

July 24

Nick Clegg's Fresh Start

Nick Clegg did not have a happy first year as leader of the Liberal Democrats in 2008. He committed a number of major gaffes, his opinion poll ratings were poor and, worst of all, the Lib Dem leader had trouble getting himself noticed by either the media or the public. These problems were compounded after the recession hit the UK last autumn. The Lib Dems' highly respected shadow chancellor, Dr Vincent Cable, gained a stellar media profile and seemed to completely eclipse his leader.



As parliament rose for the summer this week, Nick Clegg seemed to be in a much better place. In July, YouGov's polls gave him a net satisfaction rating of 17 per cent, compared to minus 6 per cent six months ago. The numbers saying "don't know" about the Lib Dem leader are steadily dropping. The Lib Dems' own polls reportedly show similar trends, with Mr Clegg much better known than Dr Cable.

This year, Nick Clegg has built up his profile, especially on salient issues where he and his party have something interesting and different to say. In April, Labour rebels and Conservative MPs joined forces to pass a Lib Dem opposition day motion calling for all retired Gurkhas to be awarded the right to settle in the UK. This was the first time in living memory that the Lib Dems have had such a success. As well as being a major humiliation for Gordon Brown (not even John Major was beaten

in the Commons by the Lib Dems), the result was a triumph for Nick Clegg, given that he had been promoting the Ghurkhas' cause for some time.

The Lib Dem leader has also been more prepared to take risks. In May, Nick Clegg cast aside the Westminster convention that party leaders should avoid criticism of the Commons Speaker and demanded the resignation of Michael Martin. These comments dramatically increased the pressure on Speaker Martin and were a major tipping point in his decision to step down.

Even though Nick Clegg is picking up popularity and gaining a higher profile, most voters remain somewhat ambivalent towards the Liberal Democrats. Their performance in the public opinion polls this year has remained solid rather than spectacular, with the party staying at between 15 and 20 per cent in most polls. The Lib Dems' showing in last month's elections for the European Parliament and some English councils was hardly stunning. Voters who are fed up with Labour have other options, most notably a Conservative Party that is resurgent under David Cameron. The European elections showed how minor parties such as UKIP can scoop up "anti-politics" protest votes. In yesterday's Norwich North by-election (where the Conservatives took the seat from the Labour with a 16.5 per cent swing), the Lib Dems came third, but their share of the vote was slightly down and the party finished only narrowly ahead of UKIP. All this seems to leave Nick Clegg's party exposed to the risk of being buried by a Conservative landslide.

So the Liberal Democrats are following an obvious strategy: trying to sharpen up their messages and policies and make them more distinctive from the major parties'. The party is building up a storyline that goes something like this. *We all know that Brown and Labour are finished and that change is coming. But we can't allow ourselves to be conned again by David Cameron, another smooth-talking, youthful politician, like Tony Blair. This time we need to do more than change the faces at the top, we need a basic change of direction, of values. To achieve that, we need to elect more Liberal Democrat MPs.*

July 24

In June, Nick Clegg called for the Trident nuclear deterrent to be scrapped, claiming it is too expensive. He argued that the UK still needed a deterrent but said that a "like for like" replacement was out of the question. The Lib Dems are now the only major party saying that it should not be renewed when it expires in 2024. They have long had doubts about Trident and recent ICM polls indicate that Mr Clegg may be taking a popular stance, especially with women and Labour voters.

Earlier this month, Nick Clegg became the first party leader to publicly question the UK's military tactics and commitment in Afghanistan. His questioning of the war is likely to be stepped up over the coming months.



On Wednesday, Mr Clegg launched *A Fresh Start for Britain*, the Liberal Democrats' "pre-manifesto" that will be presented to the party conference at Bournemouth in September. The paper put forward three key themes (or values as Lib Dems like to call them): "creating a sustainable economy"; "building a fair society"; and "cleaning up politics".

So far, so familiar. But the Lib Dem leader added in a new, tougher message on fiscal policy: the public finances are in a mess but Gordon Brown won't face this challenge in an open and honest way and the Conservatives would make big spending cuts regardless of the consequences. Mr Clegg promised that, unlike the other two parties, the Liberal Democrats would be the only party to front up to the new age of austerity and show how they would be prepared to take difficult decisions.

In saying this, Nick Clegg was mindful of the public's apparent readiness to accept spending cuts. He is also very aware that his party has gained an image - not always fairly - of being too keen to make big, costly promises to voters and having policies that don't add up. So he pledged to impose two fiscal rules on his own party's general election manifesto: no overall increase in public spending; and any new spending pledges will have to be paid for with cuts elsewhere.

The drive for sharper definition and fiscal probity left Nick Clegg's *Fresh Start* notably light on specific commitments. The party promised only to: invest in green jobs and infrastructure and in early years' education; reform the City; cut taxes for lower income earners (paid for by green taxes and higher taxes on the rich); and make a raft of constitutional changes. The specific cuts proposed by the Lib Dems include: downgrading the replacement for Trident; cutting future public sector pensions, scrapping the government's "arbitrary" target of 50 per cent of young people going to university and simplifying tax credits.

Yet a big question remains: what will happen to the Liberal Democrats' "spending" policies, many of which feature prominently in their efforts to win marginal seats? These include commitments to provide free personal care for those aged over 65, restore the link between the state pension and earnings; try to keep open rural post offices and, of course, bring in free university tuition for undergraduate degrees.

Mr Clegg said on Wednesday that "we will have to ask ourselves some immensely difficult questions about what we as a party can afford. A lot of cherished Lib Dem policies will have to go on the back burner. They will remain our aspirations . . . but we are not going to kid the British people into thinking we could deliver the full list of commitments we have put to them at the last three or four elections." These words have been widely interpreted to mean that the policy on tuition fees has been relegated to being an aspiration, along with most of what Mr Clegg calls the "shopping list" of expensive policies. For this, the Lib Dem leader has been praised by sections of the media and attacked by some of his opponents for jettisoning key policies.

July 24

The reality, as Nick Clegg explained on Wednesday, is that nothing has been finally decided. The Lib Dem leader, his senior colleagues and the party's policy makers have yet to reach agreement on precisely what should be in and out of the general election manifesto. The September conference will be invited to approve his policy priorities and overall approach to spending pledges, leaving the serious number crunching and deal-making over the manifesto to be done in the months that follow. Nick Clegg's new paper may be seen as a political holding action but he has retained plenty of flexibility to work out the details of the final manifesto.

Keeping that flexibility will be his main goal. Some Lib Dem MPs, activists and bloggers believe that Nick Clegg has tried to lock them into ditching their totemic policy on tuition fees and have not reacted well. He has already been publicly challenged by one of his frontbench MPs and federal policy committee member, Dr Evan Harris, who was adamant that tuition fees for undergraduates would be in the next manifesto.

So Mr Clegg should be preparing himself for what is sure to be another difficult conference this September. With just a few months to go until the next general election campaign, Liberal Democrat constituency representatives are highly unlikely to torpedo his strategy on public spending. They may, however, send their leaders clear signals about what they expect to be in the Lib Dem manifesto, making the writers' job more difficult. The likely cries of sell-outs and bounces could muddy the party's messages for a time. If he wins convincingly, however, Nick Clegg could go into the election campaign with much clearer campaign messages and a reputation for fiscal rigour that his predecessors could only dream of.