: a minority Conservative government which would need support of other parties to govern, or a coalition government. It is worth noting that the only successful coalitions of the twentieth century were in the two World Wars. Media had discussed the possibility of a 'hung parliament'[4] even before the election regarding the growing unpopularity of the Labour government which culminated with the financial crisis of 2008-2009. Soon, it became clear that the only workable majority would be produced between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats because a deal between Labour and the Liberal Democrats would not produce a majority even with a pact including Plaid Cymru, the Green Party and the Northern Ireland SDLP[5].Thus, one of the key questions is how did the Liberal Democrats negotiate their entry to government and how far did they impose their views and policies on their Conservative partner?

Predictably, with an inconclusive vote, parliament was hung. It is worth remembering how rare it is that the electoral system produces a hung parliament. Only in February 1974 did an election produce a hung parliament.

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[1] *Observer*, 2 May 2010.

[2] They polled 6.8 million votes.

[3] These parties included the Democratic Unionist Party, the Scottish National Party, Sinn Féin, Plaid Cymru, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, the Green Party, the Alliance Party, the UK Independence Party and the British National Party.

[4] The term was first used in May 1978 in a speech by kevin McNamara MP. It is derived from the American notion of a hung jury, an indecisive outcome which results in a re-trial.

[5] Chris Cook, op. cit., p.317

The Liberal Democrats' predecessors as Alliance leaders, David Owen and David Steel had imagined in the 1987 post-election scenarios in the case of a hung parliament. Would they support a minority Labour administration or a Conservative one? Steel was sympathetic to Labour while Owen would back the Conservatives. The debate ended when the Conservatives won a majority of seats in the Commons[1].

Thus, the lack of a decisive result led to a four to five-day period of negotiations between the parties. There were also talks between the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats about the possibility of a coalition between Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens. However, Clegg was more inclined to make a deal with the Conservatives as he was supported by the parliamentary party even if Brown repeated his desire to work with the Liberal Democrats[2]. Following negotiations, a formal coalition agreement between the Conservative Party[3] and the Liberal Democrats[4] was announced on the evening of 11 May 2010. Many agreements had existed already at local council level between Conservatives and Liberal Democrats such as Birmingham[5].

A special Liberal Democrat conference was held on 16 May to approve the coalition deal. However, some Liberal Democrats such as Charles Kennedy, Simon Hughes, Vince Cable and Sir Menzies Campbell were skeptics about the deal. Charles Kennedy even declared in an article in the *Observer* that he could not support the deal with the Conservatives because this would undermine future plans for a progressive centre-left alliance in British politics[6]. Finally, the deal was endorsed by a large majority (only a dozen of more than 1,500 delegates opposed it) but the party activists reaffirmed the Liberal Democrat manifesto pledges and urged Clegg to stay true to these key policies[7]. Therefore, why did the Liberal Democrats choose to make an alliance with the Conservatives and did they have really any choice?

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[1] Steve Richards, ''*The Liberal Democrats will not be forming the next government and hung parliaments are so rare. So what is Paddy Ashdown's Party for ?*''in New Statesman, Vol.125, 1996

[2] Chris Cook, op. cit., p.318

[3] The negotiators were William Hague, George Osborne, Oliver Letwin and Ed Llewellyn.

[4] The Liberal Democrat negotiators were Chris Huhne, Danny Alexander, Andrew Stunell and David Laws.

[5] Chris Cook, Ibid., p.320

[6] *Observer*, 16 May 2010.

[7] Scrapping of tuition fees, protection of the Human Rights Act and radical electoral reform.

On the one hand, New Labour could not produce a workable majority with the Liberal Democrats. In addition, many Labour politicians including Jack Straw, the Justice Secretary opposed vehemently any deal with the Liberal Democrats. On the other hand, the Conservatives were more interested in a deal with the Liberal Democrats which would create a safe Commons majority as well as reassure the financial markets. Moreover, Cameron's decision to appoint a Liberal Democrat as Chief Secretary to the Treasury[1] was, according to some commentators, deliberate and well-thought. Indeed, cuts in public spending cannot be blamed only on the Conservatives. Shared blame may not destroy the Conservatives who would probably be in a better position than the Liberal Democrats to fight another General Election[2]. But more importantly, political culture could explain the party's support for the coalition. Indeed, the Liberal Democrats have become extremely leadership-loyal. Thus, the Liberal Democrats were willing to follow their leader and consider the necessity of a coalition with the Conservatives[3].

The agreement saw David Cameron, the leader of the Conservative Party, become Prime Minister, while the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Nick Clegg became Deputy Prime Minister and Lord President of the Council with responsibility for political and constitutional reform. However, the office of Deputy Prime Minister has no constitutional significance. Indeed, it is worth remembering that Queen Elizabeth, when refusing in 1961 to grant the title of Deputy Prime Minister to Butler, declared that *'there is no such official post for queen's approval is required'*[4]. The Liberal Democrats had five Cabinet seats and many junior ministerial posts. Vince Cable became Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Skills; Chris Huhne became Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change; David Laws became Chief Secretary to the Treasury with responsibility for reducing the national debt and finally Danny Alexander, Secretary of State for Scotland[5]. Obviously, the Liberal Democrats

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[1] One month after the appointment of David Laws as Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the Daily Telegraph made revelations about his expenses as MP. He resigned and was replaced by Danny Alexander.
[2] Ibid., p.320
[3] Richard Grayson,''*The Struggle for the Soul of Liberalism*'' in New Statesman, 12 July 2010, p.33.
[4] See Michael L. Nash, ''*British Coalition Politics and Royal Prerogatives*'' in Contemporary Review, vol.292,2010,p.317
[5] Ibid., p.322

did succeed during the negotiations since they secured 22 per cent of seats in the cabinet and 19 per cent of junior ministers[1].

Two weeks after the election, the Coalition released a 34 page document entitled *The Coalition: Our programme for government* which set out plans for a five-year Parliament. Both Cameron and Clegg stated in the document that a combination of their parties' best ideas and attitudes produced a programme for government *'that is more radical and comprehensive than our individual manifestos'*. Clearly, both leaders believed that their ideas are stronger when combined. The Coalition, as they declared, *'has the potential for era-changing, convention-challenging and radical reform'*[2].

It would be interesting to reflect on the reaction of the electorate to the Liberal-Conservative Coalition. For instance, the *Guardian* published a poll which revealed that 59 per cent of voters supported a coalition government with 81 per cent of Conservative voters approving the deal. Support was higher in the South (68 per cent) and lower in the North and Scotland (48 per cent). Moreover, the support for the Conservatives was more important (39 per cent) than at the General Election, Labour polled 32 per cent and the Liberal Democrats polled 21 per cent (down 3 per cent)[3]. But the most important poll took place on 27 May in the delayed contest for the Thirsk and Malton constituency where the UKIP candidate had died during the General Election campaign. The Conservatives won the contest (20,167), the Liberal Democrats came second (8,886) and Labour finished third (5,169)[4].

Many Liberal Democrats saw the coalition as a creature of circumstance. Some were astonished to see a party which has recently been as 'left of Labour' on civil liberties, democratic reform, taxation, and public services engaged now in a coalition with the Conservatives[5].

It seemed that agreement on policy issues between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats could be reached easily as there was a much common ground on education reform, creating a low-carbon economy, reform

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[1] Robert Hazell, *The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Agenda for Constitutional and Political Reform* (2010), p.7
[2] *The Coalition : Our Programme for Government*, May 2010, p.8
[3] *Guardian*, 25 May 2010.
[4] Chris Cook, op. cit., p.323
[5] Richard Grayson, op. cit.,p.32

of the political system, decentralizing power, protecting civil liberties, abolishing plans for ID Cards. Nevertheless, there were disagreements on other more important issues, which led to compromises. Hence, the necessity to consider the coalition programme and the extent to which the Conservatives conceded to Liberal Democrat demands.

3.3. The Liberal Democrats in Government (Liberal Democrat-Conservative Coalition)

So far we have seen that negotiations between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats resulted in the formation of an impressive coalition government and the publication of the Coalition Agreement. The main question is to what extent have the Conservatives conceded to Liberal Democrat demands.

Being driven to form a coalition, both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats set plans in order to work as a strong and stable government. On 25 May the Queen's Speech outlined the government legislative programme which was based on the principles of *'freedom, fairness and responsibility'*. It was a full programme of 22 bills. The priority was given to the economic sector. In fact, the two parties have agreed that the priority is to reduce rapidly deficit to restore the confidence of the financial markets. Thus, an Emergency Budget was introduced on 22 June 2010 by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne. This Budget, described as the most austere since the Second World War, was destined to reduce fiscal deficit. The Liberal Democrats did succeed in including in the Budget an increase of £ 1,000 in the personal allowance for Income Tax from April 2011. Although the Liberal Democrats campaigned against a VAT increase, the Budget did mention an increase in VAT from 17.5 per cent to 20 per cent from January 2011. The Liberal Democrats defended this measure as unavoidable. However, four Liberal Democrat MPs, led by Andrew George, introduced an amendment to the VAT increase. Moreover, two Liberal Democrat MPs, Bob Russell and Mike Hancock voted against the government reflecting unease among grassroots activists. Predictably, because

of its VAT U-turn, Liberal Democrat support in the opinion polls went down with 22 per cent saying they were much less likely to vote for the party[1].

Furthermore, the Liberal Democrats made enormous compromises. Indeed, they had broken their election promise not to increase tuition fees[2]. It is noteworthy that more than 21 Liberal Democrat MPs voted against this proposal at the time, including former leaders Charles Kennedy and Sir Menzies Campbell. However, some Liberal democrats including the party's president, Tim Farron declared that the party should have drawn a 'red line' over the issue during negotiations and insisted that the promise had been a 'fine pledge' which should not have been broken in the first place. Conversely, Nick Clegg apologized later for breaking his party's pledge to oppose increasing student tuition fees, and recognized that his party has made a mistake[3].

As far as Europe is concerned, the Coalition partners agreed that Britain should play a leading role in an enlarged European Union, but that no further powers should be transferred to Brussels without a referendum. However, the Coalition programme included a commitment that Britain does not join or prepare to join the Euro in this Parliament. This meant clearly that the Liberal Democrats failed to include in the Coalition Agreement a defining issue for them.

Now, if we admit that the Coalition programme announced on 11 May 2010 has a very ambitious agenda for political and constitutional reform, how far could the Coalition implement these reforms? Indeed, political and electoral reforms are the Liberal Democrats' distinctive contribution to the new government's agenda. Cameron had conceded to important Liberal Democrat demands including a bill to establish a fixed term for Parliament as well as an agreement to offer a referendum on a new system of voting which is the centre piece of the constitutional reform. Firstly, the coalition agreed to the establishment of five year fixed-term parliament including a binding motion stating that the next general election would be held on the first Thursday of May 2015. Thus, legislation would be brought to make provision for fixed term parliaments of five years, and provide for dissolution if 55 per cent or more of

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[1] Chris Cook, op. cit., p.324
[2] Tuition fees were increased from £ 3,200 to £ 9,000.
[3] *Guardian*, 23 September 2012.

the House votes in favour. Both the Liberal Democrats and Labour supported fixed term parliament whilst the Conservatives said nothing about it[1].

Accordingly, when the Bill was introduced to the House of Commons, Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg declared that *'by setting the date that parliament will dissolve, our prime minister is giving up the right to pick and choose the date of the next general election- that's a true first in British politics'*[2]. Indeed, the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, which received Royal Assent on 15 September 2010, has a major impact on the timing of parliamentary elections in the United Kingdom, as well as for devolved institutions. The Act sets the date of the next general election as 7 May 2015 and on the first Thursday in May in every fifth year[3]. Thereafter, Parliament automatically dissolves 17 working days before a polling day of a general election. Early elections can be held only if a motion for an early general election is agreed either by at least two-thirds of the whole House or without division; or if a motion of no confidence is passed and no alternative government is confirmed by the Commons within 14 days. In addition, the Act provides that Parliament cannot otherwise be dissolved and that the monarch on the recommendation of the Prime Minister appoints the date of the new election by proclamation. Therefore, the Act repealed the royal prerogative of dissolving parliament. It is worth noting that an attempt by the Lords to insert a provision so that the Act would apply only when adopted by each new Parliament was abandoned. Instead, there is a requirement for the Prime Minister to establish a review of the Act in 2020[4].

Secondly, the most outstanding reform included in the Coalition Agreement was definitely the introduction of a referendum on electoral reform. The agreement included also a provision for the introduction of the Alternative Vote (AV)[5] and the creation of fewer and more equal sized constituencies. Initially, both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats made a big compromise in accepting a referendum on the AV. In fact, the

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[1] Robert Hazell, *The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Agenda for Constitutional and Political Reform* (2010), p.15
[2] BBC News, 22 July 2010.
[3] The next elections to the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales will be held on 5 May 2016.
[4] Oonagh Gay, *Parliament and Constitution Center*, Library House of Commons, 3 November 2011.
[5] Australia is the only major country to use AV.

Conservatives have always been supporter of the First-Past-the-Post whilst the Liberal Democrats have always supported the Single Transferable Vote (STV); Whereas Labour supported at the 2010 General Election the introduction of AV via a referendum. Much earlier in February 2010 the Labour government passed an amendment to include a referendum on the introduction of AV; however, this attempt was dismissed by several Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs. Of course, AV is not the Proportional Representation that the Liberal Democrats regard as their *raison d'être*. It is, on the contrary, a system in which electors rank candidates by preference and MPs have to gain at least 50 per cent of the votes. Since AV is not proportional, if it had been used in 2010, the results would have been slightly different and much more harmful to the Conservatives. As an illustration, the estimations made by the Electoral Reform Society were 280 seats for the Conservatives, Labour 260 and the Liberal Democrats 80 seats[1]. But these estimations have been made before the formation of the Liberal Democrat-Conservative Coalition. The AV would serve to cement the coalition in office and made it difficult for Labour to regain power.

It is worth to bear in mind that Herbert Asquith did establish a Royal Commission in 1908 to inquire into the electoral system. This Commission recommended not Proportional Representation but the AV. In 1917, the first Speaker's Conference recommended PR for Urban areas. Yet Lloyd George refused its recommendation whilst Asquith showed no interest in it. It was not until the General Election of 1922 that Asquith, leading a small rump of independent Liberals in opposition came out in favour of PR and by 1920 Lloyd George too approved PR confessing that it was too late[2].

As expected, a referendum on the AV was held on 5 May 2011[3]. Indeed, for the second time a referendum was held in the United Kingdom, the first one being the European Community referendum in 1975. The results were disappointing; the electorate rejected the proposal with a turnout of 42.2 per

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[1] Robert Hazell, op. cit., p.15

[2] See Vernon Bogdanor, ''*Crossing the Bridge for Asses : When the Liberal Party Held Power, It opposed PR. Now, the Liberal Democrats Have the Chance to Transform Our Voting System- but First, They Must Act to Amend the Electoral Reform Bill*'', in New Statesman, Vol.139,20 September 2010, p.34

[3] The same day as local elections, the 2011 Scottish Parliament Election, the 2011 Welsh Assembly Election and the 2011 North Ireland Assembly Election.

cent. Indeed, 68 per cent voted No and 32 per cent voted Yes[1]. On the other hand, both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats supported together the reduction of the size of the House of Commons[2]. On 22 July 2010 the proposals for the AV referendum, change in dissolution arrangements and equalizing constituencies were put forward in the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill. The Bill was passed into law by 16 February 2011.

Expectedly, the governing parties campaigned on opposite sides, the Liberal Democrats supported AV and the Conservatives opposed it. Nevertheless, some members of the Conservative Party who were for electoral reform campaigned in favour such as Andrew Marshall, former head of the Conservative Group on Camden Council. The position of the Labour Party was, in the first place, hostile to the bill providing for the referendum. Although Labour reformers supported the AV referendum, pre-may 2010 the party opposed the bill because of the inclusion of boundary changes[3] that are considered as beneficial to the Conservative Party. Some members of Labour such as Peter Mandelson supported AV. Other parties like the Scottish National Party, Sinn Féin, Plaid Cymru and the Green Party supported the referendum on AV.

Some Newspapers supported the reform of the electoral system such as the *Guardian*, the *Independent* and the *Daily Mirrors* whilst others such as *The Sun* and *The Times* opposed the reform. Another newspaper, *The Morning Star*, a socialist daily supported a No vote on the basis that AV would be no fairer than the First-Past-the-Post; it urged for the Single Transferable vote instead. Initially, the Liberal Democrats have always advocated the introduction of the system of Proportional Representation but it was rejected by the Conservatives in coalition negotiations. Finally, Nick Clegg did accept AV as a modest compromise. He even argued during the referendum campaign that AV would mean 'fairer votes'[4].

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[1] 13,013,123 voted No, 6,152,607 voted Yes.

[2] The Conservatives to 585 and the Liberal Democrats to 500.

[3] It requires a boundary review of all constituencies. The agreed target will be 585 members. That would require the removal of 65 constituencies, and raise the average size of each constituency from 70,000 to 77,000 electors.

[4] *United Kingdom Alternative Vote Referendum 2011* in http://en. wikipedia

All in all, some campaigned against the AV on the basis that AV is not enough such as the British National Party who criticized AV as not being proportional. David Cameron claimed that a vote for AV is a vote for perpetual hung parliaments; others used more likely the vote simply as a kick against the government. But ultimately the Liberal Democrats voted yes on the basis that such a system would be a first stepping stone towards Proportional Representation and a major gain for them. Regrettably, the most important political reform included in the Coalition Agreement did fail to pass. Finally, on 8 July 2011, the AV Provisions were repealed.

Not surprisingly the Liberal Democrats lost a historic opportunity to become the kingmakers of British politics. If the AV had been accepted, Governments would be chosen not directly by the voters, but indirectly. It would be the weakest of the three main parties that would decide which of the other two is to govern.

Another no less important reform agreed upon was the reform of the House of Lords. Indeed, it was decided to establish a committee to bring forward proposals for a wholly or mainly elected upper chamber on the basis of Proportional Representation. Although the Lords reform has been a key goal for the Liberal Democrats, all three parties promised at least a partly elected House of Lords in their manifestos for the 2010 general election on the ground that the current unelected chamber was undemocratic and needed to be reformed[1]. It is worth noting that Jack Straw set up in 2007 a cross-party group on Lords reform in which the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats were represented. After 15 months of work the group issued in July 2008 a White Paper which included proposals about the size of the House, the electoral system and length of term. In the cross-party group, Labour proposed a House of 400-450 members, the Conservatives proposed only 250-300. If the non party crossbenchers are to be preserved, they have to be appointed, not elected so that 80 per cent of members are elected. Furthermore, the Conservatives argued for the second chamber to be elected by First-Past –the-Post whilst the Liberal Democrats would prefer STV. While the Conservatives and Labour proposed that the election to the second chamber take place at the

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[1]The House of Lords was reformed in 1999, 90 per cent of the hereditary peers were removed becoming 92 out of 825.

same time as election to the House of Commons, the Liberal Democrats proposed elections every four years. On the other hand, all parties agreed that the term would be 15 years[1].

Accordingly, a draft Bill was published in May 2011 on which a Joint Committee reported in April 2012. The Coalition government wanted four-fifths of members of a reformed House of Lords to be elected. They would have served 15-year terms of office, after which they could not run for re-election. The number of peers would be 450 and all hereditary peers were to be removed[2].

However, the government was facing considerable opposition particularly among Conservative MPs. In July 2012, 91 Conservatives MPs rebelled against the government in a vote on how to time table the House of Lords reform Bill. In fact, many Conservative MPs thought that constitutional change should not be the government's priority during a recession and that such a radical reform needed more time. Consequently, the Prime Minister David Cameron promised that he would try once more to introduce the Lords reform but if his party could not unite on the issue he would draw a line under the issue; the Conservatives' partner responded badly. Nick Clegg announced that the coalition agreement was a contract between the coalition partners and the Conservatives had broken the contract by not honouring the commitment to the House of Lords reform. This situation recalls strongly David Steel protesting to Jim Callaghan in 1978 when Labour failed to deliver on the Lib-Lab Pact's promise to provide Proportional Representation on elections to the European parliament.

Admittedly, this is the first time that the Coalition government has failed to deliver on the agreement that the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats agreed upon in May 2010.The revolt of the Conservatives against Lords reform and more significantly the Conservatives' successful campaign against the Alternative Vote in 2011 has proved that the party of Cameron is still against constitutional reform. Indeed, David Cameron made clear he saw reform as a 'Third Term' issue.

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[1] Robert Hazell, op. cit., p.27
[2] BBC News- House of Lords Reform

Undoubtedly, the failure of Lords reform caused coalition tensions which do not augur well for the future of the Coalition. Therefore, Clegg decided that his party will withdraw its support for boundary changes designed to cut the number of MPs from 650 to 600 and equalize the size of constituencies; this was a Conservative manifesto proposal. A change opposed by many Liberal Democrat MPs since it is expected they would lose 15 or more seats[1]. Legislation to reduce the House of Commons has already been passed but proposals for the new constituency boundaries have still to be approved on October 2013, a date fixed by the government. This reform will certainly benefit the Conservatives at the next election[2].

Therefore, it would be impossible for Cameron to win the boundary review vote in either Houses without the support of the Liberal Democrats since Labour and the minority parties are opposed to the way the reform has been implemented. Many Conservative MPS reacted to Clegg's decision saying that the Conservative commitment to bring in boundary changes is linked to the AV referendum which was held only on May 2011. Therefore, they had honoured their part of the contract. On the face of these tensions and divisions between the coalition partners, the leader of Labour, Ed Miliband[3] declared that his party continued to support Lords reform and that the Conservatives were the real obstacle. Alas for the Liberal Democrats another outstanding reform has been dropped by the Conservatives who despite forming a coalition with them did not actually concede much to the Liberal Democrats.

On the other hand, Clegg conceded that this decision created a vacuum in the Coalition's legislative programme and that he wanted to fill the legislative gap by alternative measures either on further banking reform or social care. But could the Liberal Democrats expect any sort of political dividend in the future? Although the Liberal Democrat leader's position has been shattered by the failure of his 'progressive' project, Clegg admitted that the government has to focus on delivering a revival of the economy, the reason the Coalition agreement was made in the first place. Moreover, Clegg is unwilling to end the first coalition government since the Second World War. His

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[1] *Guardian*, 6 August 2012.
[2] The current boundaries favour Labour.
[3] He was elected leader of the Labour Party on 25 September 2010.

conviction is that the Coalition's task remains to deliver economic reform and social renewal.

Conclusion

Most would agree that no analysis of contemporary British politics would be complete if it does not deal with the Liberal Democrats; hence, the necessity to examine the fortunes of the Liberal Democrats and their forerunners in British politics. Many observers had predicted the demise of the Liberal Party which suffered internal splits during and after the First World War and was undermined by class conflicts that emerged in the inter-war years. This is clearly demonstrated by George Dangerfield in his influential work *The Strange Death of Liberal England* published in 1935.

Indeed, in the 1950s the Liberal Party could hardly survive in the dominant two-party politics; however by the 1980s, it did emerge with the Social Democratic Party (SDP) as a major force in British politics. Then, the newly founded party did make steady progress at each successive election since its inception in 1988. Unexpectedly, the party saw a remarkable recovery of fortunes after years passed in the wilderness. Charles kennedy, speaking at the Party's annual conference in 23 September 2004, has accurately described the contemporary party:

> *We are being seen more and more as a party which does win elections, which does exercise responsible representation, which has become increasingly comfortable with the duties and the disciplines of power.*

From the 2001 General Election onwards, the Liberal Democrats became an effective opposition. The Liberal Democrats were more confident looking hopefully to the future. Indeed, the Liberal Democrats' position has been even consolidated in the 2005 General Election as the party secured the largest number of seats since 1923, and by 2010 the Liberal Democrats became a real force in British politics being able to return to office after decades of oblivion. They are now in the mainstream of British politics.

This dissertation has been essentially concerned with the role of the Liberal Democrats in British politics and the challenges facing them. Thus, many objectives underlying this dissertation has been set out: providing an account of the development of the Liberal Democrats, exploring the main challenges facing them and the last but not the least examining their new positioning in the political spectrum.

Centrally, this dissertation has focused on main issues revolving around the British two-party system, political opposition, electoral credibility, party's policy and electoral support and the Liberal Democrat-Conservative Coalition government. All these issues have been directly linked to the Liberal Democrats in order to build our reasoning and try to answer pertinent research questions.

We have argued in this dissertation that many factors have contributed to the Liberals' survival and even progress. The party has always been able to remain present in Parliament as a distinct group despite having a small number of MPs. The Liberal Democrats have also kept distinctive policies which differentiate them from the other two parties. They were also able to remain true to their beliefs in contrast with their rivals. Even if the Liberals and subsequently the Liberal Democrats did lack a distinctive class base; however, they did have a distinctive geographical base in which they could build support.

As discussed earlier, the Liberals survived their misfortunes in the late 1940s and 1950s and began a slow road to recovery from the 1960s onwards. By the 1980s the Liberal Democrats and their predecessors did challenge seriously the duopoly of the two major parties. Indeed, the 'centre alternative'[1] looked as if it would break the mould; however, it missed this opportunity since it lacked credible policies. By the 1990s, the newly founded party in its efforts at revival and renewal adopted a strategy of tactical voting. This has certainly benefited the Liberal Democrats who have started making their votes count significantly. Therefore, the Liberal Democrats have much greater mould-breaking potential now than a third party has ever had before. This is partly due to their increased representation at Westminster through efficient electoral strategies but more likely to their ability to advocate a distinct policy agenda. Consequently, I would think that the mould of the two-party system, which survived for decades, may finally be broken in the midst of the present coalition government and future developments.

The Liberal Democrats remain an anti-Conservative Party, capable of doing well where the Labour Party is weakest. In fact, we have explained that Liberal Democrat voters resemble Labour voters in their political outlook and Conservative voters in their social and geographic background. Thus, the main

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[1] The SDP/Liberal Alliance.

challenge for the Liberal Democrats is to fight Labour in Labour held seats while winning over Labour sympathizers in Conservative-Liberal Democrat areas. We have demonstrated that the party's abandonment of equidistance has allowed the Liberal Democrats, as a centre left party, to build support at the expense of the Conservatives since they relied on the continued unpopularity of the Conservatives. Nevertheless, the Liberal Democrats did succeed in capturing safe seats from the New Labour Party in the 2005 General Election[1] . In retrospect, we can argue that the Liberal Democrats have always been a vehicle of protest for Labour supporters, as they have been a home for disaffected Conservatives. The party has always proved its ability to profit from discontent with Labour as well as disaffected Conservatives. More significantly the outcome of the 2010 General Election demonstrated clearly that the Liberal Democrats' shift to the right did enable them to capitalize on the hostility to the Labour government. In short, the Liberal Democrats should continue to adopt different strategies according to changing circumstances. We have shown that a more efficient strategy would be promoting a set of distinctive policies that can be labelled as both centrist and radical.

As we argued earlier, electoral credibility is essential for the Liberal Democrats. As a third party with geographically spread support, the Liberal Democrats as stated in Duverger's law cannot aspire to power in a single member plurality electoral system. It is clear that the Liberal Democrats as a centre party will be squeezed between its two main rivals, unless it could build an actual electoral support. We have also seen that the Liberal Democrats have been victim of the wasted vote argument. We have argued throughout this work that the Liberal Democrats have always tried to counter the obstacles resulting from the electoral system by funding and targeting winnable seats and winning by-elections, which are considered by the Liberal Democrats as vital in the battle to establish their credibility, via strong local campaigning whose aim is to convince the electorate that the party has a chance to win and refute the wasted vote argument. Therefore, the Liberal Democrats did succeed to overcome the disadvantages of the First-Past-The-Post and bridge the credibility gap.

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[1]They won eleven seats from Labour.

The Liberal Democrats have sought to claim certain issues as their own in order to improve public awareness of what the party was about. In fact, the party has adopted a set of popular as well as distinctive policies. The different party manifestoes revealed clearly their search for distinctiveness. However, we have reached the conclusion that the adoption of many popular policies has not improved significantly the party's share of the votes. Nonetheless, the party did improve its representation in Westminster through the adoption of distinctive policy positions in order to overcome the problem of being squeezed by both left and right.

Finally, we have attempted to show that the formation of a Liberal Democrat-Conservative Coalition government in Britain has been seen as a remarkable development despite Disreali's stricture that England does not love coalitions. According to a recently retired Conservative MP, Paul Goodman, this Coalition allows Cameron *'to form a progressive coalition of the centre right, a new force that will isolate Labour...and dominate British politics during the early part of the new century'*[1]. The Coalition programme though ambitious could hardly be implemented fully. Indeed, the Liberal Democrats have made considerable concessions especially when they dropped their historic support for PR and secured a promise from the Conservatives only for a referendum on the AV which Clegg had described as a 'miserable little compromise'. Regrettably, even the referendum on AV failed. Ultimately, the Liberal Democrats lost a historic opportunity to bring about reform.

In chapter one, we have tried to provide a succinct account of the history of the party before examining its evolution overtime. Firstly, we have provided a brief overview of the Liberal Party including its birth, decline and revival. We have also focused on the Alliance between the SDP and the Liberals in the 1980s, and the process of merger. In this chapter, we have reached the conclusion that the Alliance, then the merger between the SDP and the Liberals had been essentially dictated by the realities of British politics particularly the electoral system which tends to discriminate against third parties.

In chapter two, we have tried to determine the Liberal Democrats' position in the political spectrum through defining their ideology which is

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[1] Richard Mullen, *''British Politics after the Election''*, in <u>Contemporary Review</u>, vol.292, 2010, p.137

clearly rooted in social liberalism and considering their ability to achieve electoral performance in terms of votes and seats as well. Indeed, the Liberal Democrats have increased significantly their representation in Parliament since the 1990s so that it was the most successful third party in electoral terms since the 1920s. However, the Liberal Democrats still continue to suffer from the distortions of the electoral system. We have also considered the party's relations with its two rivals. We have noticed that opposition was essential for the Liberal Democrats who were determined to be the voice of opposition.

In the last chapter, we have explored the party's policy and strategy through an analysis of the party's manifestoes and policy documents. We have also examined the outcome of the 2010 General Election which resulted in a hung parliament. We have finally considered the Liberal Democrat-Conservative Coalition government which is still seeking to implement its ambitious programme despite shortcomings.

All in all, this dissertation has highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the Liberal Democrats. Now, the new big challenge for the Liberal Democrats before the next general election would be to remain in the coalition government and try to tackle economic problems. Having chosen coalition with the Conservatives over opposition, the Liberal Democrats have to try and do three things at once that are related but also contradictory: maximize their influence on policy, make the coalition work as a stable government, and retain a distinctive voice in British politics. But if we consider past history, Conservative-Liberal Coalitions[1] in Britain tend to end up being dominated by the Conservatives; would it be different this time? This is the whole question.

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[1] The example of the Liberal Unionists of 1886 and Liberal Nationals of 1931.

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الدور الجديد للحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي البريطاني

ملخص

كتب الكثير عن الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي و سابقوه (الحزب الليبرالي و تحالف الحزب الليبرالي/ الحزب الديمقراطي الاجتماعي) إلا أن دراسته لا تزال شيقة. بالفعل تعرض الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي خلال القرن العشرين و السنوات الأولى من القرن الواحــــد و العشرين تغييرات هامة أثرت على مسار هذا الحزب و غيرت موازين القوى على الساحة السياسية البريطانية.

و من الأهمية بمكان دراسة دور الحزب السياسي الثالث من حيث التمثيل في البرلمان البريطاني من أجل الإلمام بدوره المتغير و المتميز و التحديات التي سيواجهها في المستقبل القريب.

فالهدف من هذه المذكرة التي تتناول دور الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي في السياسة البريطانية يتمثل في إيجاد أجوبة عن تساؤلات عدة أهمها دور الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي كقوة تغيير فعالة في بريطانيا و التحديات التي يمثلها الحزب بالنسبة لنظام الازدواج الحزبي في النظام السياسي البريطاني.

كما أن الهدف من هذا البحث هو تفسير كيف تمكن الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي من البروز من جديد على الساحة السياسية البريطانية بعد سنوات عدة من الانهيار. كما تهتم

هذه المذكرة ببحث قدرة الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي على تغيير الوضع السياسي لصالحه و قابليته لتحويل سياساته المتميزة الرامية إلى مكانة انتخابية دائمة و متكررة.

حاولنا في هذا البحث تحليل دور الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي في السياسة البريطانية المعاصرة. كما يهدف هذا البحث إلى توسيع معرفة هذا الحزب و التحديات التي تواجهه. و نحاول فيه أيضا تفسير كيف استطاع أن يبرز من جديد بعد سنوات عديدة في الخفاء.

كان الحزب الليبرالي خلال القرن العشرين ثاني أوسع حزب في البرلمان البريطاني، غير أنه عرف انهيارا سريعا تفاقم مع الحرب العالمية الأولى و ظهور حزب العمال كقوة سياسية جديدة حلت محله تدريجيا بينما صمد الحزب المحافظ. فبعد أن أحرز الحزب الليبرالي على أغلبية 400 مقعد في البرلمان سنة 1906 أصبح بعد مرور ثمانية عشر سنة لا يحوز إلا على 40 مقعدا. و قد حاول المؤرخون السياسيون تفسير انهيار الحزب الليبرالي بمفاهيم مختلفة. فبينما تكلم البعض عن آثار الحرب العالمية الأولى، ركز البعض الآخر على الانقسام الحاد بين **لويد جورج** و **أسكويث.** لكن رغم اختلاف التفسيرات فإن التفسير المقنع يبقى بروز حزب العمال في بداية القرن العشرين.

غير أنه لم يختف تماما عن الوجود، إذ عرف في الستينيات و السبعينات من القرن الماضي نفسا جديدا من خلال أهم الانتخابات الجزئية التي عرفتها بريطانيا آنذاك. فمثلا في بداية الستينيات لم يحرز الليبراليون سوى على 6 مقاعد في البرلمان، لكنهم فاجؤوا الجميع عندما فازوا بانتخاب جزئي في اقليم أوربنكتون سنة 1962. ثم بعدها في الانتخاب العام لسنة 1964 تمكنوا من الحصول على 9 مقاعد و في فبراير 1974 تحصلوا على أكثر من 6 ملايين صوت.

و بنشوء قوة سياسية جديدة في بداية الثمانينات ناتجة عن انفصال في حزب العمال برزت آفاق جديدة للحزب الليبرالي بالخصوص   عندما تحالف مع الحزب الديمقراطي

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الاجتماعي بين سنوات 1981 و 1987. و قد حقق هذا التحالف الانتخابي نتائج ايجـــابية و أدى إلى اندماج كامل بين القوتين السياسيتين في سنة 1988 أثمرت عن نشوء الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي.

أصبح الحزب الجديد يسمى الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي و قد دعم مركزه السياسية في التسعينيات بصورة جعلته يحصل على 52 مقعدا سنة 2001. و بهذه النتيجة الهامة و المشرفة أصبح الحزب الجديد قوة سياسية هامة. و في 2010 سجل الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي رجوعا إلى الحكومة بعد غياب طويل.

الهدف من هذا البحث يتمثل في تحليل تطور القوة السياسية الثالثة في بريطانيا من خلال خمسة نقاط:

- **الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي و الثنائية الحزبية**

رأى بعض المحللون أن الفترة ما بين 1945 و 1970 المتميزة بالتحالفات الحكومية و انقسام الأحزاب و بروز حزب العمال و انحطاط الحزب الليبرالي قد فتحت المجال للثنائية الحزبية.
فبالفعل فإن كلا من الحزب المحافظ و حزب العمال حازا على أغلبية الأصوات في الانتخابات العامة المنظمة بين 1945 و 1970 بينما تم تهميش الحزب الليبرالي. تحصل الليبراليون سنة 1951 على 6 مقاعد في البرلمان (25 بالمائة من الأصوات) غير أن الثنائية الحزبية تقلصت بين 1970 و 1979 اذ توسعت حظوظ الحزب الثالث في الانتخابات الجزئية. و على سبيل المثال في الانتخابات العامة لسنة 1974 تحصل الليبراليون على 19.3 بالمائة من الأصوات. ومع تقلص دور

الحزبين ازدادت قوة الحزب الثالث لكن بقي كل من الحزبين المحافظ و العمال يسيطران على البرلمان.

و بدخول الحزب الديمقراطي الاجتماعي الساحة السياسية في 1981 و تحالفه مع الحزب الليبرالي بين مارس 1981 و مايو 1987 فاز التحالف بنصيب أوفر من الأصوات و المقاعد. فالسؤال المهم هو مدى تشكيل الحزب الليبرالي تحدي للثنائية الحزبية.

● الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي و المعارضة

مع نهاية القرن العشرين أصبح الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي حزبا معارضا للحزب المحافظ بينما كان أقل معارضة و قسوة تجاه حزب العمال الجديد.

برزت استيراتيجية الحزب في استخلاف الحزب المحافظ كأهم معارض لحزب العمال. فالمعارضة تعد هامة بالنسبة للحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي.

و الجدير بالذكر هو أن التحالف بين الحزب الليبرالي و الحزب الديمقراطي الاجتماعي في 1980 كان بمثابة معارضة للمحافظين. فمثلا في الانتخابات العامة لسنة 1983 تحصل التحالف على 25 بالمائة من الأصوات (بينما حصل حزب العمال على 27 بالمائة). غير أن هذا التحالف فشل في تحويل الأصوات إلى مقاعد كون الليبراليون الديمقراطيون يواجهون تحديا صعبا و هو ملائمة استيراتيجياتهم بصورة تليق بمصوتيهم الذين يشبهون مصوتي حزب العمال في عقيدتهم السياسيــة و لكن يشبهون أكثر مصوتي الحزب المحافظ جغرافيا و اجتماعيا.

لذلك فعلى الحزب أن يعتمد على استيراتيجيات مختلفة من أجل الفوز بمقاعد حزب العمال و الحصول على أصواته في مناطق محافظة و ليبرالية في آن واحد.

ومن جهة أخرى في السبعينيات و مع تدهور شعبية المحافظين التي تزامنت مع شعبية حزب العمال تحت رئاسة **توني بلير** ظهرت استيراتيجية جديدة للحزب

الليبرالي الديمقراطي لاستخلاف الحزب المحافظ. و هكذا بدأ الحزب يتعاون مع حزب العمال لكن انتهى هذا التعاون بسبب عدم التزام حزب العمال في تقديم أي شيء ملموس لهم.

وللحزب اليوم هدفا طموحا وهو استخلاف حزب العمال. و هذا ما تشير إليه التطورات الهامة في الساحة البريطانية. فهل يتسنى للحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي استخلاف حزب العمال و هل فعلا يمكنهم الاستفادة من الوضع الجديد.

- **مصداقية الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي**

يعاني الحزب من الفروقات في القانون الانتخابي التي يسنها النظام البريطاني. فمثلا في انتخابات 1983 تحصل التحالف على 25 بالمائة من الأصوات (2.2 بالمائة أقل من حزب العمال) غير أنه تحصل على 23 مقعدا فقط (مقارنة بـ 209 لحزب العمال).

و بالتالي على الليبراليين الديمقراطيين كثالث حزب أن يتصدوا لهذا العائق باعتماد سياسات انتخابية فكيف يمكنهم ذلك. ربما باعتماد نظام جديد أكثر تمثيلا.

- **تحويل الاستيراتيجيات إلى دعم شعبي**

ينبغي على الحزب أن يحول سياساته إلى أصوات و مقاعد من أجل تحدي حزب العمال. فقد اختار الحزب سياسات مختلفة. و قد نتج عن ذلك ارتفاع في الدعم الانتخابي.

- **الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي في الحكومة**

أفرزت انتخابات ماي 2010 نتيجة غير معهودة منذ فترة بعدم حصول أي حزب على أغلبية.

فقد تحصل الحزب المحافظ على معظم المقاعد و لكن ليس على أغلبية تمكنه من تشكيل حكومة.

لذلك تحالف الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي بعد مناقشات حثيثة مع الحزب المحافظ. و صادقت حكومة الائتلاف الجديدة على برنامج طموح جدا يتضمن إصلاحات جذرية بما فيها استفتاء حول إصلاح نظام الانتخابات. و التساؤل المطروح هو إلى أي مدى ستلجأ الحكومة الجديدة إلى تطبيق هذه الإصلاحات.

إن الإجابة عن كل هذه التساؤلات تستدعي اختيار منهجية تاريخية. إذ أن هذا النوع من البحث يتطلب فهما عميقا للحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي من خلال استعراض التطورات و التغيرات التي عرفها عبر التاريخ و كذا ربط الحاضر بالماضي من أجل فهم الأحداث المرتبطة بتطور هذا الحزب.

و في نفس الوقت يتم الاعتماد على مصادر معلوماتية من إحصائيات حول نتائج الانتخابات و كذا الصحف البريطانية.

حاولنا من خلال هذا البحث دراسة تطور الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي منذ انشائه و التعرض إلى تاريخه من خلال ربطه بالحاضر و المستقبل القريب.

و ارتئينا إلى تقسيم هذه المذكرة إلى ثلاثة مباحث رئيسية. المبحث الأول مخصص للتطور التاريخي للحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي منذ نشأته. نتناول أولا بايجاز تاريخ الحزب الليبرالي القديم و بالخصوص الأسباب التي أدت إلى انهياره في بداية القرن الماضي ثم بروزه من جديد في الستينات و السبعينات. ثانيا نهتم بالتحالف الانتخابي بين الحزب الليبرالي و الحزب الاجتماعي الديمقراطي في سنة 1981 و النتائج الايجابية التي حققها في

الثمانينات. أخيرا نتناول مرحلة الاندماج بين الحزب الليبرالي و الحزب الاجتماعي الديمقراطي و التي أفرزت ظهور الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي الحالي.

يحدد المبحث الثاني مكانة الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي في الساحة السياسية من خلال تناول الفكر الايديولوجي لأعضائه و ناخبيه. ثم نتطرق إلى الاستراتيجيات المتخذة من قبل الحزب من أجل تحويل الدعم الانتخابي إلى مقاعد برلمانية. و يتعلق الأمر بالخصوص بالاستيراتيجيات التي يعتمدها الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي في تجاوز العراقيل الناجمة عن النظام الانتخابي البريطاني الذي لا يولي أي اهتمام للأحزاب الصغيرة. أخيرا نتعرض للعلاقات التي تربط الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي بالحزبين الرئيسيين و هما حزب العمال و حزب المحافظين.

و في آخر مبحث نتناول السياسات المتميزة التي اعتمدها الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي منذ انشائه و التي تجعله مميزا عن باقي الأحزاب السياسية البريطانية. ثم نتناول نتائج الانتخابات العامة لسنة 2010 التي أفرزت أول ائتلاف حكومي منذ 65 سنة مع حزب المحافظين. و أخيرا نتعرض إلى تطبيق البرنامج الحكومي الثري الذي يعد أهم مساهمة للحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي في حكومة الائتلاف.

ركزنا في هذا البحث على مواضيع أساسية تتعلق بالثنائية الحزبية و المعارضة السياسية و المصداقية الانتخابية و كذا التحالف الحكومي بين الليبراليين الديمقراطـــيين و الحزب المحافظ. و قد تم ربط جميع هذه المواضيع بالليبراليين الديمقراطيين من أجل الإجابة على تساؤلات هامة.

و قد استنتجنا أن العديد من الأسباب قد ساهمت في تطوير الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي الذي طالما عانى من الانهيار. و قد تمكن الحزب من المحافظة على هويته من خلال الإبقاء على سياسته المتميزة عن باقي الأحزاب السياسية.

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كما شكل الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي تحديا للأحزاب الأخرى خاصة في الثمانينيات. و في التسعينيات أصبح دوره لا يستهان به من خلال زيادة تمثيله في مجلس العموم. و تكمن استيراتجية الحزب في محاولة الفوز بمقاعد في الانتخابات العـــــامة و بالخصوص في الانتخابات الجزئية. و يعتمد الليبراليون الديمقراطيون في ذلك على حملات انتخابية على المستوى المحلي في محاولة إقناع الناخبين بأن حزبهم قادر على الفوز. و يكون الحزب بذلك قد تمكن من اجتياز المساوئ التي ينشئها النظام الانتخابي البريطاني.

كما استطاع الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي من تحسين صورته من خلال الاعتماد على سياسات متميزة في مختلف البرامج التي يقترحها على الجمهور.

و في الأخير، تمكن الحزب من تشكيل حكومة ائتلافية مع المحافظين تقوم على برنامج حكومي طموح. لكن يبقى التحدي بالنسبة للحزب كبير ألا و هو التطبيق الفعلي لإصلاح الدستوري الذي يشمل على الخصوص تعديل النظام الانتخابي.

على العموم اتضح من خلال هذا البحث نقاط قوة و ضعف الحزب الليبرالي الديمقراطي. و يكمن التحدي بالنسبة الليبراليين الديمقراطيين في البقاء في الائتلاف الحكومي بعد الانتخابات العامة المقبلة المقررة في 2015.